

FAITH AND CULTURE: THE SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM AS A PANACEA FOR THE OSU-CASTE SYSTEM

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Abstract

The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria are a people blessed with a rich religious heritage. No tribe in Nigeria has produced more priests and religious than they have. Their liturgy is rich with all kinds of music that makes worship very soul-lifting. The only Nigerian saint in the making, Blessed Cyprian Michael Iwene Tansi, is of Igbo origin. Indeed, it can be said that the Gospel has taken deep roots in Igboland. In the midst of all these, one deeply ingrained cultural element casts a dark shadow on the Igbo. This unfortunate tradition creates a stratification system that divides the Igbo into castes. This work is an exposition of the Osu-caste System of the Igbo of Southeast Nigeria. It seeks to expose the ills of the system which amount to a grave affront on the dignity of the human person. The discourse begins with an introduction that sets the background of the study. Having clarified some terms, it discusses the Osu-caste system. It also exposes the indignities of the system against the victims. Then it discusses the sacrament of baptism according to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, highlighting its implications for the Osu-caste system. After this, recommendations are made drawn from our discourse and the work is concluded.

Keywords: Baptism, culture, human dignity, Osu, Osu-caste system.

Introduction

As reported by the Vanguard Newspaper of 19th November, 2018, steps to end the obnoxious Osu-caste system in Igboland appear to be gathering steam in a way never seen before. In September 2018, during the 1019th celebration of the New Yam Festival of Nri Kingdom (believed to be the birthplace of most Igbo groups), Eze Nri Enweleana II, Obidiegwu Onyesoh, abolished the system in his community. Earlier on, in July of 2018, it was abolished in Irete in Owerri, Imo State. Also, December 28th 2018 was set aside by Eze Nri, in collaboration with other major Igbo traditional rulers, to phase out the caste

system in all communities in Igboland where it is practiced. The Chairman of the Eri Dynasty Traditional Rulers Forum, Eze Nkeli Nzekwe, is quoted to have declared:

It's time to end this once and for all and unite our people for the new era. It's time for our estranged brothers and sisters who were sold into slavery to return home. We are more than ready to atone for the sins of our forefathers and reunite with our kith and kin in America, Europe, the Islands, and beyond. It's time. (Vanguard, 19.11.18)

The Osu-caste system, which is prevalent in most states in the south-east, discriminates against families which in the ancient times were dedicated to the local deities as human sacrifice which was required to cleanse the land of abominations. The Osu were mostly slaves and other categories of persons considered as “inferior”, as opposed to the “freeborn” or “Diala”. As outcasts, they were discriminated against and not accepted by the mainstream of society.

The fight for the abolishment of the Osu Caste System goes back in time to the days of Nnamdi Azikiwe who in his historic address to the defunct Eastern Nigeria House of Assembly in 1956, described the system as “devilish and uncharitable to brand any human being with a label of inferiority due to the accidents of history” (Ugobude 5). Thus, in that same year, 1956, the Eastern Nigerian House of Assembly passed a law abolishing it, though it was never implemented. The late Dr Sam Mbakwe banned the system in Old Imo State during his stint as governor. In spite of these and all efforts by clerics, political leaders and social crusaders to consign this system to the dustbin of history, it is still being stubbornly observed in many communities in Igboland and many people are still stigmatized for being Osu. Logically, there is no reason for this caste system to remain in these modern times, since slavery was abolished long ago and human sacrifice is no longer obtainable in Nigeria except as a practice linked to some diabolic cults, which is a criminal offence. Above all, the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria declares every person free and equal before the law. All Nigerians are constitutionally entitled to fundamental human rights, which include the right to freedom from discrimination and the dignity of the human person.

Our aim in this study is to examine the Osu-caste system as socio-cultural barrier in responding to the gospel values in Igboland vis-à-vis the sacrament of baptism. Let us begin by clarifying some unfamiliar but important concepts.

