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# The Osu Caste System in Nigeria:

## A Christian Response

by *Nkem Emeghara*

**T**wo schools of thought concerning the applicability of the term "caste" exist among social anthropologists.<sup>1</sup> The first school recommends the application of caste system only to Hinduism and its ritual requirements. Caste system, according to this school of thought is unique to India or at least to Southeast Asia.<sup>2</sup>

The second school of thought defines caste in terms of certain structural features which are found not only in Hindu India but in a number of other societies as well. This school of thought identifies caste on a wider area: The Arabian Peninsula, Japan, Polynesia, North Africa, East Africa, Haiti, Aboriginal North America and Southern United States.<sup>3</sup> West Africa is excluded.

In this paper the caste system practised among the Igbos of Nigeria, West Africa is examined. This indicates that West Africa should be added to the

list of areas where caste exists in the world.

Kroeber gives us a cross-cultural definition of caste system from the point of view of social stratification. According to him, caste is:

An endogamous and hereditary sub-division of an ethnic unit occupying a position of superior or inferior rank or social status or esteem in comparison with other such sub-divisions.<sup>4</sup>

Kroeber sees caste as examples of ranked aggregates of people which are usually prescribed by birth and disallowing an individual mobility. He produced this definition from his study of social stratification in some societies. However, to a Hindu, caste is more than social stratification. It is also a spiritual sliding scale which has deep religious significance. The lowest in the scale

being the *Pariah*, out castes, untouchables, whom Mahatma Gandhi sympathetically called 'Harjans' or 'People of God' (Hari).<sup>5</sup> Where a person falls within the scale is directly related to the type of life the person lived in his previous life, a concept rooted in the Law of *Karma*, and *samsara*.

Among the Igbos of Nigeria, caste is conceived in terms of relationship to the spirit forces (*arusi*) rather than laid down by social stratification. This is because anybody can become part of a different caste. There are three castes recognized: the *osu*, *ume* and the *diala* (or *amadi*). The *osu* and *ume* are those people who for certain reason have left the boundary of the *diala* (freeborn) into the spirit (*arusi*) realm. Being previously *diala* (free born), they have become taboo. The community, therefore, treats them as taboo just as one would treat any thing dedicated to the gods. To understand the Igbo concept of *osu*, it is necessary to look at Igbo world view briefly.

### **Igbo World View**

The world view of a people provides answers to questions about the peoples understanding of the place and relationship of man with the universe in general. It gives insight into a peoples political, religious, social and psychological convictions.<sup>6</sup> Knowing a people's world view provides an

understanding of how they evaluate life both temporal and non-temporal which in turn provides them a charter for action and a guide to their behaviour.

First, to the Igbo, the universe is a conglomeration of forces. The universe came into existence not by chance but through the handwork of a creator. The creator populated the universe with numerous spirit forces which are in constant communion with man. Thus, the visible and the invisible world are identified and are in constant interaction. Both worlds are in this universe. The only difference is that one is visible while the other is invisible.<sup>8</sup> This constant interaction between the visible and the invisible makes human life and nature to be regarded as sacred. They are under the governance of the creator and the numerous divinities.<sup>9</sup> The visible world is therefore subordinate to the invisible world. Man, who is chief of the visible world is less powerful and seeks the help of the invisible (spirit) world. To receive favour from the spirits, he strives to do their will, obeying their laws and carrying out their instructions which are given through priests and oracles.<sup>10</sup> Man can also influence the spirit world and the deities through sacrifices and prayers. The deities and spirits are expected to intervene and bring good fortunes to their devotees or misfortune if their laws are flouted. It is thus

through ritual that the visible world becomes sacred as it interacts with the invisible.

The Igbo generally recognize four categories of spiritual beings. *Chukwu* is the name for the Supreme being and most powerful of all the spirits, the others are deities (*Mmuo*), Spirit forces (*arusi*), the ancestors (*ndichee*).

*Chukwu* is also called *Chineke* (The spirit that creates), *Chi ukwu* (The great spirit), *Onyeokike* (The one who creates), *Eze okike* (The king of creation). He is the source of human life, animals, rain, crops, etc. He gives every human part of Himself called *Chi* which is the "destiny spirit" or "Spirit double" or the man which remains throughout life. *Chukwu* interacts with man through this *Chi*. The greater the potency of this *chi* in a man, the greater will be his achievement and fame. Because *Chukwu* is the source of human, every one belongs to him (as free born *diala*) consequently, human being is sacred in this sense. The deities referred to as *Mmuo* come next to *Chukwu*. They have been variously referred to as sons, servants, manifestations, reflections, or even metaphors of *Chukwu*. They are believed to have been assigned different functions by *Chukwu*. Some are thought to have their abode in the sky as *Igwe* (the sky deity). The sun deity and the sky deity are the same. The sun deity is

commoner in the southern part of Igboland, while the sky deity is used in the North to refer to the same deity. All the deities are answerable to God. They claim no direct ownership of man.

