THE SOCIOLOGICAL AND HUMAN RIGHTS IMPLICATIONS OF OSTRACISM: THE CASE OF OSU CASTE IN THE IGBO ETHNIC GROUP OF NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Ostracism is the act of ignoring and excluding certain individuals or group from the normal societal functions to such an extent that the victims become psychologically depressed and “the fundamental needs of belonging, self-esteem, control, and meaningful existence are thwarted while sadness and anger increases” (William, 2007). The main thrust of this paper is to critically evaluate the consequences of the osu caste system among the Igbo ethnic group in the southeast of Nigeria, especially as it impacts on human rights and equality of treatment from a sociological perspective. Three hypotheses were formulated to guide the study. A sample 1,620 respondents were randomly selected for the study in each of the five states of the Southeast Nigeria, namely, Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo; 320 respondents were drawn from for each state. The questionnaire was the major instrument used for data collection. The instrument was subjected to face and content validation by two experts at the University of Calabar and Niger Delta University. To establish the reliability estimate of the instrument, Cronbach Alpha reliability method was adopted. Pearson product moment correlation coefficient and Population t-test statistical analysis technique were adopted to test the hypotheses at .05 levels of significance. The findings show that high level of discrimination against the osu by the Diala still exists and that most people in Igboland see this practice as a violation of basic human rights. To this effect, the paper recommends a construction of a new citizenship status for osu as a panaea to integrating them into the Igbo society with dignity. Again, those who hide under the cloak of tradition and religious beliefs to discriminate against others in the name osu caste system should be adequately penalized under the constitutional law.

Keywords: Christianity, Diala, Igboland, Discrimination, Osu, Human Rights.

1. INTRODUCTION

The constitutional provision of equal rights to every citizen in Nigeria is largely on paper because of obvious stratification between classes and even sexes similar to a caste system in India. For instance, being a patriarchal society, women tend to occupy the subordinate status
while men remain the dominant group. Within the Nigerian society itself, each cultural group has traditional and religious practices that tend to produce social classes. Prominent among these is the traditional practice in most parts of Igboland that tends to distinguish between a diała (free-born) and an osu (person dedicated to gods). This traditional and religious practice that categorizes individuals into different classes has been a source of acrimony and conflict in many communities in Igboland over the years. This is because, unlike other social groups in other cultures in Nigeria, there is a high level of discrimination against the osu by the diała and there is hardly intermarriage between them. This level of discrimination is not surprising to Marshall (1998:57) as he rightly observes that, “the major dividing-line between and within the castes centres around the rules of pollutions; these affect commonalities, sharing and preparing of food, intermarriage and any other forms of social intercourse”.

This observation by Marshall (1998) aptly summarizes what is obtainable in Igboland between the osu and the diała. For those perpetuating this level of discrimination and those affected, any discourse on the osu caste system and untouchability in Igboland will always excite attention, incite hatred, and also evoke emotions. This mind-set is the sequel to the prominence given to this traditional-religious practice among the Igbo of south east Nigeria in spite of the fact that globalization has condemned the human rights abuses inherent in the osu caste system. The most disconcerting thing about the osu caste system is not that, individuals born into the caste system remain there for life, neither is it because personal accomplishment is jettisoned for ascription, but most likely, because the victims are forced to live in restricted neighbourhoods and also, barred from intermarrying (and in some instances too, even interacting) with the diała. Paradoxically, this restriction contradicts the traditional and unwritten constitution of the Igbo which, fundamentally highlights the spirit of liberty (Uchendu, 1965). Corroborating this assertion further, Iwe (1987:143) argues that, “no Igbo individual would cherish a slavish subordination to another no matter the material advantages”.

Liberty amongst the Igbo is an inalienable birthright which is not subject to negotiations and compromises. In a nutshell, the history of the Igbo is most intelligible only in terms of liberty and their devotion to it. In essence, to foist the status of osu on anyone, no matter the circumstances, contradicts the inalienable birthright of any Igbo child which is grounded on liberty. It is, therefore, a wrong against humanity and remains unequivocally irreconcilable with, and diametrically opposed to the dictates of both the natural and divine law. Thus, no matter the perspective the osu caste system is viewed, it has become so endemic and pervasive in Igboland so much so that government and all its agencies have become thoroughly inconsistent on matters relating to the preservation and promotion of human rights.

