

**OSU-CASTE SYSTEM AND THE SOCIO-CULTURAL IMPLICATIONS IN OKIJA,
ANAMBRA STATE, NIGERIA**

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Abstract

The Osu-caste system is perhaps not just among the world's longest surviving status discrimination, but dehumanizing and has had an enduring stigma on many individuals. This paper examined osu-caste system and the socio-cultural implications in Okija, Anambra State, Nigeria. The theoretical thrust of this paper was conflict theory of Marx. Survey design was used and the major instrument for data collection was structured questionnaire. Sample size of one hundred and fifty (150) residents, aged 20 years and above were drawn using multi-stage sampling techniques. The respondents were purposively selected from three villages in the area. Data were analyzed using percentages and frequencies tables. Out of the 150 copies of questionnaire administered, one hundred and twenty-one (121) that were properly filled were retrieved and used for analysis. The results showed amongst other things that stigmatization, abuse of fundamental human rights, bridge of friendship, and taunting were major social implications of osu-caste in the area. Again, the cultural implications of the caste were found to be denial of marital rights, denial of traditional rights, like chieftaincy titles, ostracism/rejection and seclusion of place of residence. The paper concluded that Osu-caste still exist in Okija and has divers disturbing social and cultural implications. It recommended that there is a need for a stern decree or law by the government to eliminate the idea that Osu-caste is part of culture and strictly enforce compliance by prosecuting anyone found labelling another an Osu. This will not only send strong message but serve as deterrence to intending offenders. In addition, any traditional ruler that deprived anyone merited chieftaincy titles and other traditional rights on the ground of being Osu should be dethroned and made to face the law. In doing this the dignity and rights of persons termed osu would not just be restored but respected.

Keywords: discrimination, outcast, Osu-caste, socio-cultural implications

Introduction

Discrimination is not only an attack on the personality of the victim, but a virus that afflicts every other emblem of human rights as it seeks to separate, and even alienate the target from the membership of human community. It is directed at removing the shield that binds humanity together. Discrimination erodes the innermost sensibilities of the victim, even when outwardly the victim's pain remains shrouded in fake resilience (Igwe & Akolokwu, 2014).

In human history, every age and people have their own problems, either natural (earthquakes, flood, etc.) or man-made. In every society, social stratification, discrimination, prejudice and injustices do exist and may differ from one society to the other. It can take several forms, be it economic, social, religious and even political. It exists among individuals, ethnic groups and even nations. While one group or nation claims superiority over another, others are meant to feel weak or less important and this may be called different names by different cultures or societies. The caste system is one of such problem made by man and is the second system of social stratification in which status is determined by birth, and it tries to restrict marriage to membership of one's own caste and it's lifelong (Henslin, 2005; Ember, Ember & Peregrine, 2005).

Human right stands above the ordinary laws of the land and which in fact is antecedent to the political society itself. It is a primary condition to a civilized existence (Nwaka, 1985). He argued that what has been done by the Nigerian Constitution since independence is to have these rights enshrined so that the rights could be immutable to the extent of the non-immutability of the Constitution itself. Section 42(1) of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria guarantees the right to freedom from discrimination. Nigeria as an active member of the international community maintains effective representation at the United Nations and other similar international organizations. She has equally contributed immensely in treaty making at the international and regional levels (Human Rights Law Journal, 2007). Yet, having some glaring discriminatory practices in some quarters of the country.

Amongst the Igbo of South-east Nigeria, there is the Osu-caste system. It is perhaps among the world's longest surviving status discrimination as that of the Indian caste; and it is believed to be as old as Igbo land herself, 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 ethnic nationals in Nigeria and Africa at large”. 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, globalisation or even democracy and the human rights culture; as the people continue to give strict observance or face dire consequences (Amalu, 2018 & Onwubuariri, 2016).

Mgbada (2016) observed that of all the customs of Igboland and perhaps Africa at large which the Europeans considered repugnant to natural justice, equity and good conscience (such as the killing of twins and extra judicial killing of thieves), the Osu-caste system has been the most obstinate in resisting extermination. While claiming that the system appears to be the most fundamental and unshakable, Mgbada further stated that “it is fundamental because it is almost aboriginally attached to the traditional system of people-making the necessary distinction between those “free” and “properly” born with legitimacy into the society and those regarded as “illegitimate” by virtue and circumstance of their birth or arrival in the society or, indeed, ultimately by circumstance of their being dedicated to one god or the other”.

