

SOCIO-POLITICAL EFFECTS OF *OSU* CASTE SYSTEM IN THE CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN SOCIETY

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Abstract

An *Osu* is strictly seen and looked upon as an outcaste, untouchables and exclusive reserve of the gods and goddesses. It is a system variedly observed from one community to other. Even as controversial as it may be schools of thought presently felt it is an issue that should be left in the past for more contemporary controversial issues. However, it must be noted that the effects of *Osu* caste system is not only a preserve of philosophical minds. There is this discriminatory attitude on *Osu* that prevail in our present day socio-political and religious life, no matter how inconsequential it may seem. The effect of *Osu* Caste System cut across social, political and religious life. In a wider perspective it could be seen as a class difference beyond a reserve of the gods or even dedicated to the gods. In our society today one may not need to be called *Osu* before receiving the same treatment given to the *Osu*. This paper aim at discussing the effects, point out the need for more proactive attitude of all in all our socio-political activities free of any form of discrimination. By so doing, a more united front that will create a better social, political and religious life in our society will be met. Man will also not only attain freedom with a fellow man but will also independently operate under any form of governance.

Keywords: *Osu* Caste System, Outcaste, Socio-Politico, Socio-Religio and Discrimination

Introduction

There are lots of global issues affecting not just Nigeria but most of the developing countries of the world. These issues range from security, economics, political, educational, infrastructural, health and general welfare of the people. The society considers those as more important and beneficial to the people now than the issue of Osu caste system. For this singular reason Osu Caste System appear to be non existence. However, in the mist of all these global issues, Osu Caste System is one issue that is playing a vital influence especially in positions of appointment, politics and even religion.

Osu Caste System is not only a controversial issue but it is more socio-political than socio-religious issue. It is pronounced among the Igbo speaking areas of Nigeria as well as a universal issue and in different forms. A lot has been said about it in the past but not many people have written or would want to be associated with the issue or rather the problem of Osu Caste System. Sometimes in the past and even now Nigerian government made it an offence punishable by law to deny, call or discriminate on the bases that one who is being discriminated against is an Osu. But instead of equal treatment, the discrimination took a different dimension. It is even more cultural than socio-religious aberration, yet it is in itself controversial and contradicts the basic cultural ethic of the Nigerian society.

In spite of all these there are still a number of disturbing questions, such as who is Osu, what belief do people still hold for Osu, both as a name and a practice or a way of life. If the issue of Osu has since persisted, why has it remained impossible to be completely wiped out. Is it on what has been held as the original meaning, the present understanding of Osu

or the influence of the church now on the issue. Why is the issue still persisting? Does it mean that no changes have yet been made on the whole issue? If there have been some changes, is it for the better. Has the non-Osus developed better attitude towards the Osus. Is the discrimination that has been there, in the increase or has it reduced? Why do we today still discourse effects of *Osu* in our society? What actually is the problem the effects have in our society today? These are some of the disturbing questions on *Osu* Caste System that the paper wishes to address, for the reason of establishing a more cordial and healthy society. A society where everyone sees the other as the same without any form of discrimination whether *Osu* or *Oru* for a better relationship.

Who/What is *Osu*?

Upon inquiry, the name *Osu* has remained from time immemorial. Among the Igbo-Africans *Osu* could literally be translated as “it has started”, “this is just the beginning”, a form of an exclamation remark. Lemchi(2011)saw the word as a name not a remark. According to him, the position of *Osu* is the result of some religious ritual. The non-Osus are called the “*Dialas*”. *Osu* is always associated with a deity or gods. It is beyond a name but a mystery. Thus, we have “*Osu-igwe*”, “*Osu-agwu*”, “*Osu-ji*”, “*Osu-ala*”, etc. The “*Igwe*”, “*Agwu*”, “*ji*”, and others are the various deities a particular *Osu* is associated with and as such is to be sacred.

When the church came into the issue of *Osu*, we thought they came to eradicate the negative attitude of the society to the Osus. We thought the discriminatory attitude will be removed, since they preached that all human being are equal in the sight of God. Following these, we were tempted to call the Priests, the *Osu* since they were all somehow dedicated to God Almighty. Our traditional rulers were then convinced about

accepting the Osu in the society, yet they could not allow them get married to the “Di-alias” – free born. Our traditional rulers will neither seek the hands of the Osu in marriage nor allow their children to do so. They could not accept the Osu into a common societal titles.

Jordan, J.P.(1949:60:70)observed that “by the time of Bishop Shanahan, it was either the Osus were admitted and loose the titled men or keep the titled men in the church and loose the Osus, but Shanahan took in the Osu”. What must be remarked in this connection is that an “Nze”, whether an NzeOzo, NzeOfo, NzeMuo, NzeIgbu, NzeJi, NzeAgwuetc, reflects in his life the cherished values of the Igbo society. According to Onwubiko, A.O.(1993:4), the “Nze” is the symbol of an ideal Igboman and embodiment of goodness, peace and harmony”. “The Ozotitle holder must be law abiding and must respect the custom of the land”, Egudu(1993:4:5) added. Just as the Osu are linked to a particular deity, so is the Nze, who can be looked at as the direct opposite of the Osu. Thus the Nzes are associated with Ofo and Ogu. According to Munonye, J.(1966:75), Ofo is the religio-cultural and socio-ritual symbol of justice, up-rightness and truth, while Ogu is the moral force, that potent spur of righteousness which drives the innocent against his aggressor”. Osu on the other hand is “an embodiment of iniquity and of its symbolic expression and concretization” in Igbo belief.

