

OSU CASTE: A CRITIQUE

Emmanuel Okonkwo

ABSTRACT

The theme of segregation is not alien to any part of the world. No matter the appellation it is branded with, its existence cannot be denied. Once, the blacks were referred to as the ‘black monkeys’. In the United States, there was a glaring distinction between the white man and the black man. In South Africa, we were plunged into the dreadful arena of the Apartheid. In Nigeria, the story is the same. One wonders, are humans not made alike? Is there any justification behind this prejudice? Why is the concept of Osu prevalent? Why is it so powerful that the elites champions or are silent to it? If it is a culture, cant there be a cultural change? Why does it still exist despite the laws made against it? This essay seeks to make clear the origin, misconceptions and criticism against the Osu caste system, using the igboland of Nigeria as a case study. The method is both historical and analytical.

Keywords:

Segregation, Osu Caste, Osu caste system, igboland of Nigeria

For Referring this Paper:

Okonkwo, Emmanuel (2014). Osu Caste: A Critique. *International Journal of Research (IJR)*. Vol-1, Issue-3. Page

Note:

A SEMINAR PRESENTATION AT THE DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY, FACULTY OF ARTS.

This Day, 28th of February 2014. Under Supervisor: Dr. Ogugua Paul.

INTRODUCTION

Prior before the advent of the colonial masters, the Igbo people like every other tribe, lived within the confines and comfort of their culture and norms.ⁱ The indigenous traditionalists believed in the earth goddess, deities and ancestral spirits under a creator called *Chukwu, Obasi, Chi* or *Chineke* (the supreme God). Their beliefs overwhelmed their culture and social lives. One of these beliefs is encapsulated in the word *Ikpenkwumoto*, meaning to judge uprightly. Thus the Supreme Court of Nigeria in **Dabierin v The State** took judicial notice of this cherished custom when she asserted that evidence (testimony) of the elders especially on land matters, are mostly true.

Again the Igbo's cherished brotherhood, communality and relationships. This is buttressed in the word *Umunna, Obinwanne, etc.* Odimegwu recaptures it when he wrote 'The African communalist family engendered dialogue and consensus as the mode of relations and method of governance in the traditional society' (2007:298).ⁱⁱ Ogugua summarizes these cardinal virtues of the Igbo community into 'Life, offspring, wealth, truth, *justice, love and peace*' (2003).ⁱⁱⁱ

However beautiful and desirous that state of nature was, the dark fog of segregation lingered with it. A certain set of clan or clans are regarded as the 'unclean', 'cult-slave', 'living sacrifice', 'outcast', 'slave of the gods', even 'the untouchables'. Living with them or marrying from them is highly forbidden. Such an act may even convert the defaulter (*Diala*) into an *Osu*.

Surprisingly, the segregation that befell these unfortunate victims, is not characterized by hatred (for foods are given to the gods knowing the *Osu's* eat from it, and arms are given to them), rather it culminated from a parochial and fanatical awe of the long aged belief of the 'living sacrifice'.^{iv}

EXPLICATION OF TERMS

OSU

This refers to a certain person, clan or species of people in the Igbo community, who are seen as sub-humans or unclean class or as some may say 'slaves to the gods'.

Some communities like *Nzam* in Onitsha, calls it *Adu-ebo*. It is called *Nwani* or *Ohu-alusi* at Augwu. Some refers to it as *Ume*,

Ohu, Oru, Ohu Ume... and some calls it *Omoni (Okpu-Aja)*.

The concept of Osu is not alien to any part of the world. Man's inhumanity to man is a common theme. Thus while we use the Igboland as a case study, we are by no means suggesting that it exist only Igboland. Rather, the appellation – Osu, must bear a generic meaning associated with any form of stigmatization, segregation, victimization, vandalization or Ostracization in any part of the world, without prejudice to any special difference.

