



THE *OSU* CASTE SYSTEM IN IGBOLAND: THE IMMUTABLENESS OF A HIDDEN CONSPIRACY

Oparaocha Violet C.ⁱ

Covenant International Mission School Owerri,
Nigeria

Abstract:

The *Osu* debacle is such a loathsome system that has survived the assaults of modernity and religion. Although a fair proportion of the Igbo race may be thought of have elected to get it into extinction, the body language of a great many seems to show that they are not in a hurry to let go. Given the efforts supposedly made to bring the *Osu* caste system to an end by various eminent social classes and persons, and its continued existence without demur, one wonders whether the proponents of its abolition are not but paying lip services. This paper, therefore, proffered some measures that may be taken to drive enough nails to the chest of the obnoxious system.

Keywords: untouchable; natural rights; Pariah; outcast, panacea

1. Introduction

This paper treats an insidious issue that has caused persistent howling in the Igbo nation, the so-dubbed *Osu caste system*. Igboland is a homogeneous entity that inhabits the eastern part of Nigeria in the West African sub-region. It is arguably the third most populated tribe in Nigeria, with about thirty per cent of its population in the diaspora. The *Osu* is an institutionalized cognomen that predates the colonial era. While the caste system may be honourable, and therefore desirable, in some cases where an endogamous and hereditary subset occupies a position of superior social rank, it is utterly loathsome where another subset is relegated to a position of inferior rank. The above was Kroeber's cross-cultural worldview of the caste system from the standpoint point of social stratification (see Berreman, 1968). In some climes, the system transcends social stratification, as typified by Hinduism which accords it a spiritual connotation. It is commonplace to see such classifications as *Pariah* (rejected person), *outcasts*, and *untouchables* whom the Peace Laurette, Mahatma Gandhi, euphemistically dubbed '*Harjans*' or 'People of God' (Hari) (Norman (1985); Emeghara (n.d.)). In Igboland, *Osu* is an aspect of repugnant social stratification, so poignant that belonging at it reduces the subject to a state of *infra dignitatem* (below dignity). It predates the colonial era and possibly ranks among the world's longest-

ⁱCorrespondence: email oparaochaviol@gmail.com

surviving status discrimination. Onwubuariri (2016) was of the position that the existence of the system is contemporaneous with times that saw the killings of twin babies and innocent children for developing the upper incisors (teeth) before the lower ones, the nagging question of reincarnation, and many other ancient boorish practices in the ancient Igbo nation. Lamentably, while virtually all the aforesaid practices have gone into the logbook of history, The *Osu* caste system remains recalcitrant. This underpins Mgbada's (2016) position that it is the most obstinate in resisting extermination.

By far, the most pertinent argument for the extermination of the *Osu* cognomen and the associated caste is the sequestration of human rights it subjects the subjects, which oppugns John Locke's dictum on *Natural Rights* (see William, 2002). However, the question of whether the major players in the institution and annihilation of the abhorrent system are true to their words in their promises and programmes of annihilation remains circumspect. Without prevarication, this writer makes bold to say that peoples and groups of no mean status- *Ndi Eze* (traditional rulers) and *Eze-in-councils* (consisting of *Ndi Nze-na Ozo*, *Ndi Ichie*, etc.), Religious leaders, Chiefs, Governments, and all people of esteem had at various places and times converged and spoken with deafening ferocity on the exigency of nailing the system; see (Njoku (2019); Okoli *et al.* (2020); Nnamdi Azikiwe admonition (Eastern Regional Assembly, 1956; see Abia *et al.* (2021)).

Considering an agglomeration of the litany of efforts made by the players mentioned above, and in cognizance of the fact that those players are enough to put the system to an end whereas it still thrives, one wonders if all their attempts are not but lip service. In this paper, therefore, the latter part suggests some measures aimed at remedying the situation.

2. Origin and aetiology of the caste system

Much has been said and conjectured about the origin and cause of the *Osu* debacle. Legends seem to intermingle the origin and cause, as to say that they are far from being mutually exclusive. Although the origin is quite nebulous, Amadife (1988) drew the period to when the *gods* were alleged to demand human sacrifice during (cultural) festivals to expiate the land of abomination- a demand to which they must defer. In some cases, the locals would treat such gods to blandishments by drawing from a general till for the purchase of a slave or for kidnapping one for ritual purposes. Another rife belief about the origin gives no thanks to the Nri Kingdom. (Nri kingdom is an acclaimed progenitor of Igbo cultural and traditional artefacts, which was governed by a priestly king-The Eze Nri (see Kingdom of Nri, Wikipedia)). According to Abia *et al.* (2021), it is supposed, of the old, Nri kingdom had some heritable powers and rites to decree cleansing to any kingdom where abominations were committed. Therefore, any community or kingdom that rebuffed the cleansing by the Nri spiritualist, or any village that does not meet up with the cleansing requirements was regarded as impure and was termed *impure*, hence referred to as *Osu* or *untouchable*. The respect and dread of the priestly king's directives are accentuated by the Igbo worldview that the universe is an accumulation of forces. The universe, comprising the visible and invisible world, came into existence through the design of a creator (the Supreme Being) who occupied the universe with an assortment of spiritual forces which are in constant communion with man. The constituents of the universe, which include man and divinities, among other things are always in a seamless interaction.

