

**AN ASSESSMENT OF THE RESPONSE OF THE CHURCH TO THE OSU
CASTE SYSTEM IN IGBO LAND IN THE LIGHT OF GALATIANS 3: 26-28**

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Abstract

In Igbo land which is situated in the Eastern part of Nigeria, there exists a social stratification into which people are born, (the free-born and the outcasts). Two caste-like systems exist in this part of the world: ohu (slave) and Osu (outcast). This paper examines the implications of Galatians 3:26-29 on the osu system in Igbo land. Galatians 3:26-29 is an eloquent rebuke by Apostle Paul to believers who are not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel. Conversion of Gentiles posed a problem for believers from the Jewish heritage. The question in their minds was, were the promises of God for the Gentiles also? Paul tried to correct this notion by enlightening them that both Jews and Gentiles, slaves and free, women and men are included in the term of the Abrahamic covenant. Our Church leaders preached against discrimination but no concerted effort is made towards its eradication. They preached from the Bible passage which says we are all equal before God, there is no Jew nor gentile, bond nor free in Gal. 3:28 and that one should not esteem himself better than another. But how applicable is this to the osu/ohu (outcast) system? This sickness has sapped deep into the mentality of the Igbo. We are very religious and of course, the most zealous Christians found anywhere on earth, yet, plagued by our inability to eradicate the osu/ohu system. This study adopted a descriptive approach aimed at elucidating that Gal. 3:26-29 is against the practice of discrimination and inequality as manifested in the practice of osu (outcast) in Igbo land. This paper discovered that the practice of osu caste system is barbaric, has great adverse effects and

needs to be eradicated among the Igbo. Paul explicitly states in his letter to the church at Galatia that men and women, slaves and free are spiritual equals as the children of God.

Keywords: Assessment, Response, Church, Osu Caste System, Igbo Land, Light

Introduction

The Osu caste system is a practice that promotes inequality between human beings among the Igbo race in the eastern part of Nigeria, fundamentally, the most endemic problem in Nigeria. This practice has withstood government efforts to eradicate it. God did not create any person superior to another. The question now is, why is this social discrimination among the Igbo? What is the meaning of osu? According to Uchegbulem (1994), the Osu caste system is an ancient practice in Igboland that discourages the freeborn from social interaction and marriage with a group of persons called osu (outcast). Osu's are people dedicated to the deities (Alusi) of Igboland; they are considered inferior beings and are usually separated from the Nwadiala or diala (real born/ freeborn). Nwachukwu (1985) defines Osu as a 'cult slave,' a living sacrifice,' an untouchable,' 'outcast,' 'owner's cult,' 'a slave of the deity,' and a 'sacred and holy being.' Dike goes on to say that the osu caste system is a societal institution borne out of a primitive traditional belief system coloured by superstition, and propagated by ignorance. In his view, it is absurd to categorize a human as a sub-human. This attitude is condemnable because it is a human rights aberration. According to Amadife (1988), the origin of the osu caste system can be traced back to the era when deities were believed to ask for human sacrifice during festivals, to clean the land from abomination thus leading to the purchase of a slave by the people. The osu caste system also has its origin traced to the Nri Kingdom. It is believed that the Nri's possessed a hereditary power and thus do go about cleansing various kingdoms of abomination; any community that refuses to be cleansed are called osu's. Another view on the history of the osu caste system centres on ostracism. Ezekwugo (1987) reveals that this occurs when a person or group of persons who refuse the orders of a king or the decision of a community are banished from the community thus resulting in the victim and its generation being called osu's. Over a century ago, some Igbo ancestors in their religious observances dedicated some of the less privileged in their society to the shrines of some deities. Some factors led to this which are some people who committed crimes deserving capital punishment, and others who were having undue oppression ran into the shrine of a deity for protection. Such refugees were not harmed but from then on, became osu by induction; marrying one who is an osu, using the same razor, drinking water from the same cup etc. In the past, osu's lived apart near the shrines and markets. Marks were left on their ears for identification and involve the dropping of the blood of the outcaste at