THE CULTURE

According to Opata, the concept of culture has undergone a long evolution and has, therefore,

Ndianefoo went on to warn that the variety of meaning which culture has acquired should not deter us from probing further for roots original meaning. In fact he traced the origin of the word to Latin, meaning 'cultivation of the soil' but in its metaphorical sense, and according to the Encyclopedia of Philosophy, it means 'cultivation of the mind'. It was during the 18th and 19th where the word extrapolated to include 'beliefs, ideas, attitudes, artifacts,

etc.' No wonder Wiredu pontificated that culture is a complete phenomenon including everything that is connected with a people's way of life (Ndianefoo 2009:138).

The cultivation of the Igbo's mind on Osu has existed before the advent of the colonial masters and Christianity. It would therefore not be wrong to say that Osu-ism was and still is the culture of the Igbo man. What we would rather be concerned with, is the conflict (if any) between its culture of love and communality against the Osu tradition; the justification if any; and also the conflict of such tradition with our Law.

acquired an elasticity of meaning such that everything under t

THE LAW

According to Okunniga, quoted by Sanni, 'Nobody including the lawyer has offered, nobody including the lawyer is offering, nobody including the lawyer will ever be able to offer a definition of law to end all definitions'(2006:25-26).^{vi} This was why Thurman Arnold declared that 'obviously, Law can never be defined'.

Without prejudice to the Austinian definition of law or the Acquinian conception of the Idea law, this study will

limit itself to the fundamental human right law that are apt for our present discourse as contained in the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

THE ORIGIN OF OSU CASTE IN IGBOLAND

The true origin of the emergence of the Osu caste seems to be at large. Different stories are told about this living tale. For instance, Amadife tells us that the origin is traced to the era when the gods were believed to demand for human sacrifice during festivals, so as to cleanse the land of abomination. Then the people would contribute to the general purse for a purchase of a slave or for kidnapping one. This victims and their descendants became known as ‘*Osu arusi*’.^{vii}

For 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’s’ or ‘untouchables’ (1987:10).^{viii}

Some believed they were descendants of travelers who were merely allowed to stay in

the community. Others say they are bastards from non-Osu’s (*Diala*).

Finally, the stronger view seem to lean on ostracization. This occurs when a particular person or group refutes the decision of the King or the entire community. The people naturally begins to withdraw from the defaulter (this was a traditional method of punishment/criminal justice in the pre-colonial era). Sometimes, the king banishes the defaulter from the land. Upon the passage of time, from one generation to another, the victim or the children of the victim are then referred to as Osu’s together with their descendants.^{ix}

CONFLICT BETWEEN OSU-ISM AND THE IGBO CONCEPT OF LOVE, UNITY AND COMMUNALITY

The Igbo community is once known for its belief in love, unity and communality. For instance, ownership of land was communal and not individualistic. Liberty was cherished and there was nothing like kingship at its inception. *Anyi nile bu ofu* (we are one) was the emblem. This was why the appointment of warrant chiefs in the indirect-rule system of Lugard led to its failure in the East. Igwe reports that one of

the fundamental constitution of the Igbo society and culture is the spirit of liberty.

No one community or village would want to oppress the other. No Igbo man would want to slavishly serve another under normal circumstances. The parable says it all - *Egbe bere ugo bere nke si beya ebele nku kwaa ya* (let both the kite and the eagle perch and stand and let the one that stands in the way of the other become powerless) – (1991:143).^x

Ogugua further recaps the cherished principle of relationship, belongings, solidarity and the common good.^{xi} Aghamelu, in explaining the current clog on solidarity noted:

The present situation in Africa (Igbo) has created a dualistic society... the weak and powerful. The worst still is that instruments of the state are used to foster this kind of discrimination, a flagrant abuse of the common good. The principle of solidarity is both Christian and African to the core (2003:85).^{xii}

However Igwe noted that the spirit of liberty led to individualism and self-deceptive competition (1991). Perhaps, this was what intensified the ambivalent attitude towards eradication of the Osu crisis.

The puzzle here is, how come a community of such values and morals should abhor the opposite of its values? Simply put, can belongings and solidarity co-exist with segregation and ostracization? This may be referred to as ‘Identity Crisis’ in the words of Oraegbunam (2006:237).^{xiii} It is sad indeed to see us making a cultural change by adopting the bad sides of westernism, while we are ambivalent towards accepting the good sides, namely – Abolition of Osu-ism!