The spirit forces are called *arusi*. These are non-human spirits which have not attained the status of deities. They lack distinct personalities and cult equal to that of the deities. They are thought to act irrationally sometimes and may be manipulated by those people who know their secrets for good and for evil. Every man tries to win the favour of the *arusi* through ritual sacrifices. All mishaps on an individual and community are blamed on the *arusi*. Their nature is not known for certain, but they are regarded as possessing superhuman powers to help or to hinder. No one dares toy with them no matter the relationship as they can turn even against their devotees. They can intervene on behalf of those who are not their devotees against those who are known to be their devotees. Some of the *arusi* are known to be inherently wicked. Some of these move in groups and may attack individual families or communities.<sup>11</sup> They have no shrines, no cults, nor priests. They are known to do little good but great harm. Thus are they singularly categorized as wicked spirits. They are anonymous and one dares not swear

with them falsely. They inflict suffering at the least provocation.<sup>12</sup>

Some of the evil spirits have been connected with age groups. The *umuro* are evil spirits of the dead children. *Ogbunike* are evil spirits of dead young men. *Akalogeli* are evil spirits of dead adults who died childless. *Ogbanje* are evil spirits of the born-to-die children. The *Ogbanje* spirits are the most dreaded by young mothers. The aim of the *Ogbanje* is to torment parents with the pangs of constant births and deaths of their children leaving them childless and frustrated even to the end of childbearing age.<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps, the most wicked of the *arusi* is the one called *Ekwensu*. It is regarded as the arch enemy of *Chukwu* whose purpose is to frustrate the goodness of *Chukwu* and to disseminate evil.<sup>14</sup> The stock in trade of *Ekwensu* is violence and disruption of peace. Thus, any person who is given to violent acts is regarded as being possessed by *Ekwensu*.<sup>15</sup> It is the spirit of warfare. The spirit who brings about chaos. He is the destroyer similar to the Hindu *Shiva* and the *Angra Mainya* of Zoroastrianism.

The fourth category of Spiritual beings is the ancestors (*ndichie*). The cult of the ancestor is directly related with Igbo concept of time.<sup>16</sup> For the people time is associated with events. Thus, there is no pronounced past and

present. Space is composed of three dimensions: the sky, the earth, and the underworld. Man has a cyclic life of birth, death and reincarnation. Death is not the termination of life. Man goes into the spirit world as ancestor to come back into the earth (the visible world) in order to live another cycle of life. The ancestral world is conceived as similar to this visible human world and the ancestors are still regarded as members of the family and take active interest in their kith and kin. The requirements for ancestorhood include: Old age, off-spring, good moral and religious life, funeral rites following a good or a natural death. Death by suicide, accident, disease, etc., are regarded as bad death, and victims of such death are not given funeral rites and consequently can not become ancestors. Since they are not ancestors they turn into ghosts and become malevolent.

Ancestors, protect the family, relay their prayers to *Chukwu*, and ensure good moral life within the family. They are likable to the Persian *Fravashis* and Japanese *Kami*. Shrines are set up for them where libation and sacrifices of food offering are made to them. They are expected to reincarnate into the family to repopulate the family of their children. It is through the *eke* (ancestral guardian) that the ancestor comes into the family and with it the child is connected with his ancestors. It is

believed that *Chukwu* assigns the *eke* to individual child as He wills. It is also *Chukwu* who determines which ancestor should reincarnate.

In summary we see that to the Igbo, man is in constant interaction with *Chukwu*, the deities, and with the ancestors as well as the *arusi*. He is also in communion with his fellow man within the community of the living. His family includes the ancestors and those yet to be born. In his dealings with these forces, he is expected to live reverently of these forces. There is a boundary which he must not cross. He must not seek to join the family of the spirit while in flesh and must not offend the ancestors. Man remains man while spirit remains spirit (*arusi*). If he is son of man, he must not change citizenship by joining the spirit community. The community of the spirit is to be left for the spirits while the community of human is to be left for the human. Any crossing of boundaries makes him become a taboo. Man is expected to remain a creation of *Chukwu* in whom he has his origin and sustenance and not expected to join the spirit (*arusi*) commune while he is human. Above all, what his ancestors think about him is vitally important. The welfare of his ancestors depends upon his welfare and vice versa. He is expected to walk by the legacy left behind by his ancestors, i.e., when they were human. Above all,

an ancestor can only be revered by his human children (*diala*) not by any one who has crossed into the spirit realm by adoption by the spirit (deities)

## The Osu Institution

As said earlier, the *osus* are people whose forbears were dedicated or given to some deities. The deities accepted them as their property. Consequently though human, they were no longer regarded as mere human by their kit and kin. This is because they had crossed the boundary between the free born into the community of the spirits. They were regarded as taboo once the ritual of initiation into the spirit community had been performed.