The Osu are treated as inferior human beings in a state of permanent and irreversible disability and are subjected to various forms of abuse and discrimination. They are made to live separately from the free born. They reside in most cases, very close to shrines and market places. In extreme cases they are not allowed to dance, drink, hold hands, associate or have sexual relations with ‘free born’. Further, they are not allowed to break Kola nuts (an offering of peace) at meetings. At the level of spirituality, an Osu is considered unworthy to pour libation or pray to the gods on behalf of the freeborn at a community gathering. It is erroneously believed that such prayers will bring calamity and misfortune (Mgbada, 2016). He stressed that an Osu may find it difficult fulfilling a desire to occupy political position in Igboland, particularly, where a Diala (freeborn) has indicated interest.

Igwe and Akolokwu (2014) added that evidence of discrimination against the Osu includes: parents administering poison to their children, in a desperate move to perpetually wipe out the stigma; disinheritance (in a situation where a freeborn marries Osu); Ostracism, organized attack, heaping harvest offering separately in churches, denial of membership in social clubs, violent disruption of marriage ceremonies, denial of chieftaincy titles, deprivation of property and expulsion of wives. The discriminations appears more worrisome and pronounced in the area of marriage. Dike (2002) argues that an Osu cannot be allowed to marry a freeborn. The belief is that any freeborn that marries an Osu defiles the family. Consequently, freeborn families are always prepared against any of their own desiring to marry an Osu. Every available ‘arsenal’ is assembled to scuttle the arrangement. This scar is so feared that marriages in most Igbo communities are preceded by very thorough and rigorous investigations.

There is no better way of articulating the interrelatedness of human rights than the violations consequent upon the discrimination of the Osu. In Anambra State, Vanguard (2020) reports that two lovers from Okija, Ihiala LGA, committed suicide by injecting ‘sniper’ insecticide on the basis of Osu-caste infringements on their desires to become husband and wife. The *caste* system has had an enduring stigma as a person is considered a member of the caste into which he or she is born and remains there until death, without any upward social mobility. Such barbaric practice is not just dehumanizing but could sustain generational conflict or cold war between the rival groups.

The sustenance of this discriminatory practice against the caste group has attracted different efforts and approaches to exterminating the menace. In 1956, the Eastern House of Assembly attempted to abolish the caste practice and enacted a law to ensure that the caste groups enjoy equal rights (Okwelume, 2009). However, it is over sixty years after and attitude remains almost the same. It is in view of the above that this paper examines Osu-caste system and the socio-cultural implications in Okija, Anambra State, Nigeria.

Specific Objectives

1. To determine the social implications of Osu-caste system in Okija.
2. To outline the cultural implications of Osu-caste system in Okija.

Conceptual Review

Osu-Caste System and the Historical Overview

Traditionally in Igbo society, there are two classes of people the slaves and the free-born. These slaves are taken to be outcasts and are called Osu, while the free-born are called the dialas. This inferiority and superiority arrangement has generated conflicts. We live in a society where Osu is considered unclean and should be avoided at all costs. Even though the Osu-caste system is condemned by many, the attitude still lingers in the heart of the people (Uchendu, 1965).

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, Amadife (1988) 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.

Amadife added that 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. The *Osu-caste* system is a social structure dating back centuries under which persons designated as *Osu* are forbidden from any social interaction, including marriage, with those considered as freeborn. An *Osu* is a person dedicated to the gods of Igbo land, either as sacrificial objects or action by the victim in the face of life-threatening circumstances. By this, the unfortunate victims become automatically untouchables, outcasts and sub-human and, therefore, deemed inferior to the normal freeborn.

According to Ezekwugo (1987), 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 refutes to be cleansed is dubbed “*Osu*” or “untouchables”. It is believed they were descendants of travelers who were merely allowed to stay in the community.

Historically, a person became Osu if he/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; while in modern times, inheritance and marriage are the strongest factors. One thing certain is that, in whichever manner the status of Osu is acquired, it is permanent (Dike, 2002).

In primitive traditional societies, to identify an Osu is not a difficult task. Some parts of his body, like an ear or a finger is usually cut off. Apart from the marks, “one can also identify one 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 (Onwubuariri, 2016). Again, place of residence equally make their identification somewhat easy. 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). The Osu is like priest of the cult and in some cases, subjects of the Chief Priests. They are made to keep vigil in the village where they are slaves (Ohu or Oru) and ensure safety of their master as well as the protection of the wives or 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 (Onwubuariri, 2016). These appear some of the assumed traditional roles the Osus are forced to occupy in traditional Igbo societies.