the shrine of the deity. Contemporary people have gone further to institutionalize the osu system, such now that the descendants of the osu cult having been dedicated to the gods, become the outcast of the society and together with their descendants' social disability or social stigma. In recent years, people are no longer dedicated to gods as osu and one cannot observe any difference between an osu and a non osu in physical features, behaviour, manner of speech etc. Osu is no longer given marks to differentiate them from the 'Diala' freeborn. However, those living together in Igbo communities are still able to differentiate the lineage of the osu's from the Diala's. It is pertinent to ask at this point what effort the Church has made to eradicate this endemic problem in Igboland since the Church is an agent of change. The Church has been in Igboland for over a century. Today, a greater percentage of Igbo populace are Christians. Despite the progress in education, economy, and Christian enlightenment, the osu Caste System persists as a social sore and an enduring shame. This raises several pertinent questions, has the Church made any attempt to change the situation?

In 1956, a political effort was made by the then-eastern government of Eastern Nigeria to eradicate the osu system by legislation. This has not changed the situation because it is still a vital force in all Igbo communities. This paper aims to examine and evaluate the situation of discrimination faced by the early Church which led Paul to address them in Galatians 3:26-29 and apply the lessons learnt as part of the solution to the endemic problem of osu in Igboland. Galatians 3: 26- 29 is a source of great debate among biblical scholars. The debate centres on how far the principle of believer equality is to be applied. In other words, in what way are we the same? Arazu (1986) quoting Lewis Johnson relates the views of some who say that equality is limited to the spiritual realm; men and women are "equal in Christ," however, in the church equality between believers "coexists" with divinely mandated hierarchy. On the contrary, Ubesie, (1991) asserts that some people agree that equality is a spiritual truth, but being spiritual does not alter its impact on this present life. The proof is seen in the fact that Paul is offering that spiritual truth as the solution to a very down-to-earth problem. His letter to the Galatians is an eloquent rebuke to believers who are not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel. Paul even calls this spiritual truth a "rule" and promises peace and mercy if they follow it.

The Osu Caste System in Igbo

Igbo have two classes of people; the Diala (free-born) and Osu (cult slave). The Diala's are the sons of the soil or as their name implies masters in the land. The Osu's are those who come from families dedicated to the gods of the land. They are regarded as slaves, strangers, outcasts, ritually unclean and therefore untouchable. What made them osu was either that their progenitor was sacrificed to a deity as a cult slave or being threatened

with the option of execution or sold to slave dealers by an unmerciful creditor or their fore-fathers ran into a shrine of a deity for life-long refuge. To grant such refuge the priest of the shrine would either shoot a gun or beat a metal gong (Igbugbo) four times in the presence of other witnesses. It was one of these reasons that made the victim and his posterity enters into a special negative citizenship of the community. With this in place, the whole family became outcasts. Initially, the practice and treatment were very obnoxious and inhuman; hence Uchendu (1956) described the treatment against Osu succinctly:

The Osu were generally known as people who had been sacrificed to the gods of Igbo land, descendants of people who have sacrificed to the gods hundreds of years ago. Such people and their families were shunned in society, banished from communal land, banned from active participation in village life and refused the right to marry anyone who was from the family of a freeborn. They were banned from participating in any form of social activity. They had no land of their own. They lived in the shrine of the gods, or within market squares, and were forced to farm the land close to the road. The general belief was that they had been dedicated to the gods and that they belonged to the gods and not to the world of human beings. They were defined as a cult slave of the deities. They assisted the high priest of the traditional religion to serve the deities or the gods in their shrines.