Facts about the origin of this practice is lost. However, a number of oral traditions concerning its origin is available. One theory claims that there was a time in the remote past when the local deities became so powerful and dangerous that ordinary sacrifices could not appease them. Human beings were therefore used as sacrifices. The human beings were not killed but were dedicated to the deities alive. Another oral history claims that *osus* started during inter tribal wars. On such occasions villagers usually promised their local deities a gift of human beings if they emerged victorious. War captives were then dedicated to the deities as fulfillment of such promises.

There were occasions when the deities themselves requested particular people to be dedicated to them as their property. This was known through an oracle or a medium. Barren women sometimes promised to dedicate a child to the deity if the deity gave them children. On some other occasions the villagers nominated people whom they gave to the deity in order to avert an impending disaster. In yet other cases people who committed some abominations which deserved death penalty, ran away from their immediate community into the shrine of a deity where they made their permanent abode. In such a case no one dared touch them as they were regarded as the property of the deity from then onwards. There were, however, people who fled into the shrines of the deities for protection. Such an action makes an individual *osu*, the property of the deity. *Nwadiala* (free born) became *osu* if he or she merely sought shelter in the house of an *osu*.<sup>17</sup> Wealth or social status did not immunize such a person from becoming *osu*. An only child who was afraid of being killed by an enemy might become *osu* voluntarily by running to inhabit the shrine of a deity.

### Dedication Rite

A person dedicated to a deity becomes *osu* through a final ritual which is carried out by the priest of the shrine

under the watchful eyes of the community elders. On the appropriate market day (*orie*)<sup>18</sup> the person is made to carry the sacred stone slab at the foot of the shrine on his or her head. The chief priest of the shrine would pronounce in the presence of the elders of the community of the village some prayers<sup>19</sup> to which the elders responded 'yes' in agreement. The person put down the stone (called *igu*) and sat on it four times. The hair of the person was next shaved completely for the last time in his or her life. The next rite was to cut off part of all of either the left or right ear of the person. The high priest concluded the ritual by greeting the audience. The person having become a cult slave (*ohu Agbara*) was provided a place usually close to the shrine of the deity where he made his home.

Villages and communities have certain deities to which human beings were dedicated. In Umuoye, Imerienive, are the *osu uramurukwa* (i.e. *osu* of the *arusi* of the peoples stream) *osu udele* (i.e. *osu* of the *arusi* of vulture). *osu Amidioha* (*osu* of the god of thunder). While in *Atta* another Igbo town, we have the *osu Ihueke Atta* (*osu* of the god of yam); *osu Thuogugu* (*osu* of the god of thunder); *osu Iyiala* (*osu* of the god of the land); *osu Iyi mmini mbaa* (i.e. *osu* of the deity of waters).<sup>19</sup> Whichever deity they may belong to, they are derogatorily referred to as *osu*

*Arusi* or *osu Agbara* collectively  
(*Agbara* is another word for spirit).

### **The Significance of the Ritual**

There was a three-stage-process involved in the initiation of someone into the *osu* caste.

Firstly, was the stage of separation. This occurred when the person went away from the *diala* community to stay in the deity's shrine. The person remained at this stage until the rites were carried out. The time lapse between the separation and the actual rite was the transition phase. The transition phase lasted as long as the consultations with the oracle took place. Once the consultation procedure was completed, the actual incorporation into the community of the spirits began. The transition duration also depended upon the market day on which the rite of incorporation took place. A person could stay as long as three days in the shrine of the deity before the rite was carried out.

The carrying of the stone slab of the shrine was the first service of the *osu* and symbolises voluntary dedication of himself or herself to the service of the deity. While the stone slab was on the head, the priest in the presence of the community elders pronounced the prayer of initiation. The whole community was represented by the presence of the elders. With the *ofo* in

the hand of the priest representing the presence of the ancestors all the members of the community, both living and non living are therefore witnesses to the occasion. Sitting on the stone four times, perhaps, symbolises more than completion. To the Igbo the number three (3) symbolises completeness. Therefore, four (4) would symbolise more than completeness which can be understood to mean "forever." The person being initiated was by so doing saying that he or she was voluntarily giving himself or herself to the deity forever.

