OSU IN IGBO TRADITION AND THE JOURNEY TOWARDS CIVILISATION: THE CASE OF UMUOCHO KINDRED IN AMAGU ISHIAGU IVO, EBONYI STATE.

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Abstract
The categorization of human beings into groups or classes is universal and as such common in every human society. While categorization in general can be described as a normal human attribute, this does not negate the fact that it can also lead to one group being ranked as superior to another. This is in fact the case of the Osu-Diala dichotomy in almost all the Igbo speaking states in Nigeria. Also the recent happening in Umuocho kindred is a case in point. The Osu-Diala seems to be replicating itself in Ocho ukwu (freeborn) and Ocho Nte (Mgbo la Ivichi), whereby Ocho ukwu (freeborn) never lets the issue and the presence of Ocho Nte (Mgbo la Ivichi) slip off their consciousness in any gathering. The next step in the progress of this growing separation is for the Ocho Nte (Mgbo la Ivichi) to be explicitely called Osu; thereafter would start their dehumanization, deprivation of social or legal rights, except those rights which the community feels that, if they are deprived of, would attract the wrath of the gods. This study brings to the fore the causes and effects of this human groupings and some contributions by some agents of change to annihilate the scourge in Igboland. The conclusion is that the burgeoning social problem could also be used as a good example of how not to proceed in human categorization of one's fellow human beings.

1. Introduction

In Igbo land, the word "Osu" is surrounded with controversies, and any study on the Osu issue can 'harmlessly' be categorised as contentious, no matter how objective the author tries to present his/her argument. This is because if you condemn the practice of Osu, you will surely be described as an Osu that wants to avoid the

tag. For fear of being labelled an Osu, many people hardly talk about this issue in the open. According to Onwubiko (1993), the persistence of Osu practice and discrimination in Igbo land is a defective cultural aberration which contradicts the basic cultural ethic of the Igbo achievement-oriented society. People are believed to achieve their fame, not to inherit it, the socio-religious and socio-cultural status of Osu is believed to be inherited. This contradiction is best exemplified in the one-sided reasoning that a *diala* (freeborn) converts to/becomes an Osu when *diala* associates with an Osu, but never the other way round. Hence, non-Osu person who for any reason or circumstance marries an Osu person is automatically infested and is regarded as Osu, and their their offsprings shall also become Osu. However, no diala can liberate an Osu, no matter how highly placed. This state of affairs has helped widen the gap between Osu and diala dichotomy in Igboland.

The case of Ocho Ukwu-Ocho Nte (Mgbo la Ivichi) dichotomy in Umuocho is the story of a group of people from the same ancestral home and descent discriminating against themselves. As the tradition has it, the man Ocho mpregnated his own daughter and subsequently kept her and her child as his own. The descendant of the daughter is known and called Umuada Ocho. But now, the crisis has erupted since the Ocho Ukwu group has persistently refused the Umuada Ocho popularly called Mgbo la Ivichi to partake fully in any traditional activity thereby making and treating them as second class citizens. This development marks the rebirth of Osu versus Diala dichotomy in the small kindred of Ocho. It is a rebirth that need not be and could be haulted by agents of change.

This study is therefore centered on Osu-closed Igbo society and the contributions of agents of change like government and

religion towards reducing the thick line between Osu and Diala in our contemporary Igbo society. The next section goes into the concept of 'Osu', its definition, origin and function, in addition to a dichotomy in a small clan that has the trappings of Osu-Diala dichotomy. Section 3 discusses the handling of the Osu issue by the Christians, while section 4 is on its handling by the government. Finally, section 5 concludes the paper.

2. The Osu Nomenclature and Its Discriminatory Practices

It is a known fact that Osu is culturally determined. A documented answer to the question "who is an Osu" is Achebe's (1978) explanation in *Things Fall Apart*:

> *the Osu was a person dedicated to a god, a thing set apart – a taboo forever, and his children after him. He could neither marry nor be married by the freeborn. He was in fact an outcast, living in a special area of the village, close to the Great Shrine. Wherever he went he carried with him the mark of his forbidden caste, tangled and dirty hair. A razor was a taboo to him. An Osu could not attend an assembly of the freeborn, and they in turn, could not shelter him under their roof. He could not take the four titles of the clan, and when he died he was buried by his kind in the evil forest.*

Corroborating Achebe, Dike (2009) defines the Osu as a people sacrificed to the gods in Igbo traditional religion to serve the deities or the gods in the shrine. Their services to the deities are obligatory and they must fulfil it as long as they live in their communities. Dike further explains that the Osu caste system is a

societal institution borne out of a primitive traditional belief system coloured by superstition, and propagated by ignorance. His conclusion is that the Osu practice amounts to a discrimination of people of equal creation irrespective of the epoch.