Clarification of Concepts

Because the issue at hand may be alien to certain people who are not of Igbo origins, it is important that we clarify certain operational terminologies that are frequently used in this

work. Let us state here that vocabularies in the Igbo language are not pluralized like those of English. Thus, some Igbo words retain the same form in singular and plural. Thus, such terms as Osu, Ohu, Diala and Igbo retain the same form in singular and plural. The context will always indicate the number.

i. Caste

This is defined by the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary as any exclusive social class, or a social system based on differences in family origin, rank, wealth, etc. Caste systems exist in a number of human societies. There is the popular Hindu caste system and the Masai caste system. In Nigeria, the Yoruba have a caste system and the Hausa tribe, with its *Hausa bakwai* and *banza bakwai* dichotomy, also has a caste system. However, none of these is as stigmatizing or traumatizing as the Osu-caste system of Igboland.

ii. Osu

This is a name in Igbo language which means 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" (Aligekwe, 137). Thus, the Osu were slaves of the gods and deities. The Osu-caste system refers to the Igbo practice of classifying certain individuals, families, clans and towns as Osu. It is a very old practice, beginning from the time of human sacrifice, which still exists today and often springs up when marital issues are discussed.

iii. Diala

This is seen as a freeborn or a free person; a person with, as it were, hundred percent right of a citizen and was worthy of that privilege. To be a Diala was to have the right to take any social title whenever one was capable (financially) of doing so (137)

iv. Ohu

In Igboland, there was a distinction between the god-owned slaves – the Osu, and the man-owned slaves – the Ohu. The Ohu was a person who was alienated from his real home through either war, kidnapping, congenial disabilities or juvenile delinquency. Such a person could be bought and owned by people for domestic purposes. An Ohu enjoyed his status as a Diala and only his movements were inhibited because he was owned and thus, until redeemed, he could not go wherever he liked. Some rose to positions of authority and one was even known to have become a king (Isichei, 47). Some Ohu however became Osu by choice for fear of being buried with their masters.

The Osu-Caste System

There have always existed different classes and distinctions within human society. Some of these distinctions are racial, sexual, religious and even social. The Bible, which has some of the oldest records of human history, shows the origins of human racial and tribal distinctions dating as far back as Pre-Aramean times, when God put confusion into the minds of the People of Babel, by giving them different languages (cf. Gen. 11:1-9). The human race has always found one basis or the other to distinguish between people. Some of these distinctions have been not only inter-racial or inter-tribal, but even among people of the same ancestral origin and those who share the same customs and beliefs. One form of classification that exists in some human societies is the caste system. The most popular caste system is probably the Indian (Hindu) caste system. The Hindu caste system has four major castes: the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. Below all these are the untouchables, who belong to no class and are seen as outcasts. The Hindu caste system was rigidly enforced and has lasted for two or three thousand years. It was enforced as law throughout the sub-continent until the adoption of the Indian constitution in 1949 which outlawed the system. However, it still remains a deeply engrained social structure, especially in rural India (www.friesian.com).

The Osu-caste System is an ancient practice in Igboland in Eastern Nigeria that discourages social interaction and especially marriage between a group of people, referred to as Osu (outcasts) and the Diala (freeborn). This is because they have dedicated these Osu people to the *Alusi* (deities) and are thus seen as inferior to the Nwadiala (freeborn). This system has been traced back to ancient times when people were offered to deities in order to cleanse the land from an abomination. Another historical narrative of the origin of the Osu puts them as rebellious people who simply refused to heed to the orders of leaders, elders or the decision of the entire community.

Writing on the origin of the name “Osu”, Onwubiko identifies such Igbo names as Osuagwu, Osuji, Osumuo, Osuamadi, to mention a few, and goes on to discuss the significance of the prefix “Osu” in these names. These names were given to children under the tutelary influence of these deities and spirits. Thus, Osuchukwu would be associated with the Chukwu oracle of the Aro people, and Osuji with the Ahianjoku yam spirit (Onwubiko, 24). He traces Osu-caste system to the practice of human sacrifice in Igboland. The Osu was a person sacrificed to a deity by a community, a group of people or a family. This was usually done in order to restore harmony in the community by pacifying the deity. Some gods in Igboland also demanded human sacrifice during certain festivals in order to remove the abominations that were committed in the communities during the past year. Since this was for the general wellbeing of the entire community,

