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## Osu caste in Igboland

[Viewpoints](#) Oct 9, 2010

By **Tony Uchenna**

A vote against discriminatory practices in the name of Osu caste in south east Nigeria.

Osu caste system is an obnoxious practice among the Igbo in south east Nigeria which has refused to go away despite the impact of Christianity, education and civilization, and the human rights culture.

Many people have condemned the system which has traumatized many innocent people but the problem persists. But one fact is that the Osu system of discrimination is an outdated tradition with no basis for its continued practice and observance in the contemporary Igbo society.

Traditionally, there are two classes of people in Igboland – the Nwadiala and the Osu.

The Nwadiala literally meaning 'sons of the soil'. They are the masters while the Osu are the people dedicated to the gods; so they are regarded as slaves, strangers, outcasts and untouchables. Chinua Achebe in his book, No longer At Ease, aptly describes Osu thus: "Our fathers in their darkness and ignorance called an innocent man Osu, a thing given to the idols, and thereafter he became an . outcast, and his children, and his children's children forever".

The Osus are treated as inferior human beings and kept in a state of permanent and irreversible disability; they are subjected to various forms of abuse and discrimination. The Osu are made to live separately from the freeborn; they reside very close to shrines and market places.

The Osu are not allowed to dance, drink, hold hands, associate or have sexual relations hip with the Nwadiala. They are not even allowed to break kola nut at meetings or pour libation or pray to God on behalf of a freeborn at any community gathering.

It is believed that such prayers will bring calamity and misfortune.

According to human rights groups, some of the atrocities meted out against the Osu in Igboland include: parents administering poison to their children, disinheritance, ostracism, organized attacks, heaping harvest offering separately in churches, denial of membership in social clubs, violent disruption of marriage ceremonies, denial of chieftaincy titles, deprivation of property and expulsion of wives.

The Osu caste discrimination is very pronounced in the area of marriage. An Osu cannot marry a freeborn. The belief is that any freeborn that marries an Osu defiles the family. So freeborn families are always up in arms against any of their members who wants to . marry an Osu.

They go to any length to scuttle the plan. Because of the Osu factor, marriages in Igboland are preceded by investigations– elders on both side travel to native villages to find out the social status of the other party. And if it is found that one of them is an Osun, the plan would be automatically abandoned. Many marriage plans have been aborted, while married couples have been forced to divorce because of the Osu factor. Chinua Achebe

also notes this in his book. When Okonkwo learns that his son wants to marry Clara, an Osu, Okonkwo says: "Osu is like a leprosy in the minds of my people. I beg of you my son not to bring the mark of shame and leprosy into your family. If you do, your children and your children's children will curse you and your memory – you will bring sorrow on your head and on the heads of your children."

Sometime last year, a young educated Igbo man, a successful business entrepreneur based in Atlanta (USA) had been engaged to be married to an Igbo lady, who was a medical doctor. The Igbo lady was already pregnant for the man. During the customary family introduction, it was discovered that the lady was an "Osu" and immediately the wedding arrangements were terminated. The lady gave birth to a baby boy and now lives in Houston (USA) as a single parent. The Igbo man has refused any form of contact with the lady and his child with all the education, western culture, civilization and exposure to Christian teachings.

And not too long ago, I met a lady in a friend's house in Lagos. I was told that she was engaged to a young man from Imo State. Months later, I learnt that the marriage plan had been cancelled because the lady was said to be an Osu.

There have been several instances like that where young men and women of Igbo extraction have suffered emotional trauma as a result of this cultural malaise. And now the question is, why is it that this cultural practice has refused to go away even among educated Igbos? The reason is not far fetched. The practice of Osu caste system is hinged on religion, supernaturalism and theism. And Igbos are deeply religious and theistic people. Osu are regarded as unclean or untouchable because they are (alleged to be) dedicated to the gods. So it is the dedication to the gods that makes the Osu status a condition of permanent and irreversible disability and stigma.

The discriminatory Osu practice involves inequality in freedom of movement and choice of residence, inequality in the right of peaceful association, inequality of residence, inequality in the right of peaceful association, inequality in the enjoyment of the right to marry and establish a family, (and) inequality in access to public office. That is the crux of the matter with Osu caste in Igboland. If one may ask, could a right exist if it is not enforced? To put it differently, can a right exist without a specific legislation that provides for its protection and remedies when violated? Oddly enough, the victims of the Osu system do not have any legal remedy in Igboland. And strangely, some people believe that the humiliating Osu caste system is a part of the Igbo culture nobody should tamper with.

The Osu case system in Igboland seems to have changed the meaning of life for the group of people branded Osu.

The maltreatment meted out to the Osu has forced many of them to migrate to other countries, many development projects abandoned, marriages dissolved and pregnancies terminated. In fact, so many crimes against humanity have been committed against individuals and groups in Igboland in the name of Osu.

The Osu caste system has caused communal strifes and wars between the Osu and the Nwadiala in Igboland. According to the United Nations definition, discrimination includes any conduct based on a distinction made on grounds of natural or social categories, which have no relation either to individual capacities or merits or to the concrete behavior of the individual person.

Based on the above, I suggest that something drastic has to be done to eradicate this obnoxious system. There is the urgent need for all Igbo leaders of thought, the traditional rulers, the governors, the clergymen and all the people that matter to come together and enact a law outrightly banning the system generally in Igboland as there is no basis for its continued existence.

\* Uchenna is resident in Enugu.

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