The shaving of the hair sealed the solemn passing from the state of dialahood into that of the service of the spirits when the person became a permanent possession and under the power of the deity.

Although it was not said that the hair was sacrificed to the deity, it is very likely that that was what actually took place. The writer thinks so because in initiations into puberty among known peoples the hair of the youth has been known to be sacrificed to the deity. For example, among the ancient Syrians and Bedouins the hair of youth entering into maturity were sacrificed to the goddess of the Hieropolitan sanctuary which belonged to the universal Semitic mother-goddess as her right upon the youth.<sup>20</sup>



The story about the biblical Samson indicates that from remote ancient times the hair of who ever was vowed a perpetual Nazirite (dedicated to the deity) was never cut, the belief was that the over grown hair marked the person out as different from the other people in the community. In fact the Bible states explicitly that the shaving of Samson's hair caused his strength to depart from him completely, which indicates the belief that his strength and vitality dwelled in his hair (Judges 16:19). Thus, the shaving of the hair of a person being imitated into the *osu* was also a removal of the *diala* (profane) hair to give way for the *osu* (sacred) hair to grow out, the bushy sacred hair of the *osu* thus symbolises his distinctiveness within the community as well as the powers of the deity which indwelled him or her.

The cutting of the ear spills some blood. Blood has been known from ancient times to symbolise life. It has also been known from the Hebrew children that the opening or cutting of the ear symbolises perpetual servanthood.<sup>21</sup> Therefore to the Igbo the blood shed in the initiation into *osu* was a sacrifice which redeemed the life of the community from the curse of *osu*. The cutting of the ear symbolises the perpetual servanthood of the *osu* to the deity who from then owed him or her. The cutting of the ear and the blood

spilled during the cutting sealed the covenant between the *osu*, the deity, the ancestors, and the people.

Two theories have been suggested as to why the parties covenanting with one another involves blood and the cutting of flesh.

One is the retributive theory which claims that the cutting of the flesh and the blood symbolises the retribution that will overtake the perjurer of the covenant.<sup>22</sup>

The other theory is the sacramental theory which was propounded by Robertson Smith.<sup>23</sup> Smith claims that the rite was indicative of protective rather than retributive intention. The flesh cut and the blood are thought to present an obstacle to the power of evil on the person.

In the case of the *osu*, the ritual of initiation effects protection of the *osu* by the deity having become a possession of the deity. The rite was also retributive on the people (*diala*) and symbolised the harm that would befall any *diala* who ill treats the *osu*. In this situation, the *osu* became a taboo to the *diala*.

As an adopted child of the deity, the *osu* could therefore eat the food of the deity and take charge of all that belonged to the deity.

The significance of the ritual of initiation into *osu*, therefore, explains

why there is much fear associated with the *osu*.

### Privileges of the *Osu*

The *osu* served the priest of the deity. This service forced the people to give them gifts such as yams, fowls, kolanuts, oil, cocoyams, fish, pepper, etc. The care given to them by the people was similar to the biblical saying that he who preached the gospel should live by the gospel. The *osu* regarded whatever the priest left in the shrine after sacrifice as belonging to him. It is only him who could eat with the spirits and he alone has the right to take and eat whatever was offered to the deity. Any non-*osu* who did that automatically became an *osu*.

Apart from eating with the spirits, the *osu* inherited much around the shrine. He alone farmed on the land surrounding the shrine. He alone could enjoy the produce from the fruit trees within the locality of the shrine. The sacred cows, goats, fowls, etc. of the deity, belonged to the *osu*.

The *osu* also enjoyed some immunity within the community. No one dared spill the blood of an *osu*. Anyone who hurt an *osu* to the extent of spilling some blood faced the wrath of the deity. The *osu* was not flogged by anybody. The *osu* often took advantage of this

immunity to become troublesome and unruly in the community in those days when its privileges were enjoyed. Since they were feared because of the taboo associated with them people would naturally keep away from them.

Just as no one dared get angry with a sacred cow or goat, so it was with the *osu*. A sacred cow could enter into any farm or household and eat up food items without being scolded. So also an *osu* could go to the barn of anybody and take as much food as he or she willed and nobody would raise an eyebrow. The only thing to do was to keep such food items away from the *osu* and any sacred animal. In the olden days when they roamed about aimlessly they constituted a menace to the *diala* (free born) who as a result avoided every association with them.