2. CONCEPTUAL ISSUES

A caste system, according to Tischler, Whitten and Hunter (1986:274), refers to “a rigid form of stratification based on ascribed characteristics such as skin color or heredity”. The stratification between the osu and diała social classes is reminiscent of caste system. In the case of the United States of America, some American scholars have observed that gender roles in American society resemble a two-level caste system whereby men occupy the upper caste while women occupy the lower caste (Myrdal, 1944). In a society stratified along castes, in the real sense of it, contact among the castes is minimal and is governed by rules. If interaction must take place, it is impersonal, and there is an ample display of the participants’ superior-inferior status and access to valued resources is hugely unequal (Tischler, Whitten and Hunter, 1986).

It is very fundamental to elucidate and expati ate some terms associated with the osu caste system to make it comprehensible. Dike (2002) rightly submits that, it would be very difficult, if
not impossible, to explain and analyze the terms associated with osu caste to individuals who are
not familiar with the system without a definition of the many labels describing the term. There are
many conceptions of the term osu just as there are many historians and sociologists interested in
unraveling the mysteries surrounding the institutionalization of the osu caste system amongst the
Igbo of Southeast Nigeria. Ezeala (1993:24) sees osu caste concept as “a barbaric practice which
has sorrowfully divided the noble Igbo race into two segments, the superior and the inferior
citizens, and which makes a caricature of intelligence, a mockery of their nobility and avoidable
lepers in any International Human Rights Forum.” In other words, osu caste concept demeans and
subjugates one into second class; it fans the embers of social disorder, frustration, immorality and,
bring a chain reaction of hatred, suspicions and prejudices. In another instance, Ezeala (2008:4)
observes that, the osu caste is “a cancer of bone marrow, an Igbo endemic disease which causes
nightmares to well meaning and dedicated Igbo sons and daughters and the traditional rulership,
and most particularly to the Igbo Christian leadership”. He further argues that, the irony of these
developments is that almost all the practitioners and perpetrators of this horrible brand of apartheid
are either Igbo Christians or pagans with Christian names. For Uchendu (1965:89), “osu is different
from ohu, a pawn, although some literature use osu and ohu interchangeably”.

Commenting on the gravity of the distinction between these terminologies, Uchendu (1965)
observes that “neither a diala, nor an ohu, nor a pawn is an osu. Essentially speaking, calling them
osu is the gravest of all insults”. Uchendu (1965) observes that an osu is a cult slave dedicated to the
services of the deity”. In other words, an osu is a religious cult slave under the practice of Igbo
traditional religion and a system of worship. Concurring with Uchendu, Meck (1983) tenaciously
submits that an osu is a person who has been bought and dedicated to the services of the owner’s
cult. In his presentation, Basden (1966) conceptualizes osu to mean slave. But since a slave can
someday regain his freedom in the traditional Igbo society where the osu exists, the slavery nature
of an osu as implied by Basden is obviously different from that of a slave (ohu/oru) because an osu
is dedicated to the gods; his movements is restricted within the precincts of the shrine to which he is
attached, he has no prospects of ever regaining freedom, and as a result a sole property of the gods.

From all these definitions, Dike’s own (2002:3) seems all-encompassing. According to him,
“Osu is a people sacrificed to the gods in Igbo community; they assist the high priest of the
traditional religion to serve the deities or the gods in the shrine”. Traditionally, there is the belief of
most traditionalists that the deities, which were (and are still), perceived in some quartres as being
very powerful, would wreck havoc in the society, if they are not appeased. It is also to be noted as
Dike (2002) asserts that, in some special circumstances, these traditionalists could also transform a
diala into an osu for committing certain atrocities against the land through some intricate ritual
sacrifices (offering of libations and sacrificing animals to the earth goddess).

In all, it is obvious that the osu caste system is a form of discrimination which the United
Nations is not oblivious. The position of osu in Igboland is one of inequality. Allport (1979:52)
holds that, this “inequality encompasses restrictions on the freedom of movements and of choices
of residence, inequality in the right of peaceful association, inequality in the enjoyment of the right
to marry and establish a family (and) inequality in access to public office… amounts to slavery.”
Allport’s (1979) submission aptly unravels the crux of the matter with the osu caste system in
Igboland.