The Igbo society refers to Osu with a variety of names, depending on the locality and the dialect. Such names have same connotations among Igbo speaking people. Osu is known as Adu-Ebo in Nzam in Onitsha. In Nsukka axis, Osu is called Oruma; it is referred to as Osu, Ume, Ohu, Oru, Ohu Ume, Omoni (okpu-Aja). They are regarded as sub-human beings, the unclean class, or slaves. Because of many oral interpretations, Osu has been defined as a "cult slave", "a living sacrifice", "an untouchable", "outcast", "owners cult", "a slave of the deity", and a "sacred and holy being" (Dike, 2009).

People could become Osu for various reasons. Madugba (2014) noted that the greater number of Osu were those offered to deities as human sacrifices and in the service of the deities. Such Osu propagated and raised families of Osus. Others were people on the run either from danger or from their crime who were conscripted into the Osu caste system. Some were courageous young fellows who opposed the evil machinations of the elders of the land and who as a result become victims of the elders that conspired to sell them into slavery or offer them to the deities to become Osu. There are also people whose children become Osu because the deity asks its priests to take Osu persons as wives; yet there are others who out of gluttony for the property of the deity and perhaps the incessant cock and goat delicacies around its shrine choose to become Osu. In addition, oral information revealed that some prisoners captured during inter-communal wars were sold off, and their new owners were forced to enlist some of them into the Osu system by giving them away as gestures and

placation to a local deity. No matter how the Osu caste system originated in Igboland, and no matter its apparent past benefits, it is now the feeling of many peace-loving individuals that the ancient institution, an internal apartheid in Igboland, has outlived its usefulness (Dike, 2009).

Meanwhile, there is no denying the fact that almost every ethnic group in Nigeria has its own reasons for discriminating against their own people; and some of the reasons are apparently religious. The Osu caste system, which is a form of discrimination, has caused division, inter-communal clashes and wars between the Osu and the Diala in Igbo land. Such conflicts have claimed lives and properties worth millions of naira. Agbaegbu (2000, cited in Dike 2009) explained that, in the south-east of Nigeria, the people of Umuode in Nkanu East local government area of Enugu state, who are said to be the descendants of the Osu, are treated as second class citizens. In Uruku community made up of Umuode, Umuchiani and Onuogowo, the people of Umuode have limited social interaction with the rest of the community because of their ascribed Osu status. And strangely, the other two villages cannot intermarry with the people of Umuode. No matter their social status in the community, the local churches could hardly appoint the people of Umuode to positions of responsibility. This ostracism is operated in such a manner that any person from the other side of the community who talks to or greets any person from Umuode, pays fine sometimes as high as one thousand (₦1,000). Because of this situation, the people of Umuode operate their own local market different from the Eke-Oruku market, which is owned exclusively by Umuchiani and Onuogowo. The people of Umuode have waged wars against this social stigma; about five major conflicts have been recorded in this area since 1995, and many lives have been lost. However, some communities like Nnobi in

Idemili local government area of Anambra state have successfully integrated their Osu population into the mainstream of the community. Other Igbo communities are encouraged to emulate this.

According to the United Nations' definition, discrimination included any conduct based on a distinction made on grounds of natural or social categories, which have no relation either to individual capacities or merits, or to the concrete behaviour of the individual person. The discriminatory Osu practices involves inequality in freedom of movement and choice of residence, inequality in the right of peaceful association, inequality in the employment of the right to marry and establish a family, (and) inequality in access to public office… slavery (Allport 1979 cited in Onwubiko 1993). In the past, the Osus were subjected to various forms of dehumanizing treatments including discrimination in the buying of their goods in the market, forcing them to grow very long and dirty hairs to mark a conspicuous difference between them and the Diala. In our Igbo traditional society, the quagmire between Osus and Diala is gradually fading away except in marriage and some traditional titles like Ozo, Nze and Eze (Madugba, 2014).

It is common saying in Igboland that the Osus are usually beautiful or handsome, very rich and has an odour. However, a recent and common observation proved that the above statement do not hold water because the Osu group is a mixture of beautiful and ugly, poor and rich, and not all have body odour. This is part of cultural strengthening of a prejudice so as to widen the already existing discriminatory gap between the Osus and the Dialas.