CONFLICT BETWEEN OSU CASTE AND THE LAW

Right to freedom from discrimination was provided for by **section 42** of the Constitution. The Constitution frowns at any discrimination of a person on grounds of the person’s community, ethnicity, and place of birth or origin, circumstance of birth, sex, religion, political opinion or disability. What is not clear is – **does the law frown on the other person’s right not to want to middle or involve with an Osu?** The cases of *Nzekwu v Nzekwu* [1989] 2 NWLR (pt 104)

p.373 SC; *Mojekwu v Mojekwu* [1997] 7 NWLR (pt 512) p.282 CA, are to the effect that one's entitlement cannot be denied on basis of discrimination. But surely, this does not extend to forcing a man to associate with another. For the right to associate includes the fundamental right not to associate. And if there is a right not to associate, then to an extent, there exist a right to discriminate. But this discrimination is attenuated and curtailed when a right of the other person to obtain something arises. In other words, in strict legal sense, an Osu as a right to go anywhere any man has right to go; to speak where any man has right to speak; to contest any post any man has a right to contest; and to propose to any lady any man has right to. But these rights are all subject to the rights of those at the other end i.e. the lady, the people to be ruled, the owner of the place etc. while they cannot deter him to apply, he cannot force them to accept. The solution may therefore lie in ethical persuasion.

The right to peaceful assembly and association is provided for in **section 40**. Association includes political parties, trade unions, or any association. However, the section limits this right to the dictates of the Independent National Electoral Commission

with respect to political parties. By implication, the section forbids unlawful assembly and associations. Now the Osu's right to associate with the people of his village (which is a lawful community), cannot be abrogated by the fact that the community does not want him. Although one may argue that such right is dependent on the willingness of the other (community) to be associated with. On that regard I am forced to admit that this law is not breached. It will only amount to ethical and moral considerations.

It is notorious that an Osu is prohibited from even coming into the gathering of the *Diala* (freeborn or non-Osu), not to consider him addressing them. His right to be heard is consequently denied. The right to freedom of expression and the press is guaranteed by law. In *Adewole & ors v Jakande*^{xiv} it was held that **Section 39** affirms the freedom of expression to every individual and the press. Thus within the provisions of any act enacted by the national assembly, a person is free to own and operate any medium of the dissemination of information, ideas and opinions. Hence the right of press group is ensured too. So is the right of an Osu.

The Right of liberty is affirmed by **section 35 (1) CFRN**, but this Right is made limited to orders of a court i.e. when the accused is found guilty. A person who has not attained the age of 18, may be restricted for the purpose of his education or welfare. Also persons suffering from *infections or contagious diseases*, unsound mind, drug addiction, alcohol or vagrants, may be restricted for the purposes of their care or the protection of the community, or for the purpose of preventing unlawful entry into Nigeria or effecting expulsion from Nigeria.^{xv} A lawful arrest upon reasonable suspicion of having committed a criminal offence and contempt of court may be made. Personal liberty has been defined by Prof. Dicey as ‘the right not to be subjected to imprisonment, arrest and any other physical coercion, in any manner that does not admit of legal justification’. It must be noted that the *Osu* does not suffer from any physical contagious disease. It is imaginary and socially afflicted. Thus it is illegal within the ambit of the law.

A PHILOSOPHICAL EVALUATION OF THE OSU CASTE JUSTIFICATIONS

Onwubuariri tried to justify the Osu caste by implication when he classified the types of Osu to include:

1. The voluntary
2. The involuntary and
3. The mass consensus classification.

While the last two are not the fault of the victim, Onwubuariri justified the voluntary type of Osu which reflects the victim’s choice to become an Osu. This type occurs when the victim, out of laziness, takes to the shrine and eats from the food of the gods. It is also voluntary according to him, when the victim resorts to the shrine for solace out of the frustration or marginalization witnessed as a *Diala*^{xvi}. Thus if a man want to be an Osu who are we not to respect that?