The origin of the osu caste system is as old as the emergence of the areas where it exists.
Concurring with this perspective, Oparachi (1994:32) holds that, different areas in Igboland have
different legends, surrounding the origin of the osu caste. In essence, there is no one comprehensive
agreement among social historians and cultural anthropologists about its origin, but however, there
are conflicting theories and diverse assertions that tend to make its origin Jewish. In his view, Dike
(2002:3) observes that, the historical origin of osu began about six centuries ago when the growth
in number of powerful deities in Igbo land created the need for many assistants for the high priests of major shrines. He further avers that the early Osu were “non-celibates” and thus had families; and the offsprings inherited their status.

A set of rules that regulated the community’s interactions with the Osu were maintained, mostly out of fear and/or respect for the powerful deities under whom they thrived and performed their religious functions. For instance, intimate social interaction, including marriage, was forbidden. In some communities, Nwosu (1999) says it is forbidden for the Diala (free-born) to spill the blood of Osu (even in non-hostile situations). In addition, the Osu were also forbidden to be combatants in warfare for fear of spilling their blood, which could unleash the wrath of the deities. Again, in some circumstances, some defenseless small communities were often compelled to seek refuge in the premises of nearby shrines in order to avert impending doom when under sudden attack from superior invading forces. Once the deity’s priest acknowledges and grants them protection from attack and harm, they automatically become Osu. Similarly, prisoners captured; sold and bought after inter-communal wars were enlisted by their new owners and given away as gestures to conciliate a given deity while others not too fortunate become objects of ritual murder upon the death of powerful chieftains (Basden, 1966). In another strand, evidence suggests that, the Osu were originally regarded with “respect and honour” apparently because they belong to the gods; the show of respect and honour were unfortunately, transformed into social ostracism with the advent of Christianity (Nwosu, 1999). As a result, their status deteriorated dramatically, and they became outcasts, feared and despised or even abhorred.

On his own part, Uchendu (1965:89) identifies two traditions: the Osu tradition and the Diala tradition. According to him, the Osu tradition maintains that “their ancestors were pro-Aro priests (Priests from Arochukwu in Abia state, one of the states in the southeast of Nigeria where the Igbo are located) who were highly respected until they were supplanted” while the Diala tradition which he called the scape-goat theory maintains that Osu is a slave dedicated to the deity at the instance of a diviner. Uchendu further explains the making of the Osu from the Diala tradition thus:

In that view, a village, a lineage, a family, or an individual dogged by illness, bad luck, or calamities and misfortunes would consult a diviner to find out what was wrong. In such a case, the diviner would recommend the dedication of a slave who would then become an Osu. He is feared because the Diala do not know how to interact with him without offending the deity. He is hated because the Diala do not know how to interact with him without offending the deity. He is hated because the Osu remind the Diala their guilt.

The list of items that maintain a social divide between the Osu and the Diala are still with us today though, they vary from place to place. But any person who breaches the rules regulating the interaction with Osu automatically becomes one. Even though the offenders may not physically relocate to co-habit with the Osu, he or she is regarded and treated like one by the rest of the community. Achebe (1960:120) collaborates this assertion thus: our fathers in their darkness and ignorance called an innocent man Osu, a thing given to idols, and thereafter his children, and his children’s forever.

If the accounts of Uchendu (1965) and Dike (2002) are anything to go by, then the Osu did not become an Osu or a cult-slave out of his or her making. Be that as it may, the making of Osu, from this perspective, contradicts the cultural evolution of the Igbo of southeast and south-central Nigeria which emphasizes justice as being the most fundamental ethical value. Justice, according to Iwe (1987), is to the ethical culture of the Igbo what love or charity is to Christianity and its moral standard. Furthermore, Iwe (1987:145) asserts that, “one who cannot lay claims of justice is, in the eyes of the Igbo, either a mischievous villain, or an abominable hypocrite, worthy of neither trust nor respect”. In essence, justice is the basis of morality, the measure of moral goodness and the king of all other virtues”. This position of justice in Igbo land simply presupposes that, all those who
manipulated these innocent people into the osu caste system are mischievous villains, or abominable hypocrites, worthy of neither trust nor respect.

Sequel to this, there is, therefore, a deep reflection on the concept of justice when the osu caste system, which dehumanizes individuals is x-rayed. Essentially, human rights as a universal concept have today, gained greater acknowledgment and force from the Magna Carta Declaration in 1215. This widespread acceptance of the importance of human rights gets further boost in the preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted on December 10th, 1948 which further emphasizes that, “recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world” (Akinbola, 2005:63). Lending credence to this preamble, Ajomo and Okagbue (1991) as quoted by Akinbola (2005:63) observe thus:

“In concrete terms, human rights refer to how legal system, the state are its various agencies, and other persons, respect and protect the basic rights and freedoms of each citizen. This is characteristically ensured within the body of laws and the constitution governing the country, through the provision of a set of instruments and status that guarantee the respect and integrity of human beings irrespective of race, creed, sex, ethnicity and economic status.”