each individual, irrespective of age, contributed towards the general purse and with the money, the victim to be sacrificed was purchased. As a result, everybody was involved in the sacrifice during which a victim was immolated or renounced as a living victim, carrying the iniquity of the people. Such a victim personified the rage of the god. His presence reminded the people of the rage of the god and the antecedent of his sacrifice (24). In the Emekuku community of Imo State, the gods Onuokwu, Onuabosi, Onuochasi, Okitankwo and Orumurukwa owned and demanded cult-slaves (Osu). During the Mgbugbauzo festival in this community, the actual dedication of an Osu took while the older Osu rededicated themselves to their cults. While the Aro people, who belonged to the cult of Ibinukpabi, popularly called Chukwu, were known for selling Osu into slavery, this was not the case in the Igwekala cult of Umunaoha, where they were called Umuosu Igwekala, with some degree of importance and were allowed to marry and live with their families. These two communities: Umunaoha and Aro had very powerful oracles.

In his attack on those he calls ‘Igbo animist clergy’, Jude Ezeala condemns the Osu-caste system in the following words:

The Osu-caste system is a horrible and debasing form of idolatry introduced by the Igbo juju priests of antiquity by which human beings were used in sacrifices to appease the wrath of the community man-made deities. The human are used irrespective of age or sex (Ezeala, 5).

From that moment, he says, the Osu became victims of indescribable indignities, discrimination and human rights denial, social exclusion, economic blockade and commercial quarantine. To marry them was a taboo and in many communities till recently, they suffer isolation, deprivation, contempt and humiliation. Ezeala describes some forms of Osu-caste practices. He mentions the Mgbeke, Mgborie, Mgbafor and Mgbokwo which were names given to girls born the Eke, Ori, Afor and Nkwo market days, respectively. Where a town honours its deity on a particular market day, the girl was named after the market day. She was considered a property of the deity and no one could marry her. There were also the Ume and Akwasa who were deemed responsible for low crop yield (6).

Some Ohu (slaves) became Osu by taking refuge in the shrine of a deity for fear of being used in funeral rites of their masters, while some miscreants, for fear of the consequences of their misdeeds did same to avoid punishment. Whichever the case, by opting out of the secular world into the sacred, one lost one’s rights and stand in the Igbo society (Onwubiko, 29). This practice is still very exists in varying degrees in communities in Igboland. However, while in some communities it is hardly noticed except for the marital quarantine that prevents Diala from marrying Osu, in some others it is still quite strong

such as in some communities in Enugu State that still dedicate their kith and kin, especially young women, to the Adoro deities, despite the progress of Christianity and the social and intellectual development in Igboland (Egekonye, 64).

The Osu-Caste System as a Violation of Human Dignity

After the creation of man and woman, “God saw everything that he had made, and behold it was *very good*” (*Gen 1:31*). Every man and woman is created out of love and made in God’s image and likeness (cf. *Gen 1:26*), thus emphasizing the immense dignity of each person. The human person is capable of self-knowledge, of self-possession and of freely giving himself and entering into communion with other persons. This is due to the unique love of the Creator for each human being. This is the basis for our commitment to defend the dignity of the human person. As Jeremiah says “Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you” (*Jer. 1:5*), therefore every one of us is willed, loved and indispensable.

The basis for the theme of human dignity, the bedrock of Catholic Social Teaching, is that humans were created in the image and likeness of God. Regardless of any factors or reasons we can think of, individuals have an inherent and immeasurable worth and dignity; each human life is considered sacred. This theme is about our radical equality before God that leads us to think no less of somebody because they are from a different place or culture, because they believe something different to you, or because of their work or employment situation. In the words of Daniel Groody, “Catholic Social Teaching believes that human beings, created in the image and likeness of God (*Gen. 1:26-27*) have by their very existence an inherent value, worth and distinction” (Groody, 23). Thus human dignity is something that cannot be taken away. Catholic Social Teaching teaches that each and every person has value, and are worthy of great respect and must be free from slavery, discrimination, manipulation and exploitation.