Sexual intercourse between an *osu* man and a *diala* woman automatically made the *diala* (free born) an *osu*. Consequently no marriage between *diala* and *osu* was allowed, a practice still in effect this day.

The *osu* were highly revered people. In fact, up till today, in some parts of Igboland everyone avoids quarreling with the *osu*. No one dares take him to the law court for fear of incurring the wrath of the deity that owns him.

The *osu* was also exempted from communal labour and was not taxed.

## **Social Stigma Against the Osu**

Perhaps, due to the unpleasant experiences the non-*osun* had as they interacted freely with the *osun*, the non-*osun* had to learn not to associate commonly with the *osun*. The free born did not need to associate with that which is taboo as if it was ordinary. What is profane should be treated as such and what is sacred (taboo) should be treated as sacred. No man would wrestle with the gods and remain normal. This is perhaps, the lesson the Igbo non-*osun* learned from the *osun* institution. Experience is known to be the best teacher. A situation in which the god came to avenge the harm done to its possession will certainly call for caution. Consequently, the *osun* became ostracised by the non-*osun* in various ways. Being avoided by the non-*osun*, the *osun* life became a life of isolation. He had lost the freedom to associate with the free born and stopped mixing socially with the non-*osun* who were in the majority. As a result of this isolation the *osun* began to be attracted to themselves and began to see themselves as members of a stock. They inter married only among themselves. Their offspring were included in the isolation. In fact, the offspring of an *osun* are more avoided than their parents who were once free born. This is because the offspring of an *osun* were

never free born. They were born *osun* and remained *osun* all their life.

The *osun* was not given any village title. He or she was not initiated into any society. He or she was exempted from the traditional rites of passage. The reason is perhaps that since they had rejected the affairs of the community, they should participate in the affairs of the spirits. It is in the light of this principle that they are seen even till this day. And participating in the affairs of the spirit, made people to avoid them.

The *osun* was not to fetch water or bathe in the same stream with the free born. Touching an *osun* was believed to defile the non-*osun* or even kill him. The *osun* must not participate in the Igbo traditional breaking of kola or distributing or sharing palm wine in the midst of the free born at any social gathering which they were permitted to attend. The corpse of an *osun* was not given a traditional burial. It was carried away from the community and thrown away, buried or mangled in an evil forest (*Ajo ohia*). An *osun* does not become an ancestor and if buried in the same way as the free born the *osun* may carry his or her mischief into the spirit world and prevent the *diala* attaining ancestral status. The *osun* does not possess any *ofo* as the *diala* does, therefore the *osun* has no right to a proper funeral ceremony which is

necessary to usher the dead into the ancestral world. In the olden days, the corpse of an *osu* was buried at night. In fact, the *osu* in those days was to leave the house only towards mid day. This is to prevent *diala* meeting an *osu* first thing in the morning. This is because it was believed that meeting an *osu* first in the morning carried along with it bad luck for the rest of that day.

### Identifying the Osu

Today it is becoming more and more difficult to identify the *osu* in a city or larger community. Before the modern urban era, it was much easier to identify the *osu*. In those days the *osu* were found near the shrine of the deity that owns them and that section of the town or village ever remained marked out as the commune of the *osu*.

The *osu* could also be identified through the long or unkempt hair which he or she wore. Since the hair must not be cut as a sign of belonging to the gods, the hair soon over grew and remained so. If cut the *osu* was believed to die or the barber himself dies.

It has also been alleged that a characteristic odour wafts wherever an *osu* is. Today, the odour can only be recognized as that of *osu* odour by those people who are used to the odour.

Some *diala* claim that they feel some aura when an *osu* walks past them or when they come across one.

With Christianity and modern innovations the *osu* have hair-cut like the *diala* and their ears are no longer cut. The alleged characteristic odour is being neutralized by the provision of assorted types of perfumes. It, therefore, becomes very difficult to identify an *osu* away from anybody who knows him as one. However, some *diala* still believe that the *osu* aura and aroma are different from that of the *diala*. Some of the *diala* even claim that identifying the *osu* is a mystery. It is certain as they say, that when they meet an *osu* they recognize him or her as such. *Diala* claim to be able to identify the *osu* any place in the world. It is also interesting to note that the Igbo believe that every ethnic group has *osu* whether the caste is institutionalized or not. Even places, that do not have such idea among them, the Igbo believes still has *osu*. And whenever a *diala* sees one he or she "who had good village life" would be able to identify the *osu*. If this is true, then the *osu/diala* issue is indeed a mystery. It would be wrong to dismiss the above assertion as a delusion because spiritual matters often defy human reasoning. Many spiritual issues are better experienced than philosophised. People who dismiss the fact of *osu* need to think again. What is

important is not to dismiss *osu* belief. Rather, the solution to the influence of the system to this day should be sought for.