Socio-Cultural Implications of Osu-caste System

Due to the stigmatisation suffered by many people in the hands of their brothers and sisters over the Osu-caste system, the defunct Eastern House of Assembly, on May 10, 1956, abrogated the obnoxious practice through an act of parliament, but 60 years after this has not done the required magic. The word Osu in Igboland means a group of people that were dedicated to the gods or deities. These were people captured during the inter-tribal wars and sold to other communities as prisoners of war and whenever there was need to offer a human sacrifice to the deities, they were used. Some of these slaves ran to deities for protection whenever they were wanted for sacrifice. Because they ran to the deities for protection, they were then seen as belonging to the deities or dedicated to the deities. They were ostracized, discriminated and segregated from the rest of the societies (Mezie-Okoye & Asike, 2019).

Mezie-Okoye and Asike, (2019) further stressed that the foundations and origins of the obnoxious Osu-caste system can be understood but the superstitions and myths that support its continued existence are flimsy. It beats imagination on how offspring of the said Osus who were not party to the exchange and who were not in any case priests of some of the now extinct deities also be referred to or perceived as living sacrifices or remain ostracized in an age when no one can be a slave either to man or to any god. Again, where Christian parents deny discrimination against the Osu but send search parties to seek out the ancestry of their children’s brides or suitors before they give their approval for marriage, left one wonder how worse hypocritical humans can be. That inhuman categorization is premised on the existence and placation of a god which Christianity views as manmade ineffectual idol. It is common to see many claim to be Christians yet revere obnoxious cultural practices by claiming that they cannot disrespect their long standing culture. Morality can be relative and the morality of a cultural practice is relative to time and place. The Osu-caste system may not have been barbaric a century ago but is manifestly and despicably so presently, hence the need for its abolition.

The deities in Igboland once considered the existence of twins a taboo and the people believed. And thousands of twins were slaughtered at birth in the service of the wishes of the gods. And mothers who clung to their twins were banished to the evil forest so that the land was spared the wrath of the gods. Heaven did not fall when Mary Slessor single-handedly stopped the killing of twins in the Southern Nigeria, and I believe that nothing will happen to anybody who marries an Osu (Okonkwo, 2014).

There is some wisdom in the saying that what one cannot learn by formal education he learns by travelling and exposure. The Igbo is the most dispersed group in Africa and is therefore a group particularly well acquainted with the horrors of racism. The Igbo man suffers unbearable discrimination for being Igbo and for being black. You would think anyone so badly and chronically victimized would champion equality. Ironically many Igbos who reject marriage with the Osu are the well-travelled, well educated, roundly humiliated victims of virulent racism. But the Osu-caste system is worse than racism. Racism prepares you, gives you warning. So, the black girl is socialized to understand her racial handicaps, the hatred of blacks by some whites. Osu-caste system is rubbish and the only obstacle remaining is the marriage between them and the free born. I am a free-born and so are the “so-called Osu”. Nobody has the right to discriminate against anybody and I feel it is high-time we do away with this obnoxious culture.

Among the affected groups, the toga of Osu is not only demeaning of the human person but leads to tragic loss of self-worth, which could have tremendous social and economic implications for the individual and his community. Moreover, some women so classified have found safe havens in prostitution, while a lot more have chosen to remain single mothers. The Osu-caste system infringes the provisions of Sections 34 and 42 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended). Section 34 deals with respect for human dignity, while Section 42 stipulates that no citizen should be discriminated against based on the circumstances of birth. The Constitution is an embodiment of human rights to be enjoyed by all citizens but which the Osu-caste system negates. It also runs against the provisions of the 1948 Universal Declaration on Human Rights of the United Nations General Assembly, which guarantees human rights and freedom from any form of discrimination (Dike, 2002).

The pro Osu or mainstream discourse upholds that Osu phenomenon is indispensable in the Igbo cultural heritage and forms an integral part of their existence, historicity, spirituality and worldview (Arinze, 1970; Isichei, 1977). The anti Osu school of thought on the other hand argues that Osu is an inglorious dehumanizing façade of ugly past and should be cast into the bin of history for the Igbos to develop and advance (Obinna, 2009).

It is an aberration and a huge shame that a system that segregates and practically promotes discrimination against people in Nigeria of the 21st century is still allowed to thrive in parts of the country. It is a societal demon that must be exorcised anywhere it exists in the country. According to Vanguard (2020), sixty-eight years after the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and banned slavery in 1948; some communities in Igbo land are still discriminating against those they still regard as slaves. Investigations by the South-East Voice revealed that in some of the communities where people discriminate against the so-called slaves, those who call themselves free-born do not allow the slaves to marry their daughters just as their sons do not marry those they regard as “sub-humans”.