Human dignity originates from God and is of God because we are made in God’s own image and likeness (*Gen. 1:26-27*). Human life is sacred because the human person is the most central and clearest reflection of God among us. Human beings have transcendent worth and value that comes from God; this dignity is not based on any human quality, legal mandate, or individual merit or accomplishment. Human dignity is inalienable – that means it is an essential part of every human being and is an intrinsic quality that can never be separated from other essential aspects of the human person. Human beings are qualitatively different from any other living being in the world because they are capable of knowing and loving God, unlike any other creature. Belief in the dignity of the human person is the foundation of human ecology. The principle of human dignity is the foundation of all principles of Catholic Social Teaching.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church, in analyzing the dignity of the human person, states as follows:

The dignity of the human person is rooted in his creation in the image and likeness of God; it is fulfilled in his vocation to divine beatitude. It is essential to a human being freely to direct himself to this fulfillment. By his deliberate actions, the human person does, or does not, conform to the good promised by God and attested to by moral conscience (CCC 1700).

Thus, the Church affirms that the dignity of the human person is derived from his being created in God's image and it is in Christ that man is created in the image and likeness of God. It is in Christ also that man's divine image, disfigured by sin, is restored to its original beauty and ennobled by the grace of God (CCC 1701). The Church also states that this divine image is present in every man (CCC 1702) and the human person is the only creature that God willed for its own sake (CCC 1703). By this the Church affirms that no human being is to be seen or used as a means to an end. Every person has the right to self-fulfillment and this condemns any form of exploitation of the human person for whatever reason.

Echoing the dignity of the human person, the Second Vatican Council proceeds to condemn anything inimical to the life and dignity of the human person in these words:

Furthermore, whatever is opposed to life itself, such as any type of murder, genocide, abortion, euthanasia or willful self-destruction, whatever violates the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, torments inflicted on body or mind, attempts to coerce the will itself; whatever insults human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children; as well as disgraceful working conditions, where men are treated as mere tools for profit, rather than as free and responsible persons; all these things and others of their like are infamies indeed. They poison human society, but they do more harm to those who practice them than those who suffer from the injury. Moreover, they are supreme dishonor to the Creator (*Gaudium et Spes* 27).

Against this backdrop, it is right to say that the Osu-caste system is a total violation of everything the Church stands for on issues of human dignity. Every human being has an inherent and inalienable dignity by virtue of being created *imago Dei*. This dignity is irrespective of race, tribe, creed, or social class and no human being has the power or right to classify another as less than himself under any pretext whatsoever. To do so is be an affront on the Creator himself, in whose image all were created equal. The Osu are confined to a state of permanent and irreversible disability and subjected to the worst

forms of abuse and discrimination. In ancient times, they are forced to live separately from the freeborn and lived close to the shrines and marketplaces. They are not allowed to have any form of social relations with the Diala. They may not break kolanuts during meetings or pour libations or pray to the gods on behalf of the freeborn at any communal gathering.

An Osu cannot marry a freeborn. This is one major reason why there are investigations in Igboland whenever marriages are announced. When two people want to get married, it is customary for elders from both families to travel in order to conduct investigations about the social status of the family, to avoid bringing an outcast into the family. Though Christianity is the predominant religion for the Igbos, many still consider it a taboo in Igboland for a slave and descendant of slaves to be offered or taken for marriage by a free-born. Free-born men and women are expected to investigate the origins and social class of an individual to be certain he/she is not an Osu before contracting marriage. Some marriage proceedings have been stopped simply because, upon investigation, it was discovered either family descended from an Osu ancestry.

With the advent of modernization in Igboland, many people have criticized the Osu-Caste System as a violation of fundamental human rights. Some scholars have even likened the Osu system to slavery and insisted that it should be abolished. Unfortunately, this system is still practiced in some parts of Igboland. The ill-treatment meted out to the Osu has forced many of them to abandon marriages. Some have committed crimes against humanity in a bid to fight back. Many have also migrated to other countries where their basic human rights will be better respected. Indeed, abolishing the Osu-caste system will help to restore the inalienable dignity of human beings; it will reduce unnecessary conflicts and promote peaceful relations in society.