The Osus were forbidden to be combatants in warfare for fear of spilling their blood, which could unleash the wrath of the deities. In our secular society, to an extent particularly within the

ambit of the law, it is voluntary to belong to a group. It is commonly known that any attempt at exerting influence on an already existing order, may lead to various forms of reactions. However, people regarded as modern-day Osu in Igbo land are descendants of individuals who volunteered and were sacrificed to the various gods. The Osu enjoyed protection and privileges, but were segregated from other folks. They marry and socialize among themselves. Obinna (2012) reported that in some Igbo communities, especially Enugu, Anambra, Imo, Abia, Edo and Delta states of the country, the Osu caste system remains a social issue. Once someone is born into the Osu caste, this Nigerian person is an outcast, with limited opportunities or acceptance, regardless of his or her ability. Obinna discusses how this caste system-related identity and power is deployed within government, church and indigenous communities. One can actually imagine how these deities with dysfunctional sense organs are still sustained by the learned and in a civilized society like ours. If these deities are without life, they cannot own properties, let alone own human beings. Today, many Igbo Christians still believe that the Osu caste system is a cultural issue the Church should not step into, while some equally maintain that the Osu issue will die naturally with time.

In 1956, Igbo legislators in the then Eastern House of Assembly in Enugu abrogated the common practice of referring to people as Osus. The fine imposed made people to restraint from the public expression of the word, Osu. Today, the potency of this law is still doubtful because 60 years after the law, people of substance in Igbo land are denied titles and positions they deserve simply because of the Osu tag. A negative tradition gave birth to Osu. A positive tradition in terms of re-socialization ought to be developed for it. Our humble opinion is that we can end the Osu-

Diala dichotomy by re-educating our children on its tendency to destroy rather than build Igbo civilized society.

2.1 The New Form of Discrimination in Ocho Kindred

The case of Ocho Ukwu-Ocho Nta-Umuada Ocho bifurcation developed into a crisis since the Ocho Ukwu group persistently denied the Umuada Ocho (Ocho Nte) the right to partake fully in any traditional activity thereby making and treating them as second class citizen. The oral information from the bifurcation of the Ocho kindred indicates that this division has been on for a very long time. However, early this year both groups finally went their separate ways. Thus, this marked the re-enactment of the Osu-Diala dichotomy in the small kindred of Ocho in Ebonyi State.

3. Christianity and the Osu Caste System

The advent of Christianity in Igboland was a momentous event. This missionary movement also occurred within the context of the British colonization of the territory. Colonial presence was a feature that gave extra boldness and courage to the European missionaries as they advanced into the Igbo hinterlands (Njoku, 2015). According to reports of early Christian activities in 1863 in Igboland, most of the first members of the Christian community were converts who were slaves purchased by the missionaries or others who suffered from social disabilities, lepers, widows and a variety of others formed the hard core of the early church congregation (Ekechi, 1972). These groups were converts because of their situations and urgently needed a refuge. The work of evangelization at the time was necessary to combat ignorance and revive social co-existence. Physical liberation was also emphasized and this was liberation from sickness and the breaking of the social barriers in Igboland. Thus, for the Osu in particular, Christianity

was a religion of liberation. The churches preached the message of freedom and the Osu who had been suffering from societal rejection, for centuries, welcomed the message (Onwubiko, 1993). The event is narrated in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*:

> *these outcasts or Osu seeing that the new religion welcomed twins and such abominations, thought that it was possible that they would also be received. And so one Sunday, two of them went into the church. There was no immediate stir; but so great was the work the religion had done among the converts that they did not immediately leave the church when the outcasts came. Those who found themselves nearest to them merely moved to another seat. It was a miracle (Achebe, 1978).*

This particular action gradually started a process of social regeneration and change that was obviously contrary to the indigenous custom of the Igbo society.

However, this was the first time the Osu was accommodated in the assembly of the freeborn. It was clear that in due time the institution which underwent… distortion and corruption was that of Osu, cult slavery (Isichie 1976). This singular attitude was a sharp shift from what existed and a great relief to the Osus. No wonder Achebe recorded that they did not leave the church immediately the church service was over. The church tried to eradicate the scourge through re-orientation and non-violent approach. The moves to accommodate Osu was not an easy one, the eradication of the system meant cutting across the roots of traditional religion itself. Yet the Christian missionaries remained firm (Onwubiko, 1993). The Church was able to achieve