Onwubiko, A.O.(1993:5), went on, is a negative socio-religious status which in its religio-cultural original context served as a behavioural control mechanism”. For him the eradication of the Osu Caste System has been difficult because it has often been looked at only from the Christian point of view without considering the Igbo traditional culture, either to be taken or applied. May be that has been why the church has

not succeeded in the eradication of the effect of *Osu* Caste System. In the Igbo traditional culture, *Osu*, *Nso* and *Aru/Alu* are opposite of *Nze*, *Ofo* and *Ogu*. *Nso* is a taboo, something that must not be done. *Aru/Alu* is the expression and the consequence of the evil implied in the commission of *Nso*. *Nze*, *Ofo*, *Ogu* and *Osu*, *Nso* and *Aru/Alu* express the concepts of good and evil in Igbo culture. The church also has to understand this aspect of Igbo culture in order to delve properly into the effects of *Osu* Caste System.

Whereas some develop rigid systems between groups in the effects of *Osu* Caste System in their different origins, some do not. Such countries like Mali, Mauritania, Senegal, Gambia, Guinea, Ivory-Coast, Cameroon, Ghana, Nigeria, among others have societies with Caste systems. The *Osu* Caste System in Nigeria or Cameroon is traceable to an indigenous religious belief within the Igbo people. The Igbo traditionalists according to Basden, G.T.(1966:248) maintain that the *Osu*s are historically owned by deities, and are therefore considered to be “living sacrificial offerings”, outcastes, untouchables and therefore sub-humans. They are also seen as descendants of individuals who volunteered and are sacrificed by being pledged to these gods. According to Cardinal Francis Arinze(1970:18), the *Osu* people married, fraternized and socialized among themselves, while Obinna(2012), holds the view that a *Di-ala* – (owners of the land or free-born), dare not marry an *Osu* without suffering the same isolation associated with the *Osu*. On rare occasions love or lust has flouted *Osu* saga but not without the traditional stigma.

A school of thought has also supposed that modernization, Religion, Western education, the strategy of the missionary evangelization and the combined might of the government’s military and police presence in Igbo land would have erased

the traces of Osu caste system but in vain. The Osu caste system is determined by one's birth into the family of Osu, irrespective of the religion practiced. They remain a group of people whose ancestors were dedicated to serving in the shrines and temples for the deities of the Igbo, and therefore were deemed property of the gods. Relationships and interactions with Osu people were in many cases forbidden. Till now being called an Osu remains a stigma that prevents people's progress and lifestyles. It is not only a contemporary ethical issue but a social and political issue.

Osu Caste System has a firm grip and thrives within the caucuses of Kinsmen who are the purveyors and custodians of culture (omenala) other than the customs, practices and traditions of the same people of a particular region. Culture embraces archaic practices as well as new ways of doing things. Tradition is informed by the people's visual art, music, dance, attire, cuisine, language, idioms and experiences. Most unfortunately Christianity and western education have transformed most of these aspects of culture, thus making it almost impossible to handle the problems and effects of Osu in our present day society. Without putting into consideration the content of the people's culture, attempts to combat Osu praxis have provoked loss of one's identity within the kinsmen if not total ostracism. The kinsmen as far as their culture is concerned remain the watchdogs of the people in the society. Their Christian piety notwithstanding, the traditional belief in the tenets of the goddesses could not override the quest to overcome the Osu Caste creedal tempo. Even the church on their part could not discard the concept of Osu whereas they promote Ozo title by the Umunna or Kinsmen. For Lemchi(2011:19), to have condemned slavery and apartheid in the world-wide communities and remain dwarf in the combat of evil effects of Osu in our society, we will not only continue

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to fan the problems of the system but will find it very hard to
be eradicated within this contemporary era.

The free-born could also be referred to as *Di-ala* - owners of the land, they isolate themselves from *Osu* membership in matters of marriage, co-habitation and land-partnership. They pray in the same church, attend the same market and go to the same school, nothing happens. Both parties interact fully with the ordained priests who are supposed to be frontline *Osu* people, but they never realize. The longer the faith is practiced, the more the kinsmen are rooted in matters contrary to the same faith they practiced, which is contrary to the faith being practiced by the *Osu* Caste System. In the words of Chinenye Polycarp (2013), "It pains me that there are still Igbo brothers and sister (in) Igboland regarded as *Osu* "Out Castes". Though I fall within the so-called *Di-ala* (Free born) enclave ... I see the level of segregation and discrimination *Osu* creates in Igboland". He condemns the ongoing marginalization experienced in Nigeria by the Igbo enclave and wonders why the Igbo race should perpetrate an intra marginalization policy through *Osu* Caste praxis. If the Free born can complain about marginalization to government, how much worse is the situation of Igbo *Osu* Castes ostracized by their fellow brothers and sisters? They are still seen as a system where one is dedicated to the exclusive service of a god or goddess.