Essentially, in the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, these human rights are called fundamental rights in Chapter IV (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999) because they accrue to a person, merely because he is a human being and no more. Whenever the Igbo people speak of rights that accrue to individuals, they mean those enforceable rights or privileges, such as freedom of speech, free assembly, the right to vote, freedom of association, among others, but in their various discourses, the osu is never considered worthy enough to be included in the category of beneficiaries of human rights. Uchendu (1965) says this could be attributed to the fact that the osu lineages are still living social reality, and that, their residential segregation has not been abolished by law notwithstanding the fact that, civil rights, according to Dike (2002:11), are considered the cornerstone of a free society. Ironically, the Nigerian Constitution which embodies human rights, among other things, is not oblivious of this great injustice and abuse. The country’s constitution which is supposed to indicate ways a society protects justice, and freedom of association with other individuals has, in the osu circumstance, become toothless. Could it be said that the same Igbo people that always sermonize on liberty and justice have forgotten that, an osu is, by all standards, a person and a human being protected by the universal human rights, and therefore ought to enjoy civil rights without hindrance? Perhaps, with the African Charter of Human and People’s Right signed in 1981 (and which became effective in 1986), and the several International Human Rights conferences being held in one major city or another, and treaties negotiated for the sole purpose of safeguarding human rights could be the panacea to the abuses meted out to the usual. After all, Thomas Jefferson’s assertion in the Declaration of Independence (United States) cited in the Encyclopedia Americana (1999: 553d, 552h) is a good example of what justice and liberty means to everyone irrespective of one’s purported origin. In the document, he asserts, in part thus, “we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness…”
3. METHODS AND MATERIALS

The research design adopted for this paper is the ex-post facto, defined as a systematic empirical inquiry in which the investigator does not have any control of independent variables because their manifestations have already occurred before the time of the investigation and cannot therefore be manipulated (Kerlinger, 1986; Denga and Ali, 1998). This explanation holds true of the variables in this study as they were presumed to have already impacted on the areas of study before the time of the research.

The target population involved in this study consisted of a randomly selected 1620 Igbo men and women drawn from the five states in Igboland. The population area was given equal and independent opportunity to be selected or not selected in the study. In essence, three hundred and twenty respondents were drawn from each state, and this accessible population is seen as typified, reasonable and represent the target population.

The questionnaire was the major instrument used for data collection, and mostly close ended with few open ended questions. Using the Cronbach Alpha to test for the internal consistency, the reliability index of the instrument was found to be 0.94. Data were collected through the use of the questionnaire from the sampled respondents used for the study. Through a very rigorous approach, and with the assistance of some students mainly, to whom the researchers are very grateful, all the 1620 copies of the questionnaire were retrieved, and they were all properly completed, thus giving 100% return rate.

Three hypotheses adopted for the study were tested using the Pearson product moment correlation coefficient and population t-test statistical analyses at .05 levels of significance. The hypotheses are as follows:

- The Osu caste system does not significantly relate to the traditional religious belief practices of the Igbo of Southeast Nigeria.
- The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria do not significantly discriminate and segregate against members of the osu caste system.
- The negative consequences of human rights abuse by the osu caste system among the Igbo of the south east Nigeria is not significantly high.

3.1 ANALYSIS OF DATA AND RESULTS

The presentation is done hypothesis by hypothesis.

**Hypothesis 1:** Osu caste system does not significantly relate to the traditional cum religious belief practice of the Igbo of Southeast Nigeria.