recognizable breakthrough when the so-called freeborn began to at least accept the physical presence of Osus. But the cold-war continued especially outside the worshipping arena. According to Ekechi (1972), the early content of the congregation in fact militated against missionary work, for most people in society would not associate freely with these so called social outcasts. But their accommodation was a good step and created an avenue for the missionaries to drum into the ears of the freeborn that all have sinned and needs salvation through common worship. So, the freeborn till today no longer consider it below their dignity to worship in the same place with the Osus. They have gradually learnt that in the sight of God, there is no salvation difference – that all are sinners need the salvation of their immortal souls. In Onwubiko's view, the freeborns who became Christians looked more favourably towards the Osu as their brothers in the faith, yet the attacks of the traditional religionists in areas where the Osu system was an essential organ for promoting the cult of the deities, were constant. No wonder it was noted even among Christian's that some people were prepared to accommodate the new religion and the social changes that came with it, others were determined to maintain or to restore the purity of Igbo traditional life and religion. The church is still working hard at its effort toward a total eradication of Osu caste system in Igbo traditional societies.

Recently, Anthony Obinna the Catholic Archbishop of Owerri has devoted much time in the campaign against the Osu-Diala Dichotomy in order to awaken the consciousness and sensibilities of the Igbo Christians to the numerous evils associated with it. This is to make the conscious Igbo Christian join him for the total eradication, destruction and annihilation of the Osu caste system in our society and the birth of a new society.

4. The Government and the Osu Caste System

From the inception of colonial administration to the present, one form of action or the other has been taken by the government.

With regard to the colonial administrators, it must be recognised that the administration was initially totally ignorant of the existence of Osu caste system and as such, did not discriminate in the governmental and systems organization and that offered a protective front to the Osu group. In their attempts to appoint people to handle public offices, the Osus were favoured and some of them were made warrant chiefs. This gave them the opportunity to organize themselves into villages like the other villages, and in some cases they took genealogical names – umu… preferring a name of one of their ancestors, and from then they began to have the feeling of a common descent (Onwubiko, 1993). In Nzimiro (1992), the official banning of the Osu system in Eastern Region in 1956, was a definitive stand of the colonial government on an issue it had hitherto handled with tacit caution. In fact, a law was passed by the government prohibiting the use of the words "Osu" or "Ohu" to describe any member of this class. As a result, the Dialas stopped calling them Osu but usually shrugged it off by saying that 'what they are, we know in our hearts'. The Osus, although entrenched in politics, academics, commerce and industry, are not totally free from the stigma. No wonder Obasi (1989), stated thus: "it is shocking that despite social, educational and political advancement among the Igbos, the Osu caste system is perpetuated. And this, despite the fact that there are thousands of people who are branded Osu today who hold very high positions in government, in the professions, in industry and even in the military. For example, although nobody has any specific list of who is Osu (and all its different variations) and who is not, the following belong to those that have been branded Osu. A state

commissioner in one of the Igbo states; the wives of two men who have been governors in two of those states; a retired academic who later headed a big national media institution; a highly-renowned economist and a minister in the First Republic whose off-springs have turned out to be highly-reputable personalities in the country; a very famous poet who is deceased now; and even a famous footballer. But all these personalities, without exception, are shy of making their identities known in spite of all the privations they have suffered and which they see others suffer daily. According to Nzimiro (1972), when Dr. Azikiwe spoke on the second Reading of the Abolition of the Osu system Bill, he noted the aims of the Bill as follows. "this Bill seeks to do three things: to abolish the Osu system and its allied practices including Oru and Ohu system, to prescribe punishment for their continued practice, and to remove certain social disabilities caused by the enforcement of the Osu, and its allied system." This declaration gave the Osu group the rights to sue the freeborn if they directly or indirectly tried to take advantage of them because of the stigma.

5. Conclusion

The argument here is that since Osuship entails categorization of, and subsequent discrimation against other human beings. It is superfluous to maintain that the practice has ended as alluded by some Igbo scholars. There is an unnoticed gradual rebirth of the practice in some clans and kindreds in our society; the recent Ocho Ukwu-Ocho Nte bifurcation is a pointer in this direction. All human beings are created equal, but human experiences are heterogeneous. Some people have had it rough all their lives, while others do not have a lot to complain about. Ordinarily, life has the same meaning for everyone, but the Osu caste system in Igboland

seems to have changed the meaning of life for a group of people branded Osu.

For so many years, all efforts by Christianity and Government to modernize Igbo culture have not been greeted with success. It is not that Igbo people have not seen reasons to welcome this change, without destroying our cultural values but they have not come to terms with the prospects of compromising what they think is the basic inclinations of man. Despite the influences of Christianity and other secular legislations, a full assimilation of the Osu into the fabrics of Igbo society is still a journey far-reached. The Government and other change agents are encouraged to do more for total eradication of any form of discrimination and categorization in Igbo traditional society.

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