Achebe(1986:8) in his work *The Things Fall Apart*, illustrates the effect in the story where Umuofia had to determine Ikemefuna's right to live because he was brought to Umuofia wearing the status of an *Osu*, following the ultimatum to choose "between war on the one hand, and on the other the offer of a young man and a virgin" as a compensation for the murder of the wife of Ogbuefi Udo. It became clear according to Lemchi(2011:37) that, "the commonest and natural way to

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become an Osu is to be born in the family of Osu”. One can also become an *Osu* through marriage contract with an osu, sexual intercourse with an Osu, surrendering oneself to Osu shrine, being dedicated to the goddess, etc. It is unfortunate that once one becomes an *Osu* one carries the social stigma for life in the eyes of the sons of the soil- the Diala. One becomes less a person, less in value and worth in spite of wealth and fame.

Further consideration into the issue Osu Caste System, Lemchi(2011:37) affirm that the position of Osu was as a result of some religious ritual. It is as a result of this discriminatory treatment, which may possibly be viewed positively or negatively in our different works of life that gave rise to a philosophical consideration of the problems and the effects of Osu Caste System. Osu is not just “a person sacrificed to a deity by a community or a group of people or a family. One connected with the deity or the divine in a special way as opposed to the ordinary man, born under natural and normal circumstances of his Chi”. Three conditions qualify one to be Osu. Either the person is dedicated to or scarified to a deity, the one ran into the protection of a deity, or things/persons obtained by the patronage of a deity, or persons or animals belonging to Osu, that is by way of association. Osu could also mean one who has a religious function to perform to and un-behave of a deity. These are sometimes and in some case being represented in the names some bear.

Onwubiko(1993:25)in his work, “Facing the Osu issue” Stated that, although “these people, maintain their social stand as “di-ala” in their respective communities, they answer names such as Osuagwu/Nwagwu, Njoku/Osuji, Osumuo/Nwamuo, Osuamadi/Nwamadi, Osuigwe/Nwaigwe Osuchukwu/Nwachukwu, Osuala/Nwala, just to mention these few. One will then

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like to ask what is the significance of the prefix *Osu*, in these names, and in what various contexts it is applied. The names above are associated with some deities or spirits in Igboland. Most of these names gives to children suppose to have been born under the tutelary influence of these deities or spirits.

In his work, *Sacrifice in Ibo Religion*, Father Anyichie(1970:50), gives an insight into, and supports the view and analysis of these names. For him:

The good spirits are mediators between God and men, for example a woman may pray to 'Udo' for a son. When she eventually bears a Son, she calls him Nwa-udo or *Osu-udo* or *Udo-ga-ekwu*

Yet people, even those that answer such names or the writers still would not want to identify with an *Osu*. For some because of the fear of being identified with the issue of *Osu*.

Worthy of note is one of my lecturer's remark following the reactions and comments of students over one of his articles in the School magazine titled, "The *Osu* Caste System and Christianity in Igboland". He expressed as a shock, the fact that his person, not the ideas expressed, became more of the object of discussion. According to Onwubiko(1993:24), "some people questioned my interest and some even did go to my home to find out my background. However, they found out I had nothing at stake in the *Osu* issue and I vowed not to get into the discussion again". One then wonders what his fears were. What, if he has something as take in the issue of *Osu*.

Achebe (1986:143) in the *Things Fall Apart* went on to clearly say that Osu, 'was a person dedicated to a god, a thing set apart-a taboo forever, and his children after him. He could neither marry nor be married by the freeborn. He was in fact an outcast, living in a special area of the village, close to the Great shrine. Wherever he went, he carried with him the mark of his forbidden caste, tangled and dirty hair. A razor was a taboo to him. An Osu could not attend an assembly of the freeborn, and they in turn, could not shelter under his roof. He could not take the four titles of the clan and when he died he was buried by his kind in the evil forest'. No wonder people avoid being identified as Osu yet for some it is a way out. Miscreants, who menaced the society, took to being Osu, when they saw that the society was out to get rid of them. Onwubiko(1993:29) in running into the shrine of a deity, he opted out of the 'secular' world into the world of the 'sacred'. According to Onyenso(1987:85):

... some people choosing between two evils, symbolically declaring themselves properties of gods-Osu-instead of dying every day in the hands of the oppressors; or in order to escape a death penalty. In the face of emergency, nothing can be considered invaluable or dishonourable to keep oneself in being.