The Sacrament of Baptism

We shall now discuss the sacrament of Baptism as outlined by the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

1213 Holy Baptism is the basis of the whole Christian life, the gateway to life in the Spirit (*vitae spiritualis ianua*), and the door which gives access to the other sacraments. Through Baptism we are freed from sin and reborn as sons of God; we become members of Christ, are incorporated into the Church and made sharers in her mission: "Baptism is the sacrament of regeneration through water in the word."⁵

Baptism is the first sacrament of initiation and the gateway to the other sacraments. Through baptism, the catechumen is cleansed from original sin as inherited from our first

parents. In baptism, the catechumen is invited to participate in the life of Christ and his Church. Thus the two principal effects are purification from sins and new birth in the Holy Spirit (CCC 1262).

1265 Baptism not only purifies from all sins, but also makes the neophyte "a new creature," an adopted son of God, who has become a "partaker of the divine nature," member of Christ and co-heir with him, and a temple of the Holy Spirit.

Baptism is also the sacrament of rebirth, calling the faithful to a higher life by participating in the life of God "... to all who received him, who believed in the power of his name, he gave power to become children of God." (John 1:12). In baptism, we are all adopted as members of God's household, where everyone is treated as a firstborn. This was the essence of the incarnation. That by becoming one with us, Christ has made us one with God. Baptism therefore exalts us to a new dignity; the dignity of the children of God. "In the human nature united to himself, the Son of God, by overcoming death through his own death and resurrection, redeemed man and changed him into a new creation" (*Lumen Gentium* 7).

1267 Baptism makes us members of the Body of Christ: "Therefore... we are members one of another." Baptism incorporates us into the Church. From the baptismal fonts is born the one People of God of the New Covenant, which transcends all the natural or human limits of nations, cultures, races, and sexes: "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body."

Baptism makes the faithful members of Christ's body, the Church. Christ is the head of his body, the Church. The Church is the Mystical Body of Christ, *Mystici Corporis Christi*, in which all the baptized are unified into one whole. Through the Church, Christ continues to nurture the souls of the all the baptized. In the Church, all the baptized are one and equal in the sight of God. There is therefore no distinction based on race, sex, or social class. Everyone is equal in the sight of God. Hierarchy in the Church is only a matter of service, hence the Pope's title *servus servorum Dei*, the servant of the servants of God. "There is therefore no Jew or gentile, no slave or freeborn, no male or female, for you are all one in Christ" (Gal. 3:28). Baptism into the body of Christ therefore admits no distinctions whatsoever, but unites all the faithful into one race, the Chosen People of God.

1268 The baptized have become "living stones" to be "built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood." By Baptism they share in the priesthood of Christ, in his prophetic and royal mission. They are "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that they may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called them out of darkness into his marvelous light." Baptism gives a share in the common priesthood of all believers.

Baptism initiates the faithful into the royal priesthood of Christ, as prophets and apostles. As prophets, they are called to speak on behalf of Christ, reading and interpreting the signs of the times. As apostles they are invited to carry out his message of salvation to the ends of the earth, bearing witness to him in the world, amidst all the challenges of the times. The Church is missionary by nature (*Ad Gentes Divinitus 2*) and all the faithful are mandated to share in her one missionary activity, which has its origin in the mission of the Son and Holy Spirit (*Ad Gentes Divinitus 2*). All members of the Church are impelled to engage in this activity because of the charity with which they love God and by which they desire to share with all men in the spiritual goods of this life and the life to come (*Ad Gentes Divinitus 7*).

1271 Baptism constitutes the foundation of communion among all Christians, including those who are not yet in full communion with the Catholic Church: "For men who believe in Christ and have been properly baptized are put in some, though imperfect, communion with the Catholic Church. Justified by faith in Baptism, they are incorporated into Christ; they therefore have a right to be called Christians, and with good reason are accepted as brothers by the children of the Catholic Church." "Baptism therefore constitutes the sacramental bond of unity existing among all who through it are reborn."

