



THE ETHICO-RELIGIOUS IMPLICATIONS OF OSU CASTE SYSTEM IN IGBOLAND

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Abstract

Osu is a caste system of alienation and discrimination of a certain class or group of people considered to be outcast in Igboland. This paper therefore seeks to examine the Osu caste system in Igboland within the moral and religious prisms. Hence the paper is aimed at exposing the ethical as well as the religious implications of Osu caste system in Igboland. Using the analytic and historical methods of analysis, the paper discovers that the Osu/Ohu caste system has serious ethical as well as religious implications in Igboland. The paper therefore, recommends a pragmatic method of integration of both the Osu/Ohu and the Nwadiala from the government in order to obliterate the obnoxious practice of discrimination in the name of Osu or Ohu.

Keywords: osu caste system, Ethico-religious, Igboland, Nwadiala.

Introduction

Caste system exists in many parts of the world, Nigeria inclusive. It is a social stratification into which people are born or found themselves. In Igboland, there exist two caste-like systems; the first is called Ohu or Oru who are regarded as slaves. They were either bought or acquired through war conquest. The class of Ohu or Oru in Igboland is quite flexible because their status can change if certain conditions are met. However, these conditions involved some rigorous and expensive cleansing. The second class is called Osu and is not flexible like the Ohu, rather their status and conditions are fixed and permanent (Dike, 2007). Those who belong to this class are regarded as outcasts. Although Osu and Ohu differ in their classes of caste system, yet they both share the same fate of discrimination, alienation, and ostracism in Igboland. For this reason, Osu and Ohu will be treated as a single entity in this paper even as their various features would be discussed differently.

Osu caste system is an endemic social virus that has come to stay in Igboland despite the impact of civilization, exposition to other cultures and Christianity. In Igboland, the society is unnaturally divided into two – the Nwadiala (free born) and the Osu (the outcast) or the Umu amu and the Ohu as is the case with the people of Ehalumona community in Nsukka Local Government Area and other parts of Enugu State. The problem is that this division



has violated both moral and religious doctrines practiced in Igboland. Unfortunately, people seem not to be aware of or deliberately chose not to pay attention to the ethical and religious implications of Osu caste system in Igboland even as Igbo people are known to be socially connected, accommodating, friendly, spiritually inclined as well as culturally bound together. This was why Nwosu (1999) strongly remarks that “Osu system is a cultural albatross for the Igbo society.” This is because Osu caste system has become an impediment to human relationships as well as cultural, religious and social progress. It is for this reason that this paper attempts an exposition of the implications of Osu/Ohu both ethically and religiously. It is hoped that while exposing the ethico-religious implications of Osu/Ohu caste system in Igboland, this paper would have succeeded in conscientizing the minds of the Igbo people of the ugly trends and consequences of continuously holding on to an age old tradition that has done nobody any good.

Meaning of Osu/Ohu

Osu is a person dedicated as a slave to a god or goddess forcefully against his or her consent (Madubuike, 2014). For Okonkwo (2014), Osu 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.’ In other words, an Osu is an individual who is dedicated to a deity or who is offered to the gods or deities by the community and is regarded as second-class citizen or simply sub-human. Ohu on the other hand, is a person owned or bought by another person or community. In other words, an Ohu has a human master while an Osu has a divine or spiritual master. An Ohu or Osu is not a free man. He cannot go back to his parents’ house or his community. He doesn’t have the power to do anything by himself except as it concerns his owner. Hence both Osu and Ohu are outcasts in the society. They are not allowed to associate with the free-born or the Nwadiala of the community. Thus, Osu Caste System is said to be an ancient practice in Igboland that discourages social interaction and marriage with a group of people, referred to as Osu (outcasts) (Agbaegbu, 2000)). This is because they dedicate these Osu people to the Alusi (deities) and are thus seen as inferior to the Nwadiala (free-born) (Ugobude, 2018).

The Origin of Osu/Ohu in Igboland

The origin of Osu and Ohu is shrouded in ambiguity. In fact, no one knows exactly the beginning or the origin of Osu or Ohu in Igboland. What we know about the origin of Osu and Ohu today is nothing but a guess or an undocumented and unsupported account from our forefathers or from the elders of the land. For instance, some elders of the land agreed that they were born into the tradition of Osu and Ohu caste systems. Having been born into the existing tradition of Osu and Ohu, there was no accurate account of its origin. Hence, it was through the story told by our fore fathers or the elders of the land that we come to know that the Osu are the class of people whose parents were used as sacrifices to some deities and that those who belong to the class of Ohu are those who were sold or bought for one reason or the other or those who were conquered during inter-tribal or community



wars and were taken and treated as slaves (Igwebuie, 1986). However, Osu caste was non-existent before in Igboland at the beginning. Those who later became Osu were first free born or sons and daughters of the soil. And it is for this particular reason that many people rise against the Osu caste system since it was not originally part of the Igbo culture and custom.