Osu is a sacrifice of the gods or Deities in various ways. They are untouchable and left exclusively to the use of the gods. For some it is a way out while to others, it is to say the least so dehumanized and totally discriminated against. In spite of all these, the problems of Osu still persist. In the words of Uchendu(1965:89), "the of slavery Osu system constitutes the

greatest contradiction to Igbo equalitarian ideology”. The *Osu* is not chosen by the deity but rather conditioned to stay with, or choose the deity as a last resort, says Onwubiko(1993:33)”. In any case, the deity never says no. Either one is sacrificed to it or one is conditioned to stay, or that one ran to the deity as a protection. At this point it is reported that their duties, that is “the duties of the “*ndi-Osu*” consist of clearing the compound of the god which as a rule, is the market place. They must cut the bush and grass, and keep the precincts tidy; they are permitted to farm the land assigned to the god and they alone, may eat of the fruity thereof” says Basdem(1966:249).

At times they can go on errands for the priest of the deity, especially as messengers of the god, M. M. Green(1964:158) reiterate that to someone sued before the court of the deity and in this capacity, could collect debts. As the *Osu* gradually developed into a small communities, they became more like a state within a state and organized themselves. Their increasing number worsened the social distortion which the slave trade had created. They took advantage of the repulsive attitude the people had towards them to claim lands, beyond those assigned to them originally; they started working themselves up for emancipation. Could we then say it is better to be an *Osu* or “*Di-ala*” for once *Osu*, one lives until his ‘*chi*’ takes him, while as “*Di-ala*” one still choose to be one. On themselves they tend to enjoy relative peace for they are only accountable to their deity. In spite of all these contradictions, *Osu* Caste System remains a problem and a controversial issue. The problems of *Osu* Caste System could be Religious, Political, Social as well as philosophical, which could simply mean ‘the why of the problem’.

Religious effect of the Problems of *Osu*

According to history, Ekechi(1972:12) states, when the church came in, they started with those “who were slaves purchased by the missionaries or others who suffered from some kind social disabilities, like lepers, widows, these and a variety of others formed the hard core of the early church congregation”. The preached the message of universal brotherhood, equality, justice and love. Evangelization at the time was directed towards mental liberation, and for this, education was to combat ignorance, physical liberation was also the liberation from sickness and the breaking of social barriers in Igboland. Thus for the Osu in particular, Onwubiko(1993:35) called it salvation. The church preached the message of freedom of the Osu who had been suffering from one societal dejection or another for centuries and the Osu’s welcomed the message”. According to Achebe(1986:142):

These outcasts or Osu seeing that the new religion welcomed twins and such abominations thought that it was possible that they would also be received. And so one Sunday two of them went into the church. These was an immediate stir, but so great was the work the religion had done among the converts that they did not immediately leave the church when the outcasts came. Those who found themselves nearest to them merely moved to another seat. It was a miracle

Achebe called it a miracle because it could have been normal for all the “freeborns” to leave the church in sight of the outcasts. When closely looked into the Osu issue in this case, it will be noted “that the same belief which affected the

murder of twins was and still is the same belief that operates in the *Osu* system, says Onwubiko, A. O(1993:35:36). He went further to say, “while the *Osu* was used to cleanse an abomination committed by someone else, through which people who incurred a god’s rage were safe, twins were killed because they were believed to have committed abomination in their former lives to cause the rage of the gods”.

However, Christianity held the Christian teachings of the love of one’s neighbours’ which began to undermine the worst forms of social oppression. Missionaries observed in Asaba, in 1870s, according to Isichei(1976:115), that titled men were turning against human sacrifices, which was supported mainly by a powerful interest group, the *dibia*”.

Yet the *Osu* issue still remained a-no-go area. Every move to accommodate the *Osu* was not an easy one. The eradication of the system meant cutting across the roots of traditional religion itself. The early Christians still went on in their effort to accommodate the two. One thing appears to be forgotten, our Reverend fathers used to tell us that we go to church to learn how to leave with our fellow Christians outside the church. Julius Spencer reported in 1890 quoted by Ekechi(1972:12), that:

... the freeborn no longer consider it below their dignity to worship in the same place with the despised slaves. They have been gradually learning that in the sight of God there is no difference that all are alike, sinners, and that all need the one thing needful-the salvation of their immortal souls.

Yes, within the church and while in the church but what becomes of the Osu outside the church. The religious problem of Osu caste system does not end in worshipping together in the church. Julius Spencer, as quoted by Ekechi, F.K.(1972:23) went further to say that, “while some people however, were prepared to accommodate the new religion and the social changes that came with it, others were determined to maintain or to restore the purity of Igbo traditional life and religion”. So if the church must survive outside the church, they have to carry their teachings far beyond the church buildings. A critical study of the Igbo traditional life and religion is very essential, for that will enable the church see what to promote and what to remove in the traditional practice. It will also help the church to see how to join the two systems, so that it will not just end in worshipping together in the same church but to see also how the Osu and Di-ala can get along outside the church. This could not neglect the African culture that allows the Osu Caste System be by way of “Christianizing” the traditional religion so that the barriers of social, political and religious discrimination will be broken. Until the “di-ala” can freely get married to Osu, until the Osu can take the Ozo title, until there could be a total acceptance of the Osu among the “di-alas” in the church and in traditional religious society, the problem and discriminatory effects of Osu Caste System in our society will continue to persist.