Based on this belief the Diala treat them as second-class citizens and visibly discriminate against them in many ways. Some of these ways include;

Traditional Kola Breaking and Libation Prayers

Breaking of kola nut is a cultural practice exclusively done by men, women are not allowed to break the kola nor say the kola prayer let alone pour libation. Diala will not eat kola broken by Osu. Kolanut plays a significant role in Igbo society. Kolanut is at the centre of Igbo culture and theology and to deny a man the right to break kola nut was tantamount to denying him the rights that made him a man. Arinze (1970) reveals that it was an anomaly for a person to give kola nut to an osu either privately or in the presence of a visitor or even to show the kola nut to an osu. An osu was forbidden from giving kola nut to a Diala who visits him.

Marriage and Sexual Relationship

The discrimination against the osu in marital and sexual relationships appears to be worse than discrimination in other areas. The marriage of intending couples has been abruptly terminated for the simple reason that one of them came from a caste family. Onwubiko (1993) reported the case of Emeka, a Spain-based bachelor from Amichi town and

Amarachi, a spinster from Igboukwu town all from Anambra State, Nigeria whose marital plan was shattered in 2012 by the refusal of Amarachi's family after finding out through investigation that Emeka is from osu family. Amarachi's disappointment could be seen in her words:

Because we loved each other and wanted the marriage to work out, we did everything possible. For instance, we visited a Rev Father in our village church and the traditional ruler of my village. Our Rev Father even advised us that the only way he could wed us in the church was for us to go to a court and pay the dowry there and then collect evidence of payment that we are married. He said with that, he would have a reason to wed us. However, all the efforts we made did not yield any positive results.

There have been several instances where some Igbo young men and women have suffered heartbreaks and emotional traumas as a result of this cultural disease.

Titles, Honors and Social Recognitions

Social recognition in form of titles, honours and awards is given to illustrious sons and daughters as a way of acknowledging their outstanding contributions to the welfare of society. There are also the traditional Ozo and Nze title societies which wealthy individuals are initiated into. It is the highest social status an Igbo can attain in the communities where it operates. The highest traditional and political position is Eze or Igwe (title for village traditional ruler). No osu is allowed to become a member of any because of the stigma. Dureke (1985) reports a case where a chief in Imo State was dethroned in 1997 because he was from Osu family. "In 1997, a person alleged to be an Osu was made a chief in a community in Imo State. But six months later, the community was engulfed in a crisis. And when the case was brought to the court, the presiding judge noted that though the abolition of Osu caste system was in the statute, it was an unenforceable law. The chief was dethroned so that peace would reign in the community".

Blood Transfusion

Blood transfusion can be rejected by a Diala if he finds out it is donated by somebody from Osu family simply because of the belief that blood donated by an o Osu will contaminate a freeborn.

Burial Rites and Restricted Residential Areas

Some Igbo communities still do not allow Diala to bury an Osu. Burial is not just a simple affair which can be done at the wish of every family. Anyichie said, "each community has rules governing where the grave will be dug, who will dig it and who will do the internment. A Diala is not permitted by native law to bury an Osu and vice versa". In some communities, the Osu's are limited to a particular area where they can build their

residential quarters. Diala's do not easily sell land to them because that would mean giving them the privilege to live closer to the freeborn thereby making a leeway for them to move out of the stigmatized zone. Generally, treatments given to Osu's are so bad that those innocently and accidentally born in stigmatized families would not want their future generation to be born into a family called Osu. Ezeala reported the case of a brilliant professor who refused to marry till he died because of the discrimination he and his family suffered as a result of coming from a family tagged Osu. Igwebuikwe (1986) outlined the atrocities meted out to the Osu in Igboland. They include parents administering poison to their children, disinheritance, ostracism, organized attack, 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 etc.