The independent variable involved in this hypothesis is the osu caste system while the dependent variable is the traditional cum religious belief practice of the Igbo of Southeast Nigeria. Pearson product moment correlation coefficient analytical technique was employed to test this hypothesis. The result is presented in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>S.D</th>
<th>r-cal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Osu caste system</td>
<td>20.34</td>
<td>3.56</td>
<td>0.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional cum religious belief practice</td>
<td>21.23</td>
<td>3.21</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Igbo of southeast Nigeria</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* P < 0.05, d.f = 1618, critical r= 0.196
The result in Table 1 shows that the calculated $r$-value of 0.54 is found to be greater than the critical $r$-value of 0.196 needed for significance at 0.05 alpha levels of significance with 1618 degrees of freedom. With this result, the null hypothesis is rejected. By this result, there is a significant relationship between osu caste system and traditional religious belief practices of the Igbo of southeast Nigeria. The above result is supported by an earlier observation about the osu by Achebe’s (1959:111) thus:

“He was a person dedicated to a god; a thing set apart – a taboo forever, and his children after him forever. He could neither marry nor be married by the free-born. He was in fact an outcaste 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, long, tangled and dirty hair. A razor was taboo to him. An osu could not attend an assembly of the free born, and they, in turn, could not attend an assembly of the free born, and they, in turn, could not shelter under his roof. He could not take any of the four titles of the clan, and when he died he was buried by his kind in the evil forest”.

The social interaction between the diala and the osu is highly limited; its social relationship is dehumanizing and subjugation prone. In the novel, ‘No longer At Ease,’ Obi’s father admonished him over his marriage proposal to Clara, an osu:

“Osu is like leprosy in the minds of our people. I beg you, my son not to bring the mark of shame and leprosy into the family. If you do, your children and your children’s children into the third and fourth generation will curse your memory. It is not for myself I speak, my days are few. You will bring sorrow on your head and on the heads of your children. Who will marry your daughters? Whose daughters will your sons marry? Think of that, my son. We are Christians, but we cannot marry our own daughters (Achebe, 1960:121).

**Hypothesis 2:**

The Igbo of southeast Nigeria do not significantly discriminate and segregate against members of osu caste system. The only variables in this hypothesis are the level of discrimination and segregation of osu caste members by the Igbo of the southeast Nigeria. Population t-test was used to test the hypothesis. The result is as presented in Table 2

Table 2: Population t-test analysis of the level of level of discrimination and segregation of osu caste members by the Igbo of the southeast Nigeria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Sample Mean</th>
<th>Population mean</th>
<th>S.D</th>
<th>t-cal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level of discrimination of osu caste members</td>
<td>1620</td>
<td>24.67</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>3.56</td>
<td>182.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p <0.05, d.f=1619, critical-t= 1.96

The result in table 2 shows that the calculated $t$-value of 182.4 was found to be greater than the critical $t$-value of 1.96 needed for significance at 0.05 level of significance with 1619 degrees of freedom. With this result, the null hypothesis is rejected, and the alternate hypothesis
is accepted. It therefore implies that the Igbo of the southeast Nigeria significantly discriminate and segregate against members of the osu caste system. The crux of the matter is that, an osu, according to Ezeala (2008:3) is socially avoided, segregated and discriminated against, disgraced, physically and psychologically abused, dehumanized, cajoled, mocked, and spat-upon. Ironically, the position of Igbo traditionalists today, in spite of this obnoxious custom has become, let us uphold our past! The question that begs for answer, of course, is how? To Obuna (1986:53):

“Do we return to the primitive stage of bow and arrows with banana leaves for shirts? Do we go back to the killing of twins, the burying alive of wives with their dead husbands; back to cannibalism? That was where we were before the missionaries came if we really want to be completely and absolutely Africans (Ndigbo). On the other hand, would it not be much better to borrow from the best of Western civilization and try to incorporate it into the Igbo culture -- in other words, to admit that all that is outside of us is not necessarily bad or meant to destabilize our Igbo cultural society?”

In most Igbo traditional societies where the practice exists, the victims suffer all forms of degradation, oppression, suppression and repression. They are denied property rights and the practitioners of the traditional cum religious practice claim that all lands where the osu live were on pledge to their ancestors and are thus still on pledge. Decrying the existence of this social phenomenon known as osu, Ezeala (2008: 3) succinctly posits that osu caste system is a pagan and satanic ritual based on human sacrifice to idols, juju, and other false gods; it is also vicious and has blood-congealing consequences in all its aspects. It is a provocation and an affront to, wrathful and profanes God Almighty. Besides, it is copious insult on the Igbo, a stigma on their personality and an abysmal negation of their history.