Political effect of the Problems of Osu

Apart from religious problems and or its effects on the problem of Osu Caste System, there are also the political effects of the problem. The church has been making every effort to incorporate all people as in the one body of Christ. So far, they have succeeded in bringing them, the “Osu” and the “Di-ala” under one roof for main reason of worship. What happens after the church service is yet another question. The

colonial administrators did not discriminate in their governmental and organizational systems for they were ignorant of the cultural and traditional impact as such offered a protective front to the new awareness given to the *Osu* by the Christian religion. So like in the church, the *Osu* were not really outcaste. In handling the public offices, the *Osu* were favoured. There were instances where some of the warrant chiefs belong to this group. They were even more favoured as their talents and devotion were noticed by the government. Since this was an only opportunity for the *Osu* to identify with the “*Di-ala*’s”, they could not afford to compromise the chance. So they were forced to put in their best in whatever office they found themselves. The government and their officials did not waste time in noticing this. The problem then was with the community especially they would want to carry out some government function for all, including the “*Di ala*”.

Onwubiko, A.O.(1993:37) reported that, “the official banning of the *Osu* system in Eastern Region in 1956, was a definitive stand of the colonial government on an issue it had hither to handled with tacit caution. In fact a law was passed by the government prohibiting the use of the words “*Osu*” or “*Ohu*” to describe any member of this class. These acts went further into the problems of *Osu* for the *Osus* capitalized on that knowing that the government officials would not like to part with them in the office. As such the *Di-ala* waited for them after the close of work in the community. Dr. Azikiwe quoted by Nzimiro(1972:5:40) also spoke on the second reading of the Abolition of the *Osu* system Bill, and noted that the Bill is aimed at allowing the *Osu* enjoy as much freedom as the freeborn especially on political matters.

This Bill seeks to do three things:- to abolish the *Osu* system and its allied practices

including Oru and Ohu system, to prescribe punishment for their continued practice, and to remove certain social disabilities caused by the enforcement of the Osu and, its allied system”

Onwubiko(1993:38), further said, that “with this law on the side of the Osu, they began to take titles in some Igbo communities”, however, all these bills and prohibitions instead of eliminating the practice, creates rather a stronger dichotomy between the Osu and the Di-ala. The Osu rather began to create and form different autonomous villages and kindred’s in the community as may be commonly found in the eastern part of Nigeria – Imo State. These autonomous villages and kindred’s were to enable them freely take the Ozo title among themselves. Since they could not perform the rites of “OzoAma” on the town level the Osu resort to performing “Ozo-ulo” on the kindred level. Noticing this discriminatory attitude, the Osu began to make their own Ozo title very elaborate with a long Ozo names giving rise to a local saying that “one who never expected that an Ozo title will be accorded him, tie the “Ozo robe” up to the knee. According to Onwubiko, A. O.(1993:38:39):

They were careful to take honorific names which would suggest that their ancestor were taking titles. Thus ozo names such as Duru-Nnaamuzie, Duru-Nnaamezionwa, or Okwara-Nnanyereugo were taken by them”

With this the Osu begin to feel just the same way as the “Diala”. Certain duties they do perform for the deities and the people were no longer being carried out. All functions

connected with any of the customs or traditions were either perpetuated for the Diala or the concept of the system was stopped. The Diala refused paying the customary allegiance which they were expected to pay to those who originally dedicated themselves or their ancestors to the cults of the deities. The *Osu* in turn now, even challenge the freeborn and can go as far as suing them to court if they (freeborn) directly or indirectly tried to claim some right of allegiance due to them from the *Osu*. As far as government offices were concerned, there was no *Osu* or a freeborn. What matters most is an individuals' output that grantees ones pay or remunerations. In this case, the so called *Osu* were found on the tops. But instead of establishing a more cordial relationship, it developed into a kind of cold war.

With the *Osu* on the tops and the missing cordiality with the Diala who were in the majority, it became very difficult to implement policies in their favour. It will be likened to a question once asked during the period of women emancipation in America when women were being relegated to the background. Their contributions to the society could not easily be over looked yet it was asked whether women will now begin to be on top of men, with all these their struggle? There are certain societal practices that have been held for so long and beginning to be taken as a tradition. The *Osu* Caste System is one of such societal practice. It has been and even those who were supposed to feel cheated by the practice took it as normal. So no matter how much that is being said against such practice existing between the *Osu* and the Diala, a total eradication will be impossible without dealing with the culture that instituted it. Even those whom we feel are being cheated by the practice see it as an honour done to them. They were so used to the practice that they were even against those fighting to protect their interest. Some “*Osu*” will not like to belong to

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the “Diala” no matter how much one thinks they are being discriminated against. Some women were so comfortable with their womanhood that they do not even feel cheated by the men-folk. They will even fight against those who fight for their liberation. So the Osu caste system do not seem to be a practice that will easily be eradicated. It is as complicated as it is controversial and it is more of an internal problem than external. The issue of its eradication will depend to a greater extent on the Osu’s themselves and in alignment with the tradition, culture and custom of the people.