Meanwhile, some scholars like Ugoji (2015) are of the opinion that Osu caste system came into being as a result of some problems that the people encountered in the society in the olden days in Igboland. For instance, in the traditional Igbo society before the advent of Christianity, Igbo people were generally pagans or traditional worshippers. Hence, as the need for helpers at the shrine arises, the people had to look for some males who would be assisting the Chief priests of the shrine. Anyone who or those who were chosen to assist the priests and run errands for the deity automatically become the property of the deity for life. In other words, such a person or persons become an Osu to the deity. Now, when these chosen men are ripe for marriage, there arose another need to look for wives for them. Any young woman or women found and given to those chosen men will automatically become Osu to the deity also. The off-springs or the children of these men and women would equally and automatically become Osu also to the deity. Thus, historically, a person becomes an Osu if he was purchased and dedicated to the gods to atone for a crime (Asinugo, 2014). Also if an individual kills or causes an Osu to die, he will automatically become an Osu except if he provides another human being to the deity who owns the Osu. An individual who committed abominable act in the land can donate or offer himself to a deity when he notices that the community is planning to sell him off into slavery. Equally, a very poor and helpless man can also become an Osu if he offers himself to the deity to prevent the rich from selling him into slavery to enrich themselves. Another aspect of becoming Osu is when a person sleeps at the shrine of a deity till the next day, he becomes an Osu automatically. In the same vein, any woman who gives birth at a shrine of a deity also loses her child to the deity. The child becomes an Osu except if the father of the child provides another human being to replace the child. Lastly, people who were captured during war are used as slaves. They can become slaves to the whole community or to the individuals who captured them (Mgbada, 2016).

From the above therefore, the status of Osu can be acquired through birth by Osu parents and through intermarriage. As already noted, a person can acquire the status of an Osu if he was purchased and dedicated to the gods to atone for a crime. In the past, identifying an Osu was not difficult as it is presently. In those days, some parts of the Osu's body, like an ear or a finger is usually branded or cut to identify him. Also, one could easily identify an Osu by his inherent devastating body odour which most probably was as a result of lack of care, long hours of strenuous manual labour as well as denial of most basic amenities such as fresh water, good food, clothes etc. Hence, it is not really the case like some writers believe, that "Osu has a very bad body odour that no matter how they try to remove it with



perfume it does not go” (Onwubuariri, 2016, p.65). Other way of identifying an Osu is by the places they live. Usually, they are found in outskirts and fringes of the community. However, we must note that in some Igbo communities, it is not quite easy to identify Osu by the places they live or by the marks on their body. Things have changed and in most communities in Igboland, Osu or Ohu live within the same communities and even share common boundaries with the non-Osu or the free born such that visitors to the community would not be able to identify Osu if they are not told.

Advantages of Osu/Ohu

Can anything good emerge from an ontologically bad system? Or can there be advantages from a disadvantaged condition or system? These questions are necessary because in logic we are told that no conclusion can follow from two negative premises just as a negative conclusion cannot follow from two affirmative premises. The implication of these logical statements in our everyday life is that nothing good can be found or can come forth from what is already considered bad or evil. The question therefore, is can we talk of advantages of Osu/Ohu or are there advantages of being an Osu/Ohu?

Generally speaking, it would seem that Osu/Ohu caste system has no advantages to the individuals who are Osu/Ohu. But historically, Osu/Ohu system has granted some advantages to the Osu/Ohu in the past. First, the Osu/Ohu system has saved individuals that the community wanted to sell into slavery. Although slavery or slave (Ohu) and Osu both share the same stigma, discrimination and ostracism, yet Osu seems to be preferred, since an Osu remains within his environment or ancestral community or country, while Ohu is sold out to a strange or foreign community or country. Therefore, someone who is already an Osu is preserved and so escapes being sold into slavery by the community. Secondly, unlike the Nwadiala or (free-born), no one can hurt or maltreat the Osu/Ohu except the slave owner (in the case of Ohu) and the deity (in the case of Osu). Hence Osu/Ohu is free from bullying and from other maltreatments from those who are not their owners. Thirdly, due to the discrimination and ostracism following Osu/Ohu, they see the opportunity to improve their lives especially in the acquisition of skills. Lastly, the Osu/Ohu system enabled the Osu/Ohu to go to school where they acquired modern education. This has become one of the greatest advantages the Osu/Ohu have against the free-born or the Nwadiala till date.