Hypothesis 3:

The negative consequences of human rights abuse by osu caste system among the Igbo of the south east Nigeria is not significantly high. The only variable in this hypothesis is the negative consequence of human right abuse by osu cast system among the Igbo of the south east. Population t-test analytical technique was employed to test this hypothesis. The result is as presented in Table 3 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Sample Mean</th>
<th>Population Mean</th>
<th>S.D</th>
<th>t-cal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negative consequences of human rights abuse</td>
<td>1620</td>
<td>22.45</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>3.89</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p <0.05, d.f=1619, critical-t= 1.96

The result in Table 3 shows that the calculated t-value of 139 is found to be greater than the critical t-value of 1.96 needed for significance at 0.05 level of significance with 1619 degrees of freedom. With this result, the null hypothesis is rejected. It therefore implies the negative consequence of human right abuse by the osu caste among the the Igbo of the southeast is significantly high.

It is most fundamental to note that the importance of Human Rights cannot be overemphasized as the absence of these rights reduces man to the same level with animals whose existence are subject to the will of an owner or a predator. The osu caste system, an aberration, and irregularity in contemporary Nigerian society has become irritable culminating in the
continued subjugation and humiliation of the human person. It is in recognition of this and other similar dehumanization that, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights State inter alia (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948) states:

“Whereas disregarded and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts, which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people, whereas it is essential if man is not to be compelled to have recourse, as a last resort, to rebellion against tyranny and oppression, that human rights should be protected by the rule of Law, whereas, it is essential to promote the development of friendly relations between nations…”

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The result of the first hypothesis agrees with Achebe (1959:111) who remarks on the religious nature of the osu thus: He was a person dedicated to a god; a thing set apart – a taboo forever, and his children after him forever, and his children after him. He could neither marry nor be married by the free-born. He was in fact an outcaste 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, long, tangled and dirty hair. A razor was taboo to him. And of his sacred nature, an osu cannot attend an assembly of the free born, and they, in turn, cannot shelter under the roof of the freeborn (diala). He cannot take any of the four titles of the clan, and when he dies, he is buried by his kind in the evil forest. In another strand, Ezeala (2008: 3) succinctly posits that osu caste system is: A pagan and satanic ritual based on human sacrifice to idols, juju, and other false gods; it is also vicious and has blood-congealing consequences in all its aspects.

The result of the second hypothesis finds support in work of Ezeala (2008:3) who sees the osu, as one socially avoided, segregated and discriminated against, disgraced, physically and psychologically abused, dehumanized, cajoled, mocked, spat-upon, and denied all forms of fundamental human rights. In most Igbo traditional societies where the practice exists, the victims suffer all forms of degradation, oppression, suppression and repression. They are denied property rights and the practitioners of the systems claim that all lands where the osu live were on pledge to their ancestors and are thus still on pledge. Supporting the position, Nwegbo (1989:13) states that the horrible and human state of the osu is such that, they are sometimes accused of having offensive body odour, which from time to time, their accusers alleged, oozed out. Consequent upon this dehumanization, they become objects of derision, contempt and ostracism amidst other diala (freeborn). In another instance, Nwegbo (1989) further observes that, “in school…the children of osu were cajoled, mocked, spat upon ridiculed by pupils and their teachers, while in the village, they suffered all manners of approbation and odium, were despised and sometimes suffered pains.

The third hypothesis accepts that osu caste system significantly influence human rights abuse and discrimination among the Igbo of Southeast Nigeria. The finding is in line with the view of Ezeala (2008), who reported that the osu caste system is an Igbo endemic disease that has graduated into a cancer of the bone-marrow. It has, he asserts, become the cause of nightmare to well-meaning citizens, divided the noble race into superior and inferior citizens thereby making a caricature of their intelligence, a mockery their nobility and avoidable lepers in any international human rights forum. In a nutshell, Ezeala says that the victims of this cultural barbarism have been subjected for years to the most brutal treatment that any species of mammal has received from its kind. They have been murdered, tortured, poisoned, ostracized, humiliated, discriminated against, victimized everywhere, spat upon, disgraced and abused in
every way in spite of the fact that, the Eastern House of Assembly (1956) passed a bill against
the osu caste because the obnoxious custom regards victims as very inferior human beings and
thus, restricts them to marry within their fold. According to Okeke (1986:112), the section from
the law of Eastern House of Assembly abolishing the osu system reads thus:

It is an offence for any person to molest or injure or annoy or boycott
any other person by reason of his being an osu. It makes an offence
for any person to enforce against another person any disability with
regard to marriage, or acquisition of inheritance or property, or
joining of any title society or the observance of any social custom or
ceremony on account of being osu. It also makes it actionable for a
person to taunt another person that he is osu (Eastern House of
Assembly Law; 1963: 401)