### Christian Influence on Osu Institution

Christianity came into the Igboland in the later part of the nineteenth century. It met the *osu* institution already highly developed and strongly adhered to by the people.

The initial converts to Christianity were the free born since they were those who were first preached to. This is because the free born were the land owners and the rulers. The missionaries got land to build their places of worship from the patronage of the *dialas*.

However, the missionaries' message of commonality or oneness of all, in spite of caste, attracted the *osu* who soon flocked to the churches. Following the influx of the churches by the *osu* the missionaries lost the support of the *diala*. The *diala* started to desert the church when the missionaries refused to expel the *osu* from the churches. The few who remained, avoided the *osu*, refusing to sit on the same pew with them. Some of these later left the church also. Consequently, the *osu* became more in the church membership with very few of the *diala*.<sup>24</sup> The missionaries soon cut the long and bushy hair of the *osu*. This stunned the

*diala* who had thought that cutting the hair of the *osu* would lead to death. This attracted more *osu* into the church. The *diala*, to deter the *osu* from going to church, introduced derogatory statements about "the *osu* going to church" and made mockery of it. But the *osu* continued to adhere to the church. Some of the *diala* began to dissociate themselves from the communion as they feared to drink from the same cup with the *osu*. Later, the *diala* elders of the villages met and decided that they wouldn't sit watching while their land was being polluted by the missionary visitors. So they incited the burning down of churches. This reaction was started when the missionaries began to make *osu* bury the *diala* as well as burying the *diala* and the *osu* on the same piece of land. Because of the strong belief in ancestorship, the natives could not tolerate such an affront on the people's faith in the after life. Even today, many Igbo Christians still believe in their traditional ancestor and the traditional concept of the after life and family (*umurna*).

It was the intervention of the colonial rulers that abated the conflict between the *diala* and the missionaries. With the coming of the colonialists came Western education and mission schools. The *osu* were first to flock the schools. The *diala* rejected western education

because of that. They sent only their 'lazy' children and the *ohu* (family slaves). It was when the *diala* realized the material gain from western education that they developed interest in it. This explains why most of the educated Igbo were initially the *osu*.

The introduction of the judiciary by the colonial rulers further helped to abate some practices of the Igbo society including the *osu* dedication. Quarrels and conflicts were to be settled in the law courts.

The colonial authorities also began to place the *osu* in governmental posts as masters over the *diala*. This was opposed by some *diala* members of the Nigerian House of Assembly. This eventually led to the passing of a law in 1956 abolishing the *osu* institution.<sup>25</sup> Some *diala* members of the House of Assembly strongly opposed this abolition and fought to see it repealed. Those *diala* who were in opposition challenged the *diala* who were in support of it to be first to give their daughters in marriage to the *osu*. Despite opposition, however, the law had been enacted and still stands. All those who were *osu* by the time of the enacting of the law were claimed to be set free and discharged including their children by the law. The Law went on to declare that the *osu* caste system was forever abolished and declared unlawful. The present constitution of

Nigeria makes provision for freedom from discrimination of all sorts.<sup>26</sup>

However, the enacting of law does not mean that the practise was altogether stopped. What has stopped is perhaps, the dedication of new *osu*. The discrimination and fear surrounding *osu* still persists even till today. For example, a one time governor of the Eastern state (Igbo) was denied a title because he was alleged to have an *osu* woman as wife. He was accused of contaminating his *diala* blood with that of the *osu* woman. Moreover the wife was expected to perform certain rites during the installation of the title. To the Igbo it was sacrilegious for an *osu* woman to perform the rite.

In 1983, the former leader of the defunct Biafra, Odumegwu Ojukwu, during one of his electioneering campaigns is alleged to have stated that "an *osu* would not rule Igbo land, there is now a mixture of Igbo species leaders. Every Igbo man knows that some among them have no claim to leadership because their fathers were objects of rituals and do not qualify for public office. I mean the *osu*."<sup>27</sup> This statement from such a public figure goes further to show the extent to which the constitution has failed to effect any changes in the fears and beliefs surrounding the *osu* system. In fact, this tenacious cleavage to the *osu* beliefs is such that even a wealthy *osu* is worth

nothing before a *diala* in Igboland today. Thus did Ezeala ask the question "Can the Igbo man be a Christian, in view of the *osu* caste system?"<sup>28</sup> This question is indeed vital because even the Igbo clergy who preach equality of all human beings, are also under the grip of the fears surrounding the *osu*. One clergyman after giving a powerful talk aimed against the *osu* system was told by one of the men in the audience to set an example by giving one of his daughters in marriage to an *osu*. The clergy (who is a bishop) quickly said he would never do such so long as the Igbo still rejected such a practise. In fact, most Igbo Christians who are *diala* are gripped with the fear of getting into marital relations with the *osu*. Some *osu* do reveal to the *diala* who proposes marriage to them that they are *osu*. This means that even the *osu* of today accept the fact that they are different. Yet any one called *osu* could go to court to seek redress.<sup>29</sup>