In the belief system, man can inspire the spirit world and the deities through sacrifices and prayers; the deities and spirits are anticipated to intervene and bring fortunes to their aficionados or calamities if their laws are spurned. The notable spiritual beings in Igboland are: *Chukwu* (*Chineke*, *Onye Okike*, *Obasi di N'Igwe*, among other variations; the first two mean 'the Creator' and the third 'the King in Heaven') is the name for the Supreme being and most powerful of all the spirits; *Ndi Mmuo* (deities); *Arusi* (Spirit forces); *Ndi ichie* (the ancestors). Details on these are found in Emeghara (*n.d.*).

The *Osu* status may be attained by design or accident. In those ancient days, the only way to circumvent the death penalty due to sacrilege or sundry irreverent acts, and conscription into slavery was to pledge oneself to the deity for protection. Henceforth they seized from being *nwa afo/nwadibia* (son of the soil) until they died. A wonderful analogy was drawn by Ajuzieogu (2022 (retrieved)) regarding this scenario and the *Ikemefuna* story in Achebe (1958) whereby Ikemefuna killing by his kinsmen would have been averted if he had dedicated himself to a deity and become an *Osu*. Besides the quest for protection, communal decisions may accord the *Osu* status to persons. A class of offences may hand it to them, to wit: inflicting bleeding injury on an *Osu*, jumping over the head of an *Osu*, killing/causing an *Osu*, fetching water from sacred streams in the communities, sleeping overnight at a shrine, among other offences.

Osu status is automatically attained by birth. *Osu* progenitor accords an *ad infinitum osu* status to the filial entities. Therefore, this case is not a question of one's volition; it is inescapable. In his illustrious work, Achebe (), while attempting to show the vainness of the practice queried rhetorically: "*what is this thing called Osu?*" In a vague depiction of its origin and the prognosis, he retorted: "*Our fathers in their darkness and ignorance called an innocent man Osu, a thing given to the idols, and thereafter he became an outcast, and his children, and his children's children forever.*"

3. Dedication rite and implication

As sanctity demands, *Osu* status is handed to persons dedicated to a deity through a final ritual which is carried out by the (chief) priest of the shrine under the watchful eyes of the community elders on a suitable market day. (Igboland has four market days: *Orie*, *Afor*, *Nkwo*, and *Eke*, which constitute the Igbo datebook. Suffice it to say that Igboland has four days in a week which are calendared by the market days). In the course of dedication, the chief priest would lead the initiation prayer/incantation in the presence of the elders of the community to which the elders would refrain '*isee*' (i.e. *Amen*). Thereafter would be a complete hair, which shall never be cut again for life. The cutting off of part or all of either the left or right ear of the person was another rite performed. In very exigent cases it is customary for parties in covenant with each other to spill their blood to mark the seal of an agreement (between the *Osu*, the deity, the ancestors, and the people (*diala*). The cutting of *Osu's* ear, hence the spilling of blood, signifies the permanent servanthood and loyalty they owe to the deity who owns them. In the end, the high priest would end the ritual by greeting the audience.

A major implication of the dedication rite is the sequestering of the *Osu* from the *Diala/Nwa afo* (freeborn). This is transitional: first, was the stage of separation- the persons leave the *diala* community for the deity's shrine until the rites were accomplished. Second, consultations with the oracle took place. Third, incorporation into the community of the spirits

began. From the foregoing, it is deciphered that the *Osu* belongs at the shrine, and by inference, the gods.

4. The good, the bad, and the ugly

Some pertinent questions are: are there any benefits derivable from persons being an *Osu*? What are the shortcomings/consequences of becoming one? In some sense, the earlier detail has indicated a benefit; the act of running to a deity for protection against adversaries whereby the persons are truly protected is a big plus indeed. Besides, an *Osu* has unfettered access to anything (including livestock and farm produce) being brought to the deity's shrine. The dictum of *whatsoever belongs to the father belongs to me* holds well in the *Osu* kingdom (?) It was commonplace to see the *Osu* look healthy and robust because of the aforesaid. A non-*Osu* becomes one automatically if they eat what belongs to a deity. Incidentally, many of the *Osu* looked more vivacious than many a *nwadiala*. Note that a vicious *Osu* could appropriate any *nwadiala's* property without demur. This is predicated on grounds that as an *Osu* belongs to a *god*, humans cannot question a *god* either due to fear or reverence or both. By the same token, no one dared get angry with any errant sacred livestock belonging to an *Osu*, and by extension the shrine. Besides eating with the spirits, the *Osu* inherited so much around the shrine; they only farmed on the land contiguous to the shrine. Many more benefits accrue to the *Osu*. In ancient times the *Osu* had no business with communal labour, as they were being exempted; they were not taxed.