Okeke (1986) submits that, the then Premier, Nnamdi Azikiwe, in supporting the Bill
said it seeks to (a) abolish the osu caste system and its allied practices including oru/ohu
system; (b) to prescribe punishment for their continued practices; (c) to remove certain social
disabilities caused by the enforcement of osu and its allied system. The above law prescribes
punishments, fines and even prison terms for anyone that contravenes them, but since its
passage into law, it has never been enforced. A school of thought, therefore, argues that, the
whole Bill was a charade because it was stage managed, insincere and hypocritical.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

5.1 RECOMMENDATIONS

Since no government or institution in the world has ever successfully abolished what it did
not create or establish, we therefore make the following recommendations as panacea to arresting
the high rate of discrimination and stigmatization of osu in Igboland:

• The first step is taking pride and glory in the ascribed status the way and manner the
occupants of the Royal House (Buckingham palace) do, celebrate as people of distinction
and refuse to admit any derogatory attributes. After all, one can
make another feel
inferior without the other’s consent.

• Similarly, turning one’s disadvantage to advantage is yet another option of resolving the
stigmatization. When racism was at its peak in the United States of America, the Blacks
were dehumanized and stigmatized because of their colour. But with pride, that same
colour was transformed to advantage with the slogan, “black is beautiful”. Today, that
celebration has produced Barrack Obama as the 43rd Executive President of the United
States; a choice never imagined for the White House. A real fulfillment of Martin Luther
King Junior’s prophetic message that, “one day, my four little children will no longer be
judged by the colour of their skin, but by the content of their character . . . ” And we state
here unequivocally that, in no distant time, an osu in Igboland will no longer be
discriminated against, stigmatized, subjugated nor dehumanized.

• Furthermore, one way to denounce or rather reject a given name is not to react whenever
such a name is called. This strategy has worked in a number of instances and nothing stops
it from working to the advantage of the osu in Igboland. Already, it is important to note
that the Hindus have never placidly accepted the caste system. Tischler, Whitten and
Hunter (1986) contend that Varnas are all, but non-existent, and officially assert that the
Indian caste system is outlawed. Scholars have frequently noted continuous changes during
the centuries of the caste system’s development. Even today, changes in the caste system are taking place because the society is dynamic.

- The mass media should play prominent role in sensitizing the people on the ills of baseless prejudice and discrimination. Basically, changing the perceptions of people, particularly the diala would not be a day’s task, but with aggressive public enlightenment/campaigns engineered by the mass media and supported with melodious jingles, the stigmatization of the osu would be a thing of the past. Above all, grievance should be resolved amicably and resort to the rule of law.

- Obviously, civil society organizations have prominent roles to play in fighting for the rights of the oppressed by these obnoxious traditions and customs through their non-governmental organizations and other relevant activities. Furthermore, civil society organizations and the religious should encourage inter marriages among the osu and diala youths as long as they are biologically compatible.

- Human rights in Nigeria, especially those that deal with freedom of association and of movement, must be protected, preserved, and indeed, promoted. Though some proponents of the osu caste system perceive the onslaught on what is left of their traditional and religious belief system as a ploy of the intelligentsia to destabilize and destroy what binds them together. But as a civilized people, the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria should accept that democracy demands that the human personality in its course of development should be allowed to proceed without artificial forces or barricade so long as it actively does not violate the safety and reasonable right of others (The Encyclopedia Americana, 1999).

5.2 CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of the study, it was discovered that the practice of an osu caste system contradicts the traditional and unwritten constitution of the Igbo which, fundamentally highlights the spirit of liberty. As Iwe (1987:143) rightly argues that, “no Igbo individual would cherish a slavish subordination to another no matter the material advantages”. Liberty amongst the Igbo is an inalienable birthright which is not subject to negotiations and compromises. Therefore, any effort made to expose the stigmatization and inhuman treatment meted out to the osu should not be termed an irresponsible act by diala. Nigeria’s first president, Nnamdi Azikiwe (1956) in one of his numerous seminal papers, concluded that the practice of osu caste system and its allied stigmatization was immoral, unjust, unfair, unreasonable, illogical, dishonest, inconsistent and anachronistic. From this perspective, the authors of this paper here appropriately agree with this famous statesman cum erudite scholar because the practice is a wrong against humanity and remains unequivocally irreconcilably with, and diametrically opposed to the dictates of both the natural and divine law.

REFERENCES