Method of Dedicating an Osu

In the above classes of Osu, the only class of Osu that goes with a special method of dedication is the one that deals with consensus dedication. Mgbobukwa reveals the methods and processes involved in dedicating an Osu succinctly:

In Igboland, to dedicate an Osu, a diviner will be called who will reveal the mindset of the gods. If by his words it is obvious that the gods need a human sacrifice, The people having bought or kidnapped the sacrificial person will quickly bring him to the deity (IHU ARUSI) and the chief priest (Onyeisi Nchujaja) will give the slave some of the properties of the shrine to handle (properties like a clay pot, stone etc) which simply means that the slave has exchanged his person and forfeited his right, liberty and freedom with the property of the deity he is holding. The slave will nevertheless be asked to make certain citations before the deity and the entire people present. After the citation, the chief priest will cut his or her ear or any part of the slave's body and sprinkle the blood on the stones and other properties around the shrine. After these series of ritual sacrifices, the person becomes an Osu instantly, and when he wishes to marry, he will marry another Osu woman elsewhere and like that they will spread into Osu village.

How to Identify an Osu

An Osu especially those whose dedications are celebrated can be identified in several ways. For instance, most of them have cut in their body, either because their ear is cut or one of their fingers or toes are cut. According to Nzeako (1976) "Some parts of his body,

like an ear or a finger also cut to identify him.” Basden (1966) said “Apart from the identification by mark, one can also identify an Osu by their inherent devastating body odour. It is said that Osu’s have a very bad body odour that no matter how they try to remove it with perfumes, it does not go”.

Dike (2002) penned:

Another important way of identifying an Osu as we have said earlier is by the place they live though this may not be the case in all parts of Igbo land. Any group of people found to be living near a shrine, market, stream and so forth respectively are said to be Osu. Besides, Osu may also be known in some cases by their level of riches, development and education. It is said that because Osu do not have lands to farm and to do other local activities, most of their father gave their children to the early white missionaries who took them to their land and educate them, and through their education, they became affluence and they developed their people, thus, most of them are passionately rich and educated more than the freeborn.

Why Osu-caste Remains Unconquered Ground

Christianity through the church and its missionaries fought and conquered many practices based on superstitions and paganism. The killing of twins and “trial by ordeal” were stopped through the missionary activities of Mary Slessor, a Scottish Presbyterian Missionary that worked in the Eastern Nigeria region. The killing of children who cut their upper teeth was also stopped by Christianity. Many powerful idols like the Long Juju of Arochukwu were fought and won by colonial masters. The powerful Mgbafor Ezira, the priestess of Onyirioha deity in Ezira, Anambra State was conquered and imprisoned by the joint effort of the church and colonial government in the 1920s. The Igo mma ogo institution (a practice whereby female deities marry human wives dedicated to Adoro female deities who are impregnated through anonymous human male sperm donors) in Ala-Unor village, Northern Igbo-land was fought and defeated by white missionaries. The big question now is the factor responsible for the die-hardness of the Osu-caste after other inhuman practices have been decisively fought. Osu has remained unconquered because of the failure of the Igbo to discontinue giving Ala (earth-goddess) the power ascribed to it in the Igbo traditional religion. This is regarded by her worshippers as a powerful deity feared and worshipped in many parts of the Igbo community. In many places in Igbo sub-culture areas such as central Igbo and North-western Igbo areas, Ala is the owner of Osu hence they are called Osu aja ala (Osu owned by Ala). Describing the deity Green (1978) says:

Ala (Ani or Ana): This is the most common divinity in Igbo land, it is therefore generally the arch-divinity of every locality. It is regarded as the earth goddess of

fertility and the custodian of public morality in cooperation with the spirit of our departed and venerated ancestors. Breaches of public morality or social prohibitions and taboos (Nso ala), such as stealing from the barn, homicide, incest, infidelity, etc. are all considered offences against the community (Ala. Emphasizing the pre-eminence of Ala among the other divinities, Ilogu remarks, "One divinity, however, was beyond the capriciousness of Igbo men: that divinity is neither Igwe, nor even Chukwu, but Ala, the goddess of the earth. She was the one deity which no man or woman and no community could afford to offend, much less discard.'

Many Igbo Christians, irrespective of claims of conversion still respect this deity, participate in her annual festival, and play masquerade (which are symbols of the