However, those benefits may invigorate the *Osu*, watchers of the goings on with them agree that the cost of being one may better be imagined, or lives much to be desired. Below is a litany of the bad, nay, the ugly sides of the *Osu* cognomen:

The *Osu* are made to live close to shrines and marketplaces thus, separated from the (*nwa*)*diala*. This was/is a subtle act of them being sequestered. In traditional Igboland, no normal humans live close to the shrines and/or marketplaces. It was believed that ghosts and gods converge at market squares when all normal beings might have been done with their usual market activities of the day. This accounted for why people tend to vacate the markets at about 6 p.m.

The *Osu* are not allowed to have notable forms of relations with the *Nwadiala*, let alone share in the breaking of *kola nuts*, pour a libation or prayer in any events that warrant their presence at any community gathering. *Osu* and *nwadiala* cannot intermarry; forbidden!!! This elicits the barrage of investigation in Igboland when marriages are announced. Elders from both sides of the prospective couple travel and investigate the social status of either family. Till the time of this writing, the *Osu* was yet to be accepted for titular ranks and rites in any village. It was taboo for the *Osu* to fetch water or bathe in the same stream as the *nwadiala*.

From all the litany above, it could be adjudged that the *Osu* are kept in a state of permanent and unapproachably irreversible disability, and subjected to abuse and discrimination.

5. The hue and cry, the conspiracy

The hue and cry may be better captured in Okoli *et al.* (2020) in the exposition “*Osu caste system: Fury in Igbo land over (sic) continued practice.*” The content therein depicts the summit of the so-called Who’s Who in the social strata of Igboland, and their vociferous reactions against the caste system, which is spread over the land. As a humble way of contributing to the extirpation of the system, this writer has tactfully restrained from naming any part of Igboland where it applies; also, names of those who said what was carefully circumvented to avoid any sort of personalisation.

Ohanaeze Ndigbo, the council of Igbo elders, is the apex decision-making body in Igboland. This body, which was inaugurated just a few decades ago, precisely in 1976, by Professor Ben Nwabueze, a constitutional lawyer (see: *Ohanaeze Ndigbo*, Wikipedia), is the mouthpiece of the Igbo nation. On this council are outstanding leaders of thought, *Ndi Eze* spiritual leaders, and the ‘gents’. Igboland is a true repository of unfettered democracy. This gives credence to the dictum “*Igbo enwe Eze*” (Igbo are no respecter of Eze). It is instructive to note that the aforesaid only means that while the authorities of *Ndi Eze* bear on their subjects, they (*Ndi Eze*) must draw such authorities from the subjects. Thus, there is nothing as ‘the Eze has said’. This ensures the absence of absolutism, and it is an article of faith in Igboland till this time.

Religion holds sway in Igboland. Think of Church leaders who have been at the vanguard of the fight against *Osu* system. How has the Church contributed to the abolition of the *Osu* quagmire? A reading from Anyanwu (2018) will make an admirable impression. Therein was a report on the *Conference of Coalition Force on Osu Caste abrogation* held in Awka, one of the renowned cities in Igboland, where the writer said “*Bishops, High Court Judges, traditional rulers, lawyers, various Christian bodies and civil society organisations condemned, in strong words, the continued practice of caste in Igboland.*” Continuing, he said: “*governments of the five states of the South-East and youths were urged to take a bold step in eliminating the system (my emphasis) which has been identified as ‘wicked, idolatrous and barbaric’.*”

Was the gathering for buck passing? In the keynote address at the conference, an eminent Bishop noted that the *Osu* caste was abolished on May 10, 1956, by the then Eastern Region of Nigeria Government and revalidated in the Eastern Nigerian Law No. 26 of 1960. He wondered why none of the five states in Igboland presently were yet to revalidate the law. But far from revalidation of the law, how has legislation fared? Hear an eminent Juror at the conference: “*The first and second speakers have said that there is legislation, but I don’t think the Osu caste system can be eradicated by legislation, since that legislation has anybody gone to court to challenge, that I came to do this and they say no because he or she is an Osu, have you ever heard of any?*” Continuing, “*So for me, the best way to treat the issue is in the villages ...*”

6. The panacea

Excerpts from the above show an unbridled lip service to the extirpation of this pernicious sciatica that is playing society up. Is there any ‘last’ hope? This writer believes there is. There is a call for positive actions being induced by the following rhetorical questions: Can Igboland witness the first coronation of an *Osu* as an *Eze* (traditional ruler of a community)? Can any *Eze*

confer a chieftaincy title on an *Osu*? Is it possible to have an *Osu* as *Ugo eze* (her royal majesty)? Which community may be the first to allow the *Osu* to pour a libation on its behalf? Would prominent conference goers give their children's lands to the *Osu* in marriage? Would a non-*Osu* Pastor/Prelate get married to an *Osu*? The answers (by action) to these questions are believed to be a panacea to the *Osu* debacle.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

About the Author

Violet Oparaocha is a senior English Literature teacher at the Covenant International Mission School Owerri, Nigeria. She studied English and Literary Studies at the Imo State University, Owerri, Nigeria. She has the perception that studies in English and Literary Studies will have the capacity to reshape her target community; she believes that writings, drama, and poetry that capture the required attitudinal changes/modifications will be effectual in that regard. She is at the verge of starting a Master's degree programme in English Literature. Violet is happily married and her marriage is blessed with children.

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