Social Effect of the Problems of Osu

The Osu are human and they know what they want. If they can find their place in the government and not rejected, they can as well find their grounds on the social life of their society. However, Onwubiko (1993:38) reported that, “the new and emergent Igbo man on account of his education and Christianization began early enough to act against the Osu system.” Some of them married the Osus especially with the emergence of social media knowingly or unknowingly. At this time it has gone beyond the influence of the church. No wonder Onwubiko (1993:39) in his work remarked that “many Igbo Christians through their education showed that they were mentally emancipated enough as not to be influenced and controlled by the traditional religious beliefs that scared the Igbo man away from the Osu”. The Osu and the Diala now mix up and go as far as getting married. However, it has never been without difficulties and criticisms. With Western education and Christian influence on the society, there could still be direct confrontations, indicating to the Osu what they are and their movement limitations. Yes education had its own influence but what is now left depends on us all, both the Osu and non-Osu. Once we are able to convince ourselves that all human are human, that there is nothing like Osu or Ohu,

then there will be noticeable effect of religion, politics as well as social relationship on the problem of *Osu* Caste System in all areas of Igbo-man's life and her society.

Only then can all these recent write-ups and constant exposition of the ill of the system through the mass media, show a progressive effort by the Igbo elite on the reformation of opinions on this subject. Dr. Mike Ogbulafor(1973:10)talking from the point of view of health and medical facilities, pointed out that now that there is genuine acceptance and social rehabilitation, it is hoped that from now these people will enjoy better health, psychological effects of the caste system having been removed". In every aspect of Western culture that involves a group of people or that which requires a common practice or worship, the *Osu* Caste System is not eradicated without credence to the culture of the people. That is the reason why in almost all social life that involves the elders, the *Osu* issue is held to the later. In the area of marriage, unless one takes the Whiteman style, there must be an inquiry by people who know the history of the family. Impediment such as, theft, madness, murder, convulsion, whipping cough, or poverty, epilepsy e.t.c could be considered in marriage and where any of these run into the family nobody will recommend such family for marriage except the one is *Osu*. The same is always the case in almost all the social activities involving our village elders, except that the *Osu* caste issue is the upper most in a true traditional setting.

Our elders and traditionalists are yet to understand or accept all these new teaching on the issue of *Osu* Caste System. Our traditional culture requires that serious and proper inquiry be made on the both families before a serious relationship like marriage is carried out. Onwubiko(1993:41:42)in an interview

on this matter had these interactions with some elders in his town Owerri.

- Onwubiko: Sir does the Ekwunneoch own Osu?
Nwanyanwu: O yes, can you lack Osu in her compound?
Onwubiko: What is their position now?
Nwanyanwu: They stay on their own and we stay on our own, they stay together separately.
Onwubiko: Do you marry them?
Nwanyanwu: No, no one marries them unless the person is a fool or is a Christian.
Onwubiko: Do you still call them Osu?
Nwanyanwu: Who calls them Osu again? If one calls them Osu, Bekee puts the one in prison, who call them again? They are now what we know with our hearts.
Onwubiko: This thing Bekee has done is it good?
Nwanyanwu: Bekee has done what he thinks to be right.
Onwubiko: I am asking you Nwanyawu, do you think what Bekee did is good?
Nwanyanwu: How is it good. No one controls people these days. If you ask someone to do something now he retorts: “am I your slave” everybody is equal now, is the land in order then?”

It could be recalled that Ekwunneoch is a community where only Osus settle, situated somewhere in Owerri. Nwanyanwu is one of the Ozo titled men and an elder in the village. As far as he is concerned, all people are not equal. So it becomes bad for Whiteman to come and declare all man equal. Beke (Whiteman) does what he think is good without asking the people what is good. The people takes it to avoid being

thrown into prison not that they are convinced of the good in what they say.

Philosophical Effect of the Problems of *Osu* Caste System

Scholars and writers were of the view that philosophy if devoid of any practical application would be quite irrelevant. Audi Robert (2011:255) quoted Soren Kierkegaard an existentialist thinker believed that philosophy should concern itself with solution to human predicaments. To delve into the effect of *Osu* Caste System as one of the human predicaments, this part of our paper saw philosophy as a means through which solutions can possibly be found. It is on this that philosophy has tried to delve into since it is the problem of humanity. There are other human problems that philosophy handled, like evil, justice etc but *Osu* Caste System has remained most controversial as well as contradictory. The philosophic quest into the problem of *Osu* Caste System transcends the superficiality of a mere religious acceptance, political recognition and social appreciation. It goes further into the intricacies of acceptance, recognition and appreciation. For if the *Osu* were so accepted, recognized and appreciated then there will be no problem of *Osu* to be discussed not to talk of the philosophical problems.

