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**Alternative report to the eighteenth periodic report of the
State Party Nigeria to the Committee on the Elimination of
Racial Discrimination**

**Rencontre Africaine Pour la Défense des Droits
de l'Homme (RADDHO)**

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Introduction

RADDHO [*The African Assembly for Human Rights*] has prepared this **alternative report** to coincide with the consideration of the joint 14th, 15th, 16th, 17th and 18th periodic reports of State party Nigeria to the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination under the International Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination, which will be reviewed.

RADDHO is one of the leading African human rights organisations with *ECOSOC status*. It participated in the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination Xenophobia and related Intolerance in Durban in 2001. **RADDHO** also participated in the International Consultation on Caste-based Discrimination held in Kathmandu, Nepal on 29 November – 1 December 2004.

This report consists of several parts. The first part describes the nature of the Osu Caste System, the second part focuses on its origin, the third part examines its socio-political implications; the fourth part considers the legal and institutional framework and the fifth part contains some recommendations for its elimination.

1. The Nature of the Osu Caste System

The Osu Caste system exists mostly in the South-eastern and South-central Nigeria called the Igbo land or society. The system is based on descent-based discrimination and it has close resemblance to that faced by the Dalits in India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, the Burakumin of Japan, minorities in the United States of America, apartheid in South Africa prior to 1994 and the colour-caste system in Guyana.

The **Osu** is a person sacrificed or dedicated to the gods in the Igbo community in order to appease the gods. Therefore, an Osu is a sacrificial lamb [Anoka 1991; Dike 1999 etc] .An Osu is a child, slave or property of a god [Obi 1994]. *Chinua Achebe*, in his book called *Things Fall Apart*, vividly and pitifully portrayed the plight of an Osu. He states that an Osu is 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 outcaste, living in an isolated area in the village, close to the Great Shrine [1959, page 156].

The people of Igbo land give different name to the Osu. It should be stated that in their social hierarchy, the Ume is the class of Osu, the Diala abhors mostly to interact or socialize with.

2. The Origin of the Osu Caste System

There are many versions of oral history on its origin. The lack of sufficient information in this area is due to the fact that people erroneously believe that the attitude of the society towards the system cannot be changed. Moreover, nobody wants to be associated with it for fear of being ostracized by his or her community [Isaiah Ilo 1992; Obi 1994].

In the past the Osu were either local prisoners of war or those kidnapped in communal raids [Isichei 1977; Obi 1994]. One could simply become an Osu by stepping into the abode of a powerful shrine [Arinze 1970]. Moreover, to evade the wrath of a community, a criminal could become an Osu by hiding in the shrine of a deity [Obi 1994]. Many of the ancestors of the present-day Osu people acquired their dehumanising status this way. It should be noted that people are not presently quite dedicated to god as Osu. Nevertheless, it was reported that in 1988 a woman from Onyohor in the Igbo-Ekiti Local Government Area of Anambra state, in order to appease a powerful deity, dedicated her daughter to the god of the Efuru Shrine [Newswatch 2nd Jan.. 1989]. The Osu caste system, which is a sad relic of the Igbo nation, is a dynamic offshoot of Igbo indigenous religious practice. Consequently, the system finds rationalization in Igbo religious beliefs and dogma [Nwosu, June 19, 1999].

Presently, one acquires the **Osu status** through inheritance and marriage. The Osu live at or near a market square of a town because the gods whom they serve, are usually located near the market places in many Igbo communities. Thus, the system constitutes a flagrant violation of human rights, segregation, discrimination and dehumanisation.

3. Social and Political consequences of the Osu Caste System

Perhaps, those who discriminate against one another as a result of the Osu caste system are not cognizant of its implications. Nevertheless, this form of discrimination has caused a great deal of inter-communal discords and conflicts between the Osu and the Diala in Igboland. For example, the inter-communal clash in the clans of Umuawuka and Emii in Owerri LGA, Imo state [Daily Sunray, 7th May 1993; Obi 1994]. A water project in Ifakala community that was abandoned because the Diala section of the town complained that the project is located on Osu land [Newswatch, 18th September 1989]. This according to them, makes the water unfit for drinking. In Umuaka community in Imo State, a skirmish occurred between the Diala and the Osu section of the community in the late 1980s [Ezeala 1992; Dike 1999, 2002 and August 8-12, 2002]. In 1995, the Oruku community drove the people of Umuode out of their land and as a result many lives and homes were destroyed [Agbaegbu 12 Jan 2000; Dike 2002; CIRDO report]. All these incidents retard community development by creating poverty and misery.

The Osu caste discrimination does not encourage effective social interaction between the Osu, victims of the system, and the Diala. The social taboo created by this practice denies them equality and freedom of choice. The Osu system is as repressive as the apartheid system in South Africa before 1994. According to Jude Ezeala, the Osu are victims of psychologically abusive and social imprisonment. For instance, in some communities such as Oruku, irrespective of their wealth and social status, local churches could hardly appoint a person from Umuode for a position of responsibility because of their Osu status. The people of Umuaka community in Imo state categorize one of its villages Osu and the Diala are socially and traditionally forbidden to marry or engage in love relationships with them. Whosoever violates this unwritten rule will be ostracized.

The Osu are not physically being slaughtered for rituals, or insulted and ridiculed in public. Nevertheless, they always have on them the dehumanising social stigma, which is a barrier to human relations. Like ethnicity, the system influences voting behaviour in the Igbo land. For example, conservatives might vote against any politician who condemns or advocates for the

eradication of the Osu system. Some communities even refuse to elect an Osu politician even if he is better than his Diala political opponent.

4. General Legal Background and Constitutional Safeguards

In addition to acceding to the International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination, Nigeria has acceded to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. It has also ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women. It has ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child and signed its Optional Protocol. It has signed the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. The legal mechanisms established by the state to combat discrimination are ineffective with respect to caste-based discrimination.

A law prohibiting Osu caste system exist in Anambra and Enugu states, covering the eastern region of Nigeria. But this law is rarely, if ever, enforced. Otherwise, no other protective legislation exists to prevent caste discrimination.

5. Recommendations

Caste-based discrimination against the Osu in Nigeria must be treated as an issue requiring the introduction and effective implementation of specific mechanisms that will hold the perpetrators of abuses responsible for their actions, and ensure sufficient compensation for the victims.

Effective mechanisms should be established to encourage social interaction between the Osu and Diala in order to promote harmony and peace in their communities

Specific mechanisms should be established to encourage the participation of the Osu in the political process in Nigeria because democracy and the rule of law cannot exist in any state where minority groups are marginalized.

Human Rights Organisations based in Nigeria should establish an effective network with the view to combat the Osu caste system.