

THE OSU CASTE SYSTEM AND THE PROBLEM OF ALIENATION: A PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This paper examined the Osu Caste system in Igbo land. The Osu Caste system is seen as a system of alienation, discrimination and segregation between those who see themselves as freeborn and those allotted the status of slaves or outcasts. There were many historical accounts as to how the Osu Caste System began. Some pundits offered the idea of people being set aside to worship the community's deity alongside the Chief-priest (Ezemmuo or Dibia) often referred to as Osu; others said they were people cursed and an anathema placed on them and thus, separated or banished from the free people of the land. Whatever the perspective sought, offered or explained, the study exposed the problematic with the Osu Caste System, which is that it became generational and a basis for redundancy in equity, Justice and fairness in the Igbo society. The Osu Caste System came along with emotional, social, religious, economic, political and human rights implications for those tagged Osu. Employing the philosophical methods of analysis and hermeneutics, the study investigated the Osu Caste System and the rationale behind it. Following modernity, it is assessed as being untenable, reeks of injustice and devoid of equity. The agitations against the system over the years brought about the need to end it. The study concludes that the abolishment of it from Igbo land is the way forward and an indication that the Igbo traditional society has evolved and in line with global best practices as far as human rights is concerned.

Keywords: Osu Caste System, Alienation, Igbo land, Human Rights, Social Justice

Introduction:

For any human system to grow, there must be justice. Justice is an inclusive word for fairness, equity, equality. Any system that treats other members of same society as less humans, will only fan the embers of marginalization and slavery. This is exactly what the Osu Caste System historically portrayed in Igbo land. The Osu Caste System is a system of alienation with all existential, physical and emotional implications. The Igbo society some centuries back were divided into freeborn, considered real and true member of the soil and the rejects or outcasts, considered non-members. The Osu Caste System is a practice in Igbo land where some people are tagged second-class citizens as against the freeborn, and therefore, are denied certain privileges enjoyed by those who are called freeborn.¹ It has been a traditional practice for centuries, until recent memories where civilization, education contributed to people discarding and disregarding the Osu System. A child or Children or generations from the Osu Caste as called *Nwa-osu* (*Nwosu*) or *Umu-*

OSU.

Freedom is sacrosanct for all human beings. It is an inalienable right. When people are denied certain privileges in the human society, or rendered second class citizens, it reduces their worth and value. It affects their psyche and alienates them. Alienation identifies a distinct kind of psychological or social ill; namely, one involving a problematic separation between a self and other that belong together.² Alienation makes one look foreign and strange (an alien) to their own environment. It is also a serious existential factor that affects the person involved. The Osu Caste System created alienation.

In this study, we shall be looking at the Osu Caste system, its moral, social and existential imports and how the Igbo society thrive with such a system in place. We shall analytically look at why it was an evil practice that created more problems than solved.

The Osu Caste System: Conceptual and Historical Overviews

According to Abia, Amalu and Ariche, Discrimination and caste systems are rife in every society. In Igbo land, the Osu caste system is a form of discriminatory practice where the Igbo society is divided into the *Diala* and *Osu*.³ The Osu caste system is a traditional practice in Igbo land that discourages social interaction and marriage with a group of persons called *Osu* (Igbo: outcast). *Osus* are dedicated to the deities (*Alusi*) of Igbo Land; they are considered as inferior beings and are usually separated from the *Nwadiala* or *diala* (Igbo: real born).⁵ Various schools of thought and positions have emerged as to the origin of the Osu Caste System and how it thrived till this day albeit in small fraction in Igbo land.

Amadife⁵ as well as Ezekwugo⁶ gave their accounts that the origin of the Osu caste system can be traced back to the era when the Igbo city-states were managed by the laws of the earth, known as *Odinani*. The deity known as Ala provided rules that must be obeyed by the people so that the nation would be blessed to prosper in the territory given to them by Chukwu, the Supreme God. Offenders who were found guilty of great abominations were cast away so as to avoid the anger of the earth Deity and to prevent the spread of abomination among the citizens of the state. These outcasts were identified as *Osu*. They were either sold to slavery to other men or were delivered to be enslaved to certain deities who were believed to ask for human sacrifice during festivals in order to clean the land from abomination, thus leading to the purchase of a slave by the people. Another view on the history of the osu caste system centres on ostracization. This occurs when a person or group of persons who refuses the orders of a king or the decision of a community are banished from the community, thus resulting in the victim and his descendants being called *Osus*.