So far, religion 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 *Diala* alike. There should be no discrimination among the Christian folk. We all embarrass the teaching and fry the flag of total emancipation. After that the *Osu* problem still persist. In what we refer to as political problems, especially as concerns our office works and public service, we preached unity and oneness of all towards a unified political ideology. Whoever comes up with positive idea should be

given the chance to lay his view and a proper consideration be given to it. Not minding whether it is an idea of “Osu” or that of the “Diala”. We were all happy with the teaching and sang the songs of solidarity. In the offices we worked together but at home we took our separate ways. The Osu caste problem still persist. In our social affair, we preached love, acceptance and equal right to all irrespective of whether the one is “*Osu*”, “*Ohu*” or “*Diala*”. To a reasonable extent we all accepted the teachings and most of us joined our voices together to shout and clamp down on the Osu Caste System. In agreement we say Osu has been eradicated. Some even on their own got married to Osu. Some gathered and gave the Osu’s the *Ozo* title, yet the problem still persist. If there were such things as acceptance, unity and equality, why do we still talk about the problem of Osu Caste System?

The philosophical effect of the problem of Osu Caste System goes much deeper into the why of the problem of Osu caste system. The why of the problem of Osu Caste System also lay among the Osu’s themselves, especially where they launched a “self-defence war” against the *Diala*. They organized themselves into villages which were numbered among the villages of the town. They began to encroach on the *Diala*’s pieces of land and when they could, with litigations and government support, lived on them. They use their women and sexual intercourse to “enroll” some *Diala* into their fold. Osu spinsters organized themselves to ‘make’ their real opponents Osu says Onwubiko(1993:39:40). These practices instead of working to eradicate Osu Caste System was helping even to promote them. “We must admit says Onwubiko(1993:41) that there are still some hopeless prisoners of tradition who are doing the much they can to frustrate all attempts to eradicate this obnoxious practice”. I must add here, that the advocates of the eradication of Osu Caste System must first inquire from

the *Osu* whether they wish that the practice be eradicated. I should think that we must at first visit the *Osu* to find out if they really wish to be eradicated before we go on with the process of eradicating the *Osu* Caste System in Igbo land.

Solutions to the Problems of *Osu* Caste System

It is becoming clearer that the solutions to the effects of the problems of *Osu* Caste System do not just require religious approach or political or social and philosophical, it also calls for cultural approach. Among the Africans, the issue of *Osu* is even more cultural than religious, social, political or philosophical. It is the cultural influence in *Osu* Caste System that contributed to the persistency of the problems since Africans are known for their multi-cultural existence. Onwnbiko(1993:59) in his search for a lasting solution went to Nri, a town in Igbo African land and was faced with culture. He said:

The Nri cultural practice as regards the *Osu* provides an aspect of Igbo culture and religion which is an example that the *Osu* can be integrated if the Igbo normal course of action is to be taken.

The religio-cultural belief that the Nri were the itinerant priest who went to many parts of Igboland removing abominations – “*Ikpuaru*”- and conferred or initiates the “*ofo*”, which remains the symbol of authority given to an ‘*ozo*’ title holder, makes them unique in Igboland. It is important to remark also that Onwubiko(1993:27) states:

The concept of peace, harmony and truth was ritually symbolized and enacted in the ceremonies of the Ozo-titled men, who were the political elite.

It does not necessarily mean that this is the first move towards the general cultural and religious believe and practices of the entire Igbo race. The problems have always been more internal than external. That has been why it remains a philosophical problem. Only internal solution can remove the barriers. Since a lot of moves are being made to incorporate all man, the “Osu” and the “Ohu” inclusive. The Osu and even the Ohu must mentally remove themselves from all such practices that make them not acceptable. Onwuejeogwu(1981:11) reported, saying that:

According to Nri Elders ... to this day in Nri town there are no persons considered as slaves, oru or ritual slaves, Osu, as in the other Igbo towns. Nri town was considered a sanctuary to all human beings who could come into it. Runaway slaves were considered free once they set foot on Nri soil. Persons who committed an abomination that involved hanging were freed and purified once they set foot on Nri soil.

This is a wonderful move and apart from Nri other towns and villages were also making their different moves towards the abolition of Osu Caste System in the entire society. Nri town was not alone, for in 1971, December 30th to be precise, In Idemili local Government Area, Nnobi town in particular the

Osu system was abolished ritually. In Ogidi, in 1972, the *Osu* Caste System was also abolished. One of those “redeemed” took a title and became the head of *Ozo* society and *Ndichie* in Ogidi. Ikemefuna, E. (1975:10) further reported that, “this man’s son recently took to marriage the daughter of a prominent Ogidi family”.