Through baptism, all the faithful, now children of God, are invited to full communion with the Church and with one another. Through faith, they are justified in baptism and incorporated into Christ's body. They are all united as brothers and sisters in the bosom of their mother, the Church, who is the bride of Christ. All the baptized are obliged to embrace one another as siblings of the same parents, showing love to one another just as Christ has shown to us (cf. John 13:34).

Through baptism, we are formed in the likeness of Christ (*Lumen Gentium 7*). All the baptized assume a new dignity by virtue of their baptism. By the regeneration of baptism, the faithful become children of God, co-heirs with Christ, members of the Church and brothers and sisters. There is no room of discriminations of any kind among the faithful, especially the sort that violates the very dignity of the human person, created in the image of God and redeemed by Christ's incarnation, death and resurrection. Every member of the faithful is duty-bound to resist any form of violation of the dignity of another under the Osu-caste system, for the affront on the dignity of one is the affront on the dignity of all.

Recommendations

One major socio-cultural barrier in responding to the Gospel values is the ancient and strongly ingrained Osu-caste system of the Igbo. Only recently, a very respectable woman in the Church asked me to encourage her first son to find a girl for marriage, but on the condition that she is not Osu. It was only then that I was told that the first and last girl he introduced to his mother, despite meeting every criterion of beauty, education, hard work good behaviour, was rejected by his mother for the “crime” of being Osu. This, among other instances, shows how much more work has to be done to see to the end of this obnoxious belief and practice. While we rely on the government to enact and enforce laws against the Osu-caste system, let me make the following recommendations:

- i. The Church has shown great example in her fight against the Osu-caste system. However, there is still a lot to be done. She must continue be at the forefront of the battle against the discriminatory Osu practice, because it contravenes every divine teaching on the dignity of the human person as contained in scriptures and Catholic social teaching. Thus, the Church in Igboland should be able to make legislations with penalties for anyone who refuses to let go of this evil tradition, after all, you are either a Christian or not.
- ii. The power of the sacraments should be emphasized. The sacrament of Baptism should be recognized for what it is: renewal. Anyone who is baptized is a new creature and against such an individual there should be no discrimination based on outdated traditions. Baptism bestows the grace of sonship. By virtue of this sacrament, we are all children of God. Baptism makes us members of the Church and any discrimination against one, for whatever reason, is discrimination against the entire body of Christ.
- iii. All those classified as Osu should see themselves as created in the image and likeness of God and consider themselves liberated by Christ, “If the Son makes you free, then you are free indeed” (John 8:36). By baptism, they have been born anew as children of god and co-heirs with Christ. They should, therefore, live in this belief and not let anyone tell them otherwise.

Conclusion

The tension between the Christian faith and African cultures has existed since the missionary times, when the missionaries, unable to understand some African cultural practices, wrote them off as fetish. One of such practices is the Osu-caste system which this work tries to address. I have always disagreed with those who feel that the best way to handle the Osu issue is to ignore it or wave it away as nonsense. It is my opinion that

nonsense cannot create the kind of actions and reactions that the Osu problem has done for generations in Igboland. This is because the issue has a cunning nature of lying low patiently only to raise its ugly head when it has the potency to do its greatest damage, this is of course when people are at the crossroads of life and important decisions are to be taken. We can therefore not destroy it with silence, but must continue to speak up openly on its intrinsic evil and dangerous implications.

The doctrine of *Imago Dei* is the foundation of the Church's teachings on the dignity of the human person. Humankind is the crown and epicenter of creation and the only creatures capable of responding to God's act of self-communication. Only the human person is capable of knowing and loving God. This sets them apart from every other creature. From this we derive that human beings have a special dignity attached to them by virtue of their humanness and not any individual quality or characteristic of theirs. Every baptized person is a member of Christ's faithful and deserves to be defended from anything that violates his inalienable dignity. The dignity of the human person, Christian or not, is the duty of everybody. *Et pro omnibus unam, ad majiorem Dei gloriam.*

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