With greatest respect, I do not think psychologists nor humanists, will concur with Onwubuariri’s implied postulation. Frustration of a maximum depth can indeed cause one to act independent of one’s will (which should be a defense under **section 24 and 28** of our **criminal code**). Thus it could

lead to a natural mental infirmity, which psychologists would label ‘Abnormality’.

Another purported justification seems to have its root in Aristotle’s conception of equality. Aristotle believed that equals should be treated equally. The implication of this postulate is that we are not all equals. But does the veracity of Aristotle’s postulation extend to discuss at hand? No! I do not think so. The initial stage for status scrambling must and should be a fair and equal platform. It is upon the success or failure of one’s prowess that the later status should be determined. But then again, the ethical implications are too alarming to ignore.

Moreso, on the argument for punishment; as necessary as punishment may be, ostracization raises the ethical question – *should an innocent B suffer from the crime of A?* I do not think so either. Why should the descendants suffer from their father’s deviance? Besides, the difficult dialogue between the corrective or punitive justice systems is awakened! If the people have claimed to be bound by one constitution, then they should refrain from taking the laws into their hands!

Again, some have argued that the Osu discrimination is divine as it is mandated and exemplified by God himself. The book of **Genesis chapter 3**, marked the first banishment and ostracism of Adam and Eve. We all, today, suffer from that wrong. Lucifer himself was banished by God and he suffers the ever-labeled name of *Satan*. He is likened to an *Osu*. What is the difference between and *Osu* and the then *Gentiles*? The stigmatization of the *Samaritans*? The Christians and the Jews? And yes! Why is segregation common to all parts of the world?

The above arguments, except one, can be dismissed by the simple logical truth – that the world is doing it doesn’t make it right. Otherwise, why is the world gradually reversing? Why did the nation agree to shun discrimination? What informed the *Magna Carta*? Why did Nigerians applaud the anti-gay law but frown at the punishment stipulated for defaulters?

As to the biblical argument against God himself, I am forced to humbly delve into the spiritual, for the spiritual cannot be comprehended with the physical alone. Therein lies the age-long border between the Rationalists and the Empiricists. First, let me

say there was no ostracization, but a mere banishment of Satan and Man. The book of **Job chapter 1 verse 6**, records the devil coming into the meeting with the sons of God.

That meeting must be periodical and for the devil to attend and have his place and spoke with God (a thing any Osu will die to witness), then Satan is nothing near an Osu in the sense of the word. Neither is man rejected by God, less **John 3:16** would not have existed.

Secondly, every sin can only be punished based on its *quantum meruit*. This is both ethical and natural. If sin is sin, then the punisher will be grossly unfair. In fact some armed-chair Christians have argued that God would have terminated Satan's life than allow the present conflict. Many have died, and the punishment for death ought to be death. This is to say that Satan's punishment is either suitable or alleviated – a perfect ethical justice. As for man, the rule was *if you want to stay here, don't do this*. Man failed. The natural consequence is *you can't stay here*. But because the offspring must not suffer, and the purity of the innocent offspring to stay on board has been contaminated and stolen, Christ had to die to

redeem not only the innocent but to give chance to the banished to purify himself and come back. It is on this note that I commend certain rumored but unnamed villages which allows a ritual cleansing of the Osu to come back into the fold. Although the unanswered question would be, will it ever be the same?

CONCLUSION

From this research, it is found that Osu caste still exist within the Igboland, some are well pronounced some are whispered. It is also prevalent in all parts of the world under the disguise of some other names. While the law prohibits segregation of these victims, the law does not and must not mandate forced relations.

The solution to the acceptability of the Osu's, lies more on ethical and moral persuasion. Seminars in conjunction with the local government and the village chiefs and heads should be made to sensitize the people against the dreaded impart of Osu caste. The world is gradually sinking into the Hobbessian state of nature. But this state of nature is false and caused. The John Locke's state of nature must be redeemed. We must begin afresh to value the true virtues, less we all shall fall. And what a fall would be there my countrymen!