Amongst the Igbo of South-east zone of Nigeria, there is the caste system –the Osu caste system. It is perhaps among the world's longest surviving status discrimination as that of the Indian caste system; and it is believed to be as old as Igbo land itself, or as “old as the killing of twin babies, the killing of innocent children for developing first the upper incisor (teeth) the offering of human sacrifices, the problematic ideas of reincarnation and others which were practiced in the ancient Igbo nation and other nations in Nigeria and Africa at

large.”⁷

The system is a tradition that has been handed over from one generation to the other and has not been influenced to a great extent by westernization, Christianity, civilization, advancement in science, globalization or even democracy and the human rights culture; the people continue to give strict observance or face dire consequences. Like most social systems, the origin of the Osu caste system is very vague, unclear, and there is no consensus as to when the system was established.⁸ Amadife traces the origin of the Osu caste system 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.⁹ Another school holds that the Osu caste system originated from the Nri Kingdom. It is believed that in the olden days, Nri people possessed some hereditary powers and rites to proclaim cleansing to any kingdom where abominations were done in the past consequently, any community or kingdom that refuted or regretted the cleansing by the Nri spiritualist or any village that is unable to meet up with requirements needed for the cleansing was viewed as impure; and any community that was termed impure was referred to as Osu or untouchable.¹⁰

However, Abia, Amalu and Ariche noted that their position is that the Osu caste was non-existent before in Igbo land at the beginning. Those who later became Osu were first free born or sons and daughters of the soil. There were various ways in which the Osu status could be acquired. It can be acquired through birth by Osu parents, intermarriage and commensality. Historically, a person became Osu if she was purchased and dedicated to the god to atone for a crime the purchaser had sought sacred help in difficult times, or to secure asylum (such as women who refused the killing of their twin babies, or babies whose upper teeth came out first). Some of these modes of acquiring the Osu status is now obsolete as Western influence has affected this practice; in modern-day, inheritance and marriage are the strongest factors.¹¹ One thing certain is that, in whichever manner the status of Osu is acquired, it is permanent. To identify an Osu is not difficult. Some parts of his body, like an ear or a finger is also cut to identify him. Apart from the marks, “one can also identify an Osu by their inherent devastating body odour. It is said that Osu has a very bad body odour that no matter how they try to remove it with perfume it does not go.” Another way of identifying an Osu is by the places they live. They are found in outskirts and fringes of the community. In spite of their status, the Osu have certain responsibilities outside their immediate communities (among fellow Osu).¹² The Osu is like priest of the cult and in some cases, subjects of the chief priests. They keep vigil in the village when the house slaves (Ohu or Oru) and their master must have gone to farm as well as the protection of couples still with little children that are prone to kidnap. During inter-tribal wars, the Osu were given charm pots to carry as they approached the battle zone. They also served as frontiers. An Osu is the living symbol of the invisible spirit when he is carrying the emblem (of the spirit or a god). The emblem carrier is seen as the most important person on such occasions, this is because, in the very blood of the Osu runs the potency of the spirit, hence, they are feared. Hence, it is evident that Osu occupies crucial positions and play important roles in Igbo land cutting across the socio-economic and cultural

spheres.¹³

Different views have been made on this outrageous topic. The Osu Caste System is a practice in Igbo land where some people are tagged second-class citizens as against the freeborn, and therefore, are denied certain privileges enjoyed by those who are called freeborn. In this sense, second-class citizens are not allowed to marry a freeborn, and, are not qualified to take certain traditional titles which are exclusively reserved for the freeborn.¹⁴ However, different opinions or views on the subject matter have been made by different people, making it impossible for the true evolution of the Osu Caste System in Igbo land to be understood, and it indicates that the majority of Igbo people in the present generation do not have evidence that prove when the Osu Caste System came into practice in Igbo land.¹⁵ These various schools of thought have all pointed to the origin of the Osu Caste System. The overriding point was that the Osu Caste System was a sacred system reserved for people dedicated to serving the community's deity and worked directly with the Chief Priest or *EzeMmuo*. However, with time, it deteriorated. Instead of them becoming Messengers of the gods and shrine agents, they became isolated, disrespected and seen as slaves. This deterioration over time, led to alienation. They were no longer regarded as normal members of the community. They were ostracized and degraded to subhuman.