The victims of this inhuman and sordid practice and their everyday experience are really a big shame of the society. Okonkwo (2014) reports of a terrible experience and inhuman treatment meted on an osu victim in Enyioyugu, Aboh-Mbaise, Imo State. The said female victim was allegedly married to a freeborn without making her status known to the husband and after few years of marriage the husband family got to know and throw her out of her matrimonial home and take her three children away from her.

Theoretical Framework

Conflict theory was applied in this paper and it was propounded by Karl Marx. The theory contends that prejudice and discrimination can be best understood in terms of tension or conflict among competing groups with emphasis on ethnocentrism, competition and unequal power relation (Hughes, Kroehler & Vander-Zanden, 2002). For example when people are strongly ethnocentric, they find it easy to perceive the out-group as an object of loathing – as a symbol of strangeness, evil and even danger. Competition intensifies ethnocentric sentiments and may lead to intergroup strife (Olzak & Nagel, 1982).

Discriminatory outcome such as the Osu-caste in Igboland particularly Okija is a symbol of strangeness, evil and even danger. The Osu-caste has perpetuated in Okija unhealthy rivalry and social inequality that has devastated the society for years and if not checked can mortgage generation to come. However, like Marx, change can come through conflict and this is clearly revealed in the negative public perceptions against Osu-caste system across board.

Materials and Methods

Survey design was employed and the research was conducted in Okija in Ihiala LGA of Anambra State, Nigeria. Okija is an agrarian society; hence, the people are predominantly farmers and traders. Okija has a traditional city council headed by the Igwe. As such, local governance rests on the Igwe and also the native councilors the Okparas, members of the Igwe's council. Geopolitically, the area shares boundaries with Ithemboji and Ukpokoro towns towards the east, Olu or Ogbakubara on the west, to the north by Ozubulu, while to the south by Ihiala. It is one of the largest and oldest cities in Ihiala L.G.A and Anambra State. The area is made up of thirty villages, and they comprises Umuezedam, Umuakporom, Ugwucheleku/Ekpe, Umuapani, Ubahuagbugba, Umudalaegwu (Uhuosu), Umudioka, Ezieke, Umuokpala ezike, Umuawa, Umuchiuwa, Umu- Uzu, Umunakwa, Ubahu-Ezike, Umuezeobi, Umunzele, Ohukabia, Umuofo, Umu- Ezewulum, Uhungwu, Isieke/ Ubahudara, Ubahueze, Isifulu, Etiti Umuhu or Umuhu, Umuigwe, Umuodogwu, Ohuogwugwu, Umuezim/ Ezimbala, Umuanumoge, and Umunnafojolo. Popular water bodies in Okija are: Ulasi Okija, Okpu and Oso Asomba Streams. The population of this study was 23, 311 persons, and the sample size was one hundred and fifty (150) residents aged 20 years and above that were purposively selected from three villages. To do this, multi-stage sampling technique was used to delineate the area into three village clusters and thereafter, 50 study participants each were randomly selected from Umudalaegwu, Ohuogwugwu and Umuokpala Ezike villages. Aside secondary sources of data, structured questionnaire served as the major instrument for data collection. The questionnaire consisted of closed-ended or open-ended questions. Generated data were analyzed using percentages, tables and frequencies. Out of the 150 copies of questionnaire administered, one hundred and twenty-one (121) that were properly filled were used for analysis.

Results and Discussion

Socio-Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

The socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents such as age, sex, educational level, religious affiliation and marital status are presented and analyzed in table 1:

Table 1: Analysis of the socio-demographic characteristics of respondents

Variables	N = 121	% = 100	x
Age			
20 – 35	34	28	
36 – 49	50	41	42.9
50 – 59	28	23	
60 years above	9	7	
Sex			
Male	71	59	
Female	50	41	
Educational Level			
No formal Education	6	5	
Primary Education	21	17	
Secondary Education	36	30	
ND/NCE/ its Equivalent	20	17	
HND/First Degree/its Equivalent	30	25	
Postgraduate	8	7	
Religious Affiliation			
Christianity	89	74	
Islam	21	17	
African Traditional Religion	11	9	
Marital Status			
Single	36	30	
Married	64	53	
Widowed	13	11	
Separated/Divorced	8	7	

Source: Field Survey, 2022

Table 1 indicates that a total of 28% of the sample were between the ages of 20-35 years. Respondents within the age group 36-49 years constituted 41% of the sample. The respondents whose age was between 50-59 years constituted 23%, while those who were 60 years and above were 7% of the sample. The average age mean of the respondents was 42.9, implying that majority of them were above 42 years. The table also shows that there were more male (59%), than female (41%) respondents. Result of Their educational level revealed that just 5% of the respondents had no formal education. This was followed by 17% that reported to have primary school leaving certificate.