Other advantages of Osu come from possessing all the items used in sacrifice to the deity that owns them. This helped in making the Osu wealthier with time more than the Nwadiala. Also, any animal that wanders into the compound of an Osu automatically becomes the property of that Osu whose compound it entered. Finally, people were saved from starvation and death through becoming Osu voluntarily. This happens when extremely poor individuals gave themselves voluntarily to a deity so that they can feed and escape death through starvation.

Disadvantages of Osu/Ohu

The very concept of Osu/Ohu already suggests a person or persons who are socially disadvantaged by the community. Even as Osu/Ohu is a disadvantage itself, there are still several disadvantages of being an Osu/Ohu. First, in the history of most communities in Igboland, Osu/Ohu is usually used in burying the kings and great men. Osu/Ohu was also used as sacrificial lamps to the deities. They are equally punished, starved and denied food and other necessities. In the present day Igboland, the disadvantages of Osu/Ohu are quite a number. First the Osu/Ohu is not allowed to inter-marry with the non-Osu/Ohu, and this constitutes a major setback or obstacle towards integration and abolition of Osu/Ohu Caste System in Igboland till date. The Osu/Ohu was not allowed to worship in the same church with the Nwadiala. Even when they are allowed, they don't sit with the Nwadiala. They have their own separate corners. In fact, the Osu/Ohu is to be seen but not to be heard. They cannot take traditional titles as they are regarded as people devoid of respect and dignity. More so, an Osu or Ohu even at the present, may find it difficult fulfilling a desire to occupy political position in Igboland particularly, where a Nwadiala has indicated interest in spite of all the attempts that have been made towards eradication or abolition of the system (Amadife, 1988).

Ethical Implication of Osu/Ohu Caste System

Basically, one would like to know the connections between ethics or moral philosophy with Osu/Ohu caste system. The connection is that Osu/Ohu caste system is a system that discriminates against a particular group of people who are singled out of the lot and branded outcasts for whatever the reason may be. And philosophy being a discipline concerned with the lots of man, has so far contributed towards a better understanding of man, man's essence, man's ultimate desires, and man's relationship with his fellow man. This is why the paper seeks to expose the ethical implications of Osu/Ohu caste system because the starting point is that the Osu – an individual with equal rights as others, is discriminated against with a stigma of an outcast, a dreaded untouchable. But this type of discrimination against the Osu touches on his dignity and self-worth. He is perceived as someone of a status less than that of a slave. A slave can liberate himself through financial, political and even religious effort, but not an Osu. His wealth or societal status cannot avail him. The fact that he is wealthy and is holding a revered political, judicial or intellectual office cannot erase the scar he bears as an Osu. This is a glaring abuse of the right to dignity of human person which Immanuel Kant had warned against.

Kant's second formulation of the categorical imperative known as the formula of Humanity or Humanity formula states: *Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means* (Kant, 1993). This principle implies that rational human beings are "ends in themselves" because they have practical reason, autonomy and intrinsic value. By saying



that we should treat people as ends and never as a means, Kant admonishes us against using other people as a means to our own ends. Hence, a rational being is constrained by reason not to use his fellow human beings merely as a means to achieve his own purposes, not to enslave them, abuse or exploit them, but always to recognize that they contain within themselves the justification of their own existence, and a right to their autonomy (Ejeh, 2022). Hence, Osu/Ohu caste system being a discriminatory system against some individual violates the second principle of Kant's categorical imperative, since by default, Osu/Ohu caste system is a system that uses fellow human beings merely as means to achieve one's own purposes. Hence, for Kant, morality entailed the recognition of the dignity of each person as a person and as such, all human beings should be treated as free and equal members of a shared moral community.

Therefore, the ethical implication of Osu/Ohu caste system is that the Osu/Ohu has no dignity and so can be used as means to an end. And if the Osu/Ohu can be used as a means to achieve some ends, then it implies that they are not moral agents, for moral agents have dignity, and are not used as means to achieve some ends. The Osu/Ohu in various capacity and different occasions have been used as means by the Nwadiala to achieve some ends. In fact, by default, the Osu/Ohu is an individual turned as means for some cultural or traditional and even personal ends.

Religious Implications of Osu/Ohu Caste System

The level of discrimination an Osu/Ohu suffers constitutes a serious breach of his liberty and freewill. He cannot interact freely with the "freeborn" or Nwadiala, hence there is always a limitation placed on what he can do. In practice, liberty entails free enterprise and freedom to engage in any activity that avails other members of the community. The Osu/Ohu lacks access to engage in these free activities even in religious arena.

In most communities in Igboland, the conferment of traditional titles is the prerogatives of the Nwadiala (Nwachukwu, 1985). No Osu/Ohu is allowed to take any traditional title in the communities where the Nwadiala reside. This has even overtly affected the hierarchy of the church where the Osu/Ohu is not allowed to assume some religious offices. In fact, in some communities, it is believed that the Osu/Ohu cannot become priests in the church. This is as a result of several failed attempts of some or many Osu/Ohu towards reaching that height. In the past, and even now in some parishes of the Catholic and other Christian denominations, the Osu/Ohu usually sit at a different location in the church from the Nwadiala. This is because the Christian Nwadiala would not still want to be seen sitting together with the Osu/Ohu, yet Christianity preaches peace, unity and equality. Although the church has been making every effort to incorporate all people in the one body of Christ, what happens after the church between the "Osu" and the "Nwadiala" who had worshipped under one roof is yet another question.



So far, Christianity has preached and continued to preach equality of all man before God. That we are all made up of one body of Christ, Osu and Nwadiala alike. There should be no discrimination among the Christian folk, but then, it seems that the attempt is only theoretical. Because after all the hue and cry, the Osu problem still persists. The implication of this is that the discrimination against Osu/Ohu continues to create division in the church. There are competent, devoted, knowledgeable, and zealous Osu/Ohu in the church who are willing to serve the church, but as a result of the discrimination, their services are either rejected or half-acknowledged. In fact, the overall religious implication of the Osu/Ohu caste system is that the church has become a hypocrite. Preaching one thing (unity, love and equality) and doing another thing (segregation, discrimination and inequality). Also, the Osu/Ohu discrimination implies religiously that the Osu/Ohu was not created by the same God who created the Nwadiala. In other words, by implication, the Osu/Ohu caste discrimination overtly (without realizing it) preaches or supports the belief in many gods as against the Christian view and belief that there is only one God who made and created everything on earth and above the earth. This is because, since religion or Christianity has not been able to unanimously and doctrinally oppose and move against the abolition of Osu/Ohu caste system, it shows that they believe that God's creation is not perfect and good. What this implies is that God is a partial God who made some perfect and some imperfect; some good and some bad; some Osu/Ohu and some Nwadiala. But all religions including Christianity believe that God is one, ultimate, supreme, powerful and almighty, who created all equally without discrimination.

Thus, the inequality, segregation, ostracism and division which characterized the contemporary Osu caste system in Igboland runs contrary to the original design and arrangement of the creator of man (Nwagbara et al., 2011). Yet, not even the Church has been able to put an end to the ugly trend.

Conclusion

Osu/Ohuship no doubt, entails categorization of, and subsequent discrimination against other human beings in the society. Both Christianity and Human rights frown upon such categorization and discrimination. Although there have been several attempts targeted towards abolishing the Osu/Ohu Caste System in Igboland, yet the extent to which these attempts were made sincerely and determinedly is another thing all together. This is because since the official banning of Osu/Ohu Caste system in 1956, the system still thrives and the people who are affected – the Osu/Ohu continue to suffer humiliation, discrimination and intimidation. Unfortunately, because of some of the attempts and the official banning of Osu/Ohu caste system many years ago, some uninformed scholars superfluously maintain that the practice has ended or is dead and buried. The truth is that Osu/Ohu caste system is a reality that still challenges the unity and cohesion of Igbo people. In other words, Osu/Ohu caste still exist within the Igboland, and while some are well



pronounced some are silently whispered. It is also prevalent in all parts of Nigeria, Africa and the other worlds under the disguise of some other names.

The main focus of this paper has been on examining the ethical as well as the religious implications of Osu/Ohu caste system in Igboland. Hence, the paper simply recommends that for there to be any meaningful attempts towards abolition of Osu/Ohu caste system in Igboland, both the Osu/Ohu and the Nwadiala must be very sincere with themselves. This is because in some Igbo communities, while struggling and agitating for the abolition of the caste system, many of the Osu/Ohu are quite mischievous and deceitful about their demands or needs, while many of the non-Osu/Ohu (the Nwadiala) who are in the forefront in the abolition campaign, are also devious and self-seeking. Therefore, having analyzed the ethico-religious implications of Osu/Ohu Caste System in Igboland, the paper strongly recommends that sincerity and goodwill must be applied by those who seek the abolition of Osu/Ohu caste system in Igboland. But then, we must note that, although the law prohibits segregation of victims Osu/Ohu caste, the law does not and must not mandate forced relations. The solution to the acceptability of the Osu/Ohu, lies more on ethical and religious persuasion than any other, hence, the attempt to showcase the ethico-religious implications of Osu/Ohu caste system in Igboland.

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