REFERENCES

- ⁱ I. Okodo, 'The Peoples and Cultures of Nigeria' in N Ojiakor (ed), *Salient Issues in Nigerian History, Culture, and Social Political Development*. (Enugu: Emmy-Angel Publishers, 2007).
- ⁱⁱ I. Odimegwu, 'From Past to Our Present: In Search of Responsible Leadership' in I. Odimegwu et al (eds), *Philosophy, Democracy and Conflicts in Africa* (Awka: Fab Educational Books, 2007) Vol. 2.
- ⁱⁱⁱ P.I Ougua, *The Septenary Nature of Igbo Cultural Values* (Double Pee Comm, 2003).
- ^{iv} V.E Dike, *The Osu Caste System in Igboland: Discrimination Based on Descent*. Retrieved from www.nairaland.com/370741/osu-caste-system-igboland-discrimination. On 25/02/2014 at 8am.
- ^v IJ Ndianefoo, 'The Role of Philosophy in Nurturing and Sustaining National Culture' in N Okediadi et al (eds), *Themes In Nigerian Peoples and Cultures* (Awka: School of General Studies Unizik, 2009).
- ^{vi} AO Sanni, 'Law in Social Context' in A Sanni (ed), *Introduction to Nigerian Legal Method* (2nd edn, Ile-Ife: OAU Press, 2006).
- ^{vii} Amadife, 'The Culture That Must Die' Sunday Times, March 23, 1988.
- ^{viii} C.M Ezekwugo, *Ora-Eri Nnokwa and Nri Dynasty* (Enugu: Lengon Printers, 1987).
- ^{ix} M. Okonkwo, from Mmiata-Anam Anambra State. Interviewed on 19/2/2014;
C. Anietu, In Asaba, Delta State. Interviewed on 20/2/2014;
C. Ohum, Awka, Anambra State. Interviewed on 25/2/2014;
L. Njoku, from Owerri, Imo State. Interviewed on 25/2/2014.
- ^x Igwe S.S.N, *Social Ethical Issues in Nigeria* (2nd edn, Obosi: Pacific Publishers, 1991).
- ^{xi} Ougua P, 'Septenary Principles at The Foundation of Igbo-African Communalism' in *Nnamdi Azikiwe Journal of Philosophy*, Awka. (2007) Vol. 1, No. 1.
- ^{xii} Aghamelu F, 'African Development: The Contribution of African philosophy' in C.B Nze (ed), *Ogirisi: a new journal of African Studies*. (Amawbia: Lumos Nig. Ltd, 2003) Vol. 1, No. 1.

^{xiii} Oraegbunam I.K.E, ‘Western Colonialism and African Identity Crisis: The Role of African Philosophy’ in IKE Odimegwu (ed), *Philosophy and Africa* (Amawbia: UNESCO, 2006).

^{xiv} (1981) 1 NCLR 262.

^{xv} *Odogu v A.G Federation* [1996] 6 NWLR (pt 456) p.508 SC; *Madiebo v Nwankwo* [2002] 1 NWLR (pt 748) p.426. CA; *Shugaba v Minister of Internal Affairs* [1981] 2 NCLR 459.

^{xvi} Onwubuariri F, *Appraising the OSU Caste System in Igboland within the Context of Complementary Reflection*, <http://www.frasouzu.com/> Retrieved on 20/02/2014 at 10pm.

ABOUT AUTHOR

Emmanuel Okonkwo is a male Nigerian citizen who resides in the city of Lagos. Born on the 9th of October 1986. He hails from Anambra State, from Mmiata-Anam (Anambra west). He did his secondary school in Amuwo Odofin High School, mile 2 Lagos. He has a bachelor degree in Philosophy and in Law. He is to be called to the Nigerian Bar in November 2014. He taught in various secondary schools. His love for knowledge and writing has shaped his desire to be an author. This led to the publication of his co-work ‘Whispers from the Desert’, which was reviewed by Orient Newspaper on February 13, 2014. He has written many articles and music as a choral master (under the pen name- Citadel O.I) and won several local awards.