Is there no solution to this nagging problem? The writer thinks that there is a way by which the *osu* system can be stopped.

### Ending the Osu System

Many people think that the *osu* beliefs can never be rooted out of the Igbo mind. Some think that only a detribalized Nigeria will end the belief. Yet others feel that it will not be long

before the *osu* system will be a forgotten issue without, however, saying how this will come to pass.

Most people including the *diala* would prefer that the *osu* system were a forgotten issue. Yet these still adhere to it tenaciously. It is as if the mere talk about how to put an end to the system provokes greater adherence to the beliefs. This is, perhaps, because any mention of *osu* brings to memory the taboos behind it and its associated fears and dangers.

A number of life experiences point to the fact that the *osu* issue is not trivial. For example, it has been observed in Pentecostal and charismatic Christian ministries that an *osu* has greater difficulty remaining a committed Christian than a *diala*. A lot of spiritual battle ensues once an *osu* becomes 'born again.' Worse still if it is the situation when the *osu* is to be delivered from ownership of these spirit forces. There are even cases of the death of some such converts mysteriously. It takes some special personal experience to discern that such a convert was being claimed back by the deity that owns him or her consequently, the spiritual battle. The author wishes to add that through personal experiences in this ministry he agrees with the Igbo belief that the *osu* perhaps exists even among tribes and races who did not have the institution.

An example is his encounter with a co-traveler in the train during one of his evangelistic trips in the Yoruba part of Nigeria. While on the journey he began to preach to one of the men sitting on the same chair with him. The man claimed to have been 'born again.' He introduced himself, fully and gave testimony of how he became 'born again.' He also told of his Christian life including the persecution he was passing through at that time from his family. One striking revelation was that he said that his family 'like some other families in Yoruba land' was dedicated to a certain deity. According to him it took place long into the ancient past with his fore father. According to him on becoming 'born again,' he began to receive series of attacks which manifested in various ways. The cause of the attacks was unveiled to him first, according to him, "by an angel of God" and later by an elder-man in his village when he visited the village. In order to overcome the attack, he sought after "fullness of the spirit and deliverance" from his "Christian brethren." He claimed that although, he was victorious the attacks had not completely stopped.

The above information shows that total commitment to Christ helps an *osu* to dissociate himself or herself from the ownership of the deity.

Therefore, the *osu* fear and discrimination can be checked through preaching the truth about Christianity and emphasising the deliverance which the *osu* has in Christ.

On the other hand to eradicate the *osu* system from the Igbo would require dealing with the psychological aspect of the system. The fear surrounding the *osu* is the major problem. Therefore, if this fear can be removed from the minds of the *diala*, the *osu* system will die a natural death. In fact, it will then be a mark of stupidity and cowardice for any *diala* to look at *osu* with dread.

To eradicate the fear, the Igbo priests, elders and traditional rulers 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 ritual to formulate. So long as such a ritual will be aimed at ensuring cordiality, peace, and harmony within the society, the writer believes that the ancestors will welcome the idea. Moreover, the Igbo society existed as one before the *osu* ritual was started. Yet, as human beings started the *osu* through the use of rites so will it take human act (ritual) to bring an end to it. There has been no new dedications for ages and the old *osu* are no longer carrying out their duties as cult slaves to the deities. It is even becoming more and more difficult to identify an *osu*. The *osu* are not enjoying all the



privileges denied them in the past and have relinquished past privileges of *osu*.

All that remains is the fear surrounding the *osu*. This is what has kept the system thriving.

The fear surrounding *osu* cannot be removed by enacting laws for laws will only trigger greater remembrance of the taboos surrounding the *osu*.

Remembering the taboos will provoke fear of the *osu*.

The offspring of the *diala* today only need to hear about a caste called *osu* in their village and the taboos associated with it to be gripped by the same fear of the *osu* which had been in their parents.