Osu Caste System, Human Rights and Social Justice

The Osu Caste System violates the idea of human rights and social justice. Human rights are inalienable rights given to a person existentially. They cannot be taken away. For to do so, is to take out life from that person. They are structural ontological rights that belongs to every human person from birth to death which makes them a human and authentic being. It does not matter where the person was born or what status the person has acquired. Such rights entrench the freedom to be and to live. The Osu Caste System, reduces such when it pronounces them as outlaws or forbidden for no abominable crime other than the place of discrimination and generational inheritance of such tag. This is also against social justice. B. Duignan captures the idea of Social Justice perfectly. According to him:

Social justice, in contemporary politics, social science, and political philosophy, the fair treatment and equitable status of all individuals and social groups within a state or society. The term also is used to refer to social, political, and economic institutions, laws, or policies that collectively afford such fairness and equity and is commonly applied to movements that seek fairness, equity, inclusion, self-determination, or other goals for currently or historically oppressed, exploited or marginalized populations.¹⁶

Continuing further, he noted that: “In theoretical terms, social justice is often understood to be equivalent to justice itself, however that concept is defined. Many somewhat narrower interpretations conceive of social justice as being equivalent to or partly constitutive of distributive justice—that is, the fair and equitable distribution of social, political, and economic benefits and burdens. According to some interpretations, social

justice also encompasses, among other conditions, the equal opportunity to contribute to and to benefit from the common good, including by holding public office (such readings are sometimes referred to as “contributive justice”). Other interpretations promote the stronger goal of equal participation by all individuals and groups in all major social, political, and economic institutions.”¹⁷

Another set of definitions of social justice emphasizes the institutional conditions that encourage individual self-development and self-determination—the former being understood as the opposite of oppression and the latter as the opposite of domination.¹⁸ A related concept of justice, suggested by the American philosopher Martha Nussbaum, is that a just society fosters the capabilities of individuals to engage in activities that are essential to a truly “human” life—including, among others, the capabilities to live a life of normal length, to use one's mind in ways “protected by guarantees of freedom of expression,” and to meaningfully participate in political decision-making.¹⁹

Social justice is both a theoretical concept and a practical ideal—an object of social-scientific and philosophical understanding and debate as well as a real-world goal of social and political reform movements. In general, practical ideals of social justice represent an attempt to realize a certain conception of social justice in a particular state or society. Accordingly, such ideals tend to vary with the historical and cultural circumstances in which they are pursued; they may also depend upon current social-scientific understandings of the institutions to be reformed, abolished, or created.²⁰

However, the notion of social justice is understood, it is naturally grounded in the concept of justice itself. Indeed, the notion of social justice originated as an application of a historical theory of justice to current social problems. Later understandings of social justice have also drawn upon historical theories.²¹

The book—*A Theory of Justice*—by John Rawls was an attempt to resolve the problem of distributive justice. The Osu Caste System in Igbo land reeks of sabotage in enthrone distributive justice. The alienation process affects the equality of privilege and opportunity for all.

A Theory of Justice was published in 1971 by American moral and political philosopher John Rawls. It attempted to resolve the problem of distributive justice in society. Rawls was opposed to the traditional philosophical arguments on what constitutes a just institution and the justification for social actions and policies. The utilitarian argument holds that society should pursue the greatest good for the greatest number, an argument that is consistent with the idea of the tyranny of majorities over minorities.²² In opposing the utilitarian arguments, Rawls attempted to establish an unbiased version of social justice based on the social contract approach. The social contract approach holds that society is in the form of agreement with all those within the society.²³

Taking the theory of Social Justice further, John Rawls proposed the two principles of justice. They include:

Principle of Equal Liberty

The principle of equal liberty is the first principle of justice to be derived from the original position. It states that all citizens have an equal right to basic liberties, which, according to Rawls, entails freedom of conscience, expression, association, and democratic rights. Rawls added the right of personal property as one of the basic liberties that individuals should have, and that cannot be infringed or amended by the government. He, however, excluded an absolute right to unlimited personal properties as part of the basic liberties that people should have.²⁴

Principle of Equality

The principle of equality holds that economic principles should be arranged in a way that they meet two requirements. First, the least advantaged in society should receive a greater number of benefits. Second, the economic inequalities should be arranged in a way that no individual is blocked from occupying any position or office, regardless of their ethnicity, sex, or social background. Rawls argued that all individuals in the society should have fair equality of opportunities and an equal chance as everybody else of similar natural ability.²⁵

In all these, the Osu Caste System falls short in both aspect of distributive and contributive justice. Then what the Osu Caste System really present is a retributive justice that is ironical because there is no basis for the punishment, stigmatization, alienation and rejection by those members of society who consider themselves freeborn while others are slaves, abnormal and outlaws. While Distributive justice offers equal opportunities for all, contributive justice offers the opportunity not necessarily to benefit but to contribute to societal building and decision making. Retributive Justice seeks punishment for offenders but the question becomes, what is the offence of the one referred to an Osu, especially when such name tag is inherited generationally without trace of how heir forebears became Osu.

Again, there are deductions and hypotheses judging from the origins of the Osu system that jealousy and competition for prominence could have led to the change of status from people who were being revered because like the Biblical Levites, they work for the deities, to include being banished in order to take away properties belonging to them, since they are given to the work of the gods and have no time for material preoccupations. It could also be that a King somewhere changed the status of those working for the gods in order to arrogate all power, influence, position and respect unto himself and have stronghold on the community. These are arm-chair conjectures which could have rational jots of truth and justification, as to why the Osu Caste System festered in Igbo land. The people termed Osu have no basis for such term other than the struggle by members of a community to divide a people unto itself and proclaim dominance over the other. This is against the idea of Social Justice espoused by John Rawls. The historical tenets that must have necessitated the Osu Caste System to become a mainstay in Igbo land for centuries was perhaps, motivated by utilitarianism, where the highest numbers of people in a

community saw it good to alienate a fraction on unjustifiable terms that reminds of of the Hobbesian state of nature where life is solitary, nasty brutish and short. Those who suffer the stigma of Osu had miserable times as incorporation with non-members of society were non-existent. It became a case of victimization and dehumanization, which created stratification and class struggle.

This class struggle implicates the Igbo tenet of democracy and a republican society because not everyone was free in such society. Some were more equal than others. For the Osus, the alienation meant that suffered forlornness. This created a chasm for an integrative Igbo society where all men were decisions. The Osu Caste System raises the scholarly question of whether the Igbo Society was truly democratic or was an oppressive system based on class stratification.

Justification and Basis for the Osu Caste System as Practice in Igbo land

The Osu Caste System had some basis for its existence. Despite the foregone hypotheses as to its existence, research showed two major anchors as the reason for it becoming a cultural practice. Research showed that this system has been traced back to a time when people were offered to the deities to clean the land from an abomination. Another view on the historical perspective of the Osus puts them as defiant people who simply refuse to heed to the orders of the king or the decision of the community.²⁶

However, there is no conclusive evidence that being tagged an Osu could come from disobedience to the authorities of the land. After all, in core traditional Igbo parlance and understanding, *IgboenweghiEze* and the community is paramount and more powerful than the King who if at all, is only ceremonial. All men in traditional Igbo society are decision makers. Like earlier said, the Osu Caste System casts doubt on the liberality, democratic and republican status of Igbo traditional society as positioned by history. It is the position of this present study that further scholarship is needed to dig deep into the political status of Igbo society in relation to democracy and rights of individuals. The Osu Caste System makes for the seemingly belief that there could be a class struggle and it was a survival of the fittest, where the strongest conquered the weak and proclaimed themselves freeborn, while others—the conquered—became slaves and offered to the gods instead as sacrifice or as slaves in the shrine and never to partake in the political activities of the land.