Following the examples of the *Nnobi*, and *Ogidi* communities, in October 1972, the *Umuoji*, and *Awka-Etiti*, both also in *Idemiri* Local Government Area, abolished the *Osu* system in their areas. It was also said that the heathen are more practical in their approach to issues of this nature. As soon as they have their conscience satisfied through sacrifices, they turn their back to the past. Onwubiko, A.O.(1993:42:43), finally added, ‘so now that both Christian and traditional religious forces have joined to fight the system, that it will soon be forgotten is obvious but this hope is more highlighted when one remembers that, “one irony now is that the *Osu* themselves do not feel alienated in the society”. In many *Igbo* communities now, there has always been a special abolition of ancient traditional religious customs.

All these moves were expected to act as a source of encouragement to the *Osus* and also enable them feel accepted by which ever community they found themselves. With Christianity and all the recent changes in the societal developments, *Osu* Caste System only exists in the mind. Of course not in the mind of the *Diala* for they never saw themselves as *Osu* but in the minds of the *Osu* themselves. Unless the *Osu* accept themselves non *Osu*, they will still make the society know they are *Osu* and even if every other practice against the *Osu* is abolished, the problem of *Osu* will still persist.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Igbo-Africans are multi-cultural and multi-religious group of people, having their peculiar methods of carrying out and performing all their activities. Their interpretation and understanding of issues vary according to their culture and religion. Their funeral rites, traditional titles, marriage rites, even in their agricultural activities, all these vary both in time, season and method. Unless there are common and general accepted ideas or policy by both Christians and non Christians, the problem of Osu will continue to persist.

If Christians felt contempt for the Igbo funeral rites, if Christians neglect the traditional Igbo titles, if Christians make marriage a private affair, the problem of Osu Caste System will not only persist but the Osu will soon loose confident on the Christians. Then the Osu problem instead of being eradicated will continue getting worse dimensions.

There is every need that all human activities are brought together to a common factor. The Christians must allow the traditionalist get involved in all their Christian practice. The Christians also will be ready to compromise any of their practice that is not acceptable by the traditionalist. In the same way the traditionalist will make all their practices open and enable the Christians get into all their practices. That way the traditionalist will be ready to change what need to be changed. By the time this is done a common practice will emerge and in that way the Osu will have no other option than to accept the common practice and when that is done, Osu Caste System will die a natural death for they will have no other place to go and no human practice will be referred to as the practice of Osu.

Going through our work, it will be observed that there seem to be no more problems of *Osu* Caste System. Religiously they were accepted, thus the Christians had a common worship ground for Christians, *Osu* and *Ohu*. In our political practices, the *Osus* were accepted especially in our government offices. Even in our social life it has been the same, the “*Dialas*” even get married to the “*Osu*”. They attend the same school and were given the same training. The Christians and the *Osu* enjoy the same opportunities and yet the problems persist. Among the Christians and the traditionalist, serious consideration should also be given to the culture and tradition of the land especially in common practice, otherwise a solution to any problem arising from such practice will be very hard. *Osu* issues is one of such practice it requires serious collaboration of ideas and principles free of all forms of discrimination if the problem must be solved.

The traditional funeral rites were neither examined nor purified by the Christians, for according to the *Igbo* belief the *Osus* were not entitled to any funeral rites at death because of the taboo they were believed to have inherited and were carrying. The attitude of the church to traditional *Igbo* titles and to those who take them has been determined not only by the idolatrous aspects of some of them, but because, in addition, those idolatrous aspect, the *Osu* could not take them. These are vital issues that both the Christians and the traditionalist should together resolve. Attempt should be made to purify these titles of the idolatrous practices through a unifying force of both Christians and Traditionalist. Christians again at the beginning of Christianity in *Igbo*land, entered into marriages between the *Osu* and *Diala* as a “private affair” and therefore gave the *Osu* problem a “private” and individualistic matrimonial solution. This was at the expense of the positive aspect of the religio-cultural sphere of life while it was once written and generally

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recognized in Africa that, “marriage is an alliance between families and person. Cultural provisions are made to uphold its stability. All these will continue to encourage the persistency of Osu Caste System even when they are accepted in all the non-traditional practices.

However, the Osus themselves and or all the outcastes must also be ready to see and accept themselves as none outcaste even when they feel favoured by the practice. They should not see it as an advantage over the Dialas or the freeborn. In that way the Osus will see themselves as any other person in the society and as such find themselves within the common practices of the society including the traditional practices.

The slavery in Osu Caste System can easily receive an Igbo cosmic condemnation but not the caste. Practically, no one doubts the absence of the ancient servitude but the isolation of individual Osu still persist in social matters. This is where the hangover of slavery still remain, powers and super powers notwithstanding.

Marriage should be made a communal affair after all the necessary inquiry must have been made. The idea of Christians entering into marriage without proper inquiry should stop. As such it should come as a result of a sincere love emanating from the two people concerned with a total consent from the parents and family members. There should be no form of discrimination between the Osu and Diala so that the issue of Christians making marriage a ‘private affair’ thereby secretly making a Diala an Osu will not arise. This will eradicate the issue of unconsciously converting a Diala to an Osu giving the Osu problem a private and individualistic matrimonial solution. With a little sacrifice from both the Osu and the Diala

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the so called hang over will be removed and all will each other
as one and the same person.

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