To eradicate *osu* in Nigeria, therefore, there is need for a national call of all those Igbos associated with ritual acts to carry out a single ritual which will reverse the effect of the ancient ritual that introduced the *osu*. The society today has gotten too enlightened to still be adhering to such an out-dated belief. When our children and grandchildren are set free from this fear of the *osu*, the *osu* system will be forgotten.

<sup>1</sup>See G. D. Berreman, "Caste" The International Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences L. David Sills (ed.) Vols. 1 and 2 Macmillan and Collier Inc. (1968) pp. 333-338.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 333.

<sup>3</sup>M. Jacques, The Premise of Inequality in Rwanda, Oxford: (n.p.) (1961) pp. 136ff.

<sup>4</sup>In G. D. Berreman, op. cit. p. 333.

<sup>5</sup>Norman Anderson ed. The World's Religions Leicester, InterVarsity Press, (1985) p. 150.

<sup>6</sup>E. I. Metuh Comparative Studies of 'ATR Onitsha: Imico (1987) p. 61.

<sup>7</sup>V. C. Uchendu, The Igbo of Southern Nigeria New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, (1965) p. 11.

<sup>8</sup>Cf. O. U. Kalu (ed) Readings in African Humanities: African Cultural Development, Enugu, Nigeria: Fourth Dimension, (1978) p. 37ff.

<sup>9</sup>Cf. E. Ilogu, Christianity and Igbo Culture New York: Nok (1974) p. 37ff.

<sup>10</sup>Cf. F. A. Arinze, Sacrifice in Ibo Religion, Ibadan, Nigeria: Unw. Press (1970) p. 12.

<sup>11</sup>Metuh, Comparative, op. cit., p. 166.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 61.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Cf. G. T. Basden, Niger Ibos. London: Frank Cass, (1966) p. 36.

<sup>15</sup>Metuh, Comparative, op. cit., p. 165.

<sup>16</sup>Cf. Kalu, Readings, op. cit., p. 37.

<sup>17</sup>Testimony of Mr. I. Njoku 87 years, Oji-ofe Ukwo I of Atta Asukwuanunu Oral interview Stpe. 1991.

<sup>18</sup>The Igbos have four market days: Orie, Afor, Nkwo and Eke by which Igbo calendar is observed. Each Village has an only acceptable day when *osu* is dedicated.

<sup>19</sup>An example of such prayer is: "O god and father, kindly receive with good heart this special gift we offer you in this your holy day. Let trouble and sickness go far away from us, our wives and our children. May this *osu* dedicated to you bear all the bad omen in our place." This he does holding the *ofò* Igbo symbol of truth and morality. Mba Idika, "Osu" in Traditional Religion in West Africa, E. A. Ade Adegbola (ed.) (1983) pp. 23ff.

The osu is described according to the deity to which he belongs. Thus we have *Uramurukwa* (name of the village stream), *Udele* (vulture), *Amadeoha* (deity of thunder), *Ihueke* (yam deity), *Iyiala* (land or stream of the land), etc. All are referred to as *osu Agbara* or *osu Arusi*.

<sup>20</sup>Cf. B. Kahle, *Palestine Jahr Buch*, 8 (1912) pp. 150-152.

<sup>21</sup>Cf. Idika, *Ibid.*, p. 23. Unlike the Igbos, the ear of the Hebrew slave who preferred to continue servitude in the home of his master to freedom at the sabbatical year was to be nailed to the door post as a symbol that he would remain his master's permanent gift.

<sup>22</sup>Theodore H. Caster, *Myth, Legend, and Custom in the Old Testament*. New York: Harper and Row, (1969) p. 143.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 149 citing R. Smith (1927) p. 481.

<sup>24</sup>This was the case with every village where people were interviewed.

<sup>25</sup>G. Nwaiwu, "Osu caste, now against the Law," *African Concord Magazine* Vol. 12, No. 108, (30 June 1987) p. 16.

<sup>26</sup>1979 Federal Government of Nigeria constitution section 39, sub section 2, Chapter Iv on Fundamental Right.

<sup>27</sup>*Nigerian Statesman*, 10 Feb. 1983.

<sup>28</sup>J. O. L. Ezeala, "Can the Igboman be a Christian in view of the Osu caste system?" Orlu (Owerri), B. I Nnaji and Sons Press Nigeria Lit., (1991) pp. 21-22. See also K. Anoka, "Osu across beliefs," *Outreach*, Vol. 3, No. 1. Sunday, 28 July 1991.

<sup>29</sup>To avoid litigation some *diala* use different names to refer to *osu* in public. e.g. the person or people of the left (*onye aka ioa*). A people or person of the spirits, "*onye nde agbara*," Arab, etc.