As an Osu, one is kept in a state of permanent and irreversible disability and subjected to abuse and discrimination. The Osus are made to live separately from the freeborn and live close to shrines and marketplaces. They are not allowed to have any forms of relations with the Nwadias. They even may not break kola nuts at meetings or pour a libation or pray to God on behalf of a freeborn at any community gathering. An Osu cannot marry a free born. It is because of this that there are tons of investigation in Igbo land when marriages are announced. Elders from both sides travel and conduct investigations to inquire about the social status of the family.²⁷

The Abolishment of the Osu Caste System in Igbo land and Implications for

Modernity

As of today, the Osu Caste System has been abolished in Igbo land, even though some families still bear *Nwosu* as surname.

In October, 2018, the Obi of Onitsha, Igwe Nnaemeka Achebe, had taken a stance to abolish the Osu Culture in Igbo land. Days before this, some traditional leaders in Oguta Local Government of Imo State had endorsed the abolishing of the age-long culture to free affected people from stigmatization in the community.²⁸ The fight for the abolishment of the Osu Caste System goes back in time to the days of Nnamdi Azikiwe who in his historic address to the defunct Eastern Nigeria House of Assembly in 1956, described the system as “devilish and uncharitable to brand any human being with a label of inferiority due to the accidents of history”.²⁹ The late Dr. SamMbakwe had banned the system in Old Imo State during his tenure as governor. Despite these attempts, they still uphold the Osu Caste system in some parts of Igbo land with many people stigmatized for being Osus.³⁰

Since the introduction of modernization in Igbo land, the Osu caste system has been criticized by people who feel it is against human rights to freedom from discrimination. According to some human rights groups who are calling for its abolishment, some of the punishments meted out against the *osus* in Igbo land include: parents administering poison to their children, disinheritance, ostracism, denial of membership in social clubs, violent disruption of marriage ceremonies, denial of chieftaincy titles, deprivation of property and expulsion of wives.³¹ On 20 March 1956, Igbo legislators in the Eastern House of Assembly, Enugu abrogated the then common practice of referring to people as *Osus*. The fines imposed have discouraged the public expression of the word Osu.³²

As history may have it, the Osu Caste System has been abolished on 28 December, 2018, in a ceremony conducted in Nri, the acclaimed ancestral home of the Igbo nation, in Anaocha local government area of Anambra State. The title of the abolition ceremony was “*Nigeria: Osu Caste System in Igboland Ends Today.*” Also on 7th April, 2021, another abolition ceremony took place in Nsukka, Enugu, as 119 villages in the nine autonomous communities in Nsukka town, Nsukka Local Government Area of Enugu State, gathered to eradicate the Osu Caste System in their communities.³³

The implications for Modernity are that it is in line with human rights and has shown the Igbo society as a liberal society built on the tripod of *ibenne, udo* and *anyi ga-adi*. That is unity, peace and progress. It shows the Igbo society is driven by the winds of positive change and progressive in thinking and action. The Osu Caste System if allowed to have continued will put the Igbo society in dark light and indict the black man of being guilty of the racism accusations, he arrogates to the white man.

Conclusion

The Osu Caste was one system that was prevalent in Igbo land. It was discriminatory in nature and was means to ostracism and alienation for many centuries. This indicted the Igbo society of lacking true liberalism and humanism, after all. The Osu Caste System like the killing of twins was one of those bad practices that affected the human person and created existential problems. It was against morality, humanity, human rights and social

justice. It also created psychological problems of forlornness, inferiority complex and social problems like marginalization and denial of the equitable allocation of Community's goods and resources. With the growth in knowledge, enlightenment and embrace of Modernity, the Osu Caste System has been finally abolished. This reinstates the idea of personal and collective freedom and development as freedom (to borrow from Amartya Sen) to promote a society free from the shackles and stronghold of backwardness, injustice, oppression, suppression and denial of rights and privileges. Conclusively, the Abolishment of the Osu Caste System was one of the best decisions ever taken by *NdiIgbo* and it promotes the philosophy of *onyeaghanwanneya*. This is because before now, those tagged Osu were left behind in the scheme of things but not any more. The Igbo race has grown and evolved!

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