Again, about 30% of the sample had secondary education. Respondents with National Diploma (ND), National Certificate of Education (NCE) or their equivalents were 17%, while those with Higher National Diploma (HND)/First Degree or their equivalent were 25%. In addition, 7% of them had postgraduate education, implying that majority of the respondents had secondary education. Moreover, the table shows that respondents who profess Christianity were 74%, hence, the majority. Those that practice Islam were 17%, while the least 9% were of the African Traditional Religion (ATR). It is not surprising having close to 75% of the respondents as Christians, giving to the fact that the study was conducted in Anambra State which is predominantly Christian dominated area. Further still, it can be deduced from the table that majority (53%) of the respondents were married. This is followed by 30% that were single and 11% that were widowed. The least 7% were either separated or divorced.

Social Implications of Osu-Caste in Okija

The respondents view on the social implications of osu-caste are presented and analysed in table 2;

Table 2: Social implications of Osu-caste in Okija

Social implications	Responses	
	No	%
Stigmatization	63	52.0
Abuse of fundamental human rights	22	18.1
Bridge of friendship	20	16.5
Taunting	12	9.9
Don't know	4	3.3
Total	121	100

Source: Field Survey, 2022

Table 2 revealed that majority, 52% of the respondents reported that victims of Osu-caste in the study area were stigmatized. This is followed by 18.1% who reported that the fundamental human rights of victims of the osu-caste are commonly abused in social relation. This align with report of Igwe and Akolokwu (2014) who argues that Osu-caste system sometimes 'violently' stripes its victims of their fundamental rights not minding their social status or level of achievements in society. In addition, 16.5% of the sample reported that friendship relation of the Osu-caste, especially with the non-osus is usually bridged. This could bring about low self esteem and discord in a community. Moreso, while 9.9% of the respondents identified taunting as another social implication of this social discrimination in the area, the least, 3.3% of the respondents were indifferent on this issue, as they could not indicate any.

Cultural Implications of Osu-Caste in Okija

The respondents' opinion on the cultural implications of osu-caste are presented and analysed in table 3;

Table 3: Cultural implications of Osu-caste system in Okija

Cultural Implications	Responses	
	No	%
Ostracism/Rejection	23	19.0
Denial of marital rights with the non-osu's	51	42.1
Denial of traditional rights, like chieftaincy titles, etc	33	27.2
Seclusion of place of residence	11	9.0
Don't know	3	2.4
Total	121	100

Source: Field Survey 2022

Table 3 shows that 19% of the respondents reported that victims of Osu-caste system in Okija suffer ostracism/rejection. This is deprivative in nature and corroborates the finding of Mgbada, (2016) who reported that the Osu are deprived of cultural peace offerings such as breaking of kola nuts. This is followed by 42.1% who indicated that they are denied marital rights with the said freeborn or non-osus. In addition, 27.2% of the sample reported that Osu-caste victims cannot access traditional rights, like chieftaincy titles as the free born, while 9% attributed the cultural implication to the seclusion that commonly exist in communities where there are the Osus and non-osus. The least of the respondents 2.4% were indifferent as they could not point to any cultural implication.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Osu-caste system has its roots in attitudes and behaviors that are widely shared among some of the people in Igboland. It is true that old habits are hard to break. Respect for people's rights begins from the institutions that an individual is exposed to during the person's formative years (the home, school, church, etc) or in the course of socialization. This study therefore concludes that Osu-caste still exist in Okija, Anambra State and has diverse disturbing social and cultural implications. In view of the above, this paper recommends that;

- i. There is a need for a stern decree or law by the government to eliminate the idea that Osu-caste is part of culture and strictly enforce compliance by prosecuting anyone found labelling another an Osu. This will not only send strong message but serve as deterrence to intending offenders.
- ii. Priests, elders and traditional rulers in Okija in particular and Igbo land in general will need to come together and institute a reversal ritual which will bring the *Osu* back into the *diala* status. This is not an impossible task to formulate, so long as such a ritual will be aimed at ensuring cordiality, peace, and harmony within the society and it must be done before media coverage to enable it become public knowledge.
- iii. Any traditional ruler that deprived anyone merited chieftaincy titles and other traditional rights on the ground of being Osu should be dethroned and made to face the law. In doing this the dignity and rights of persons termed osu would not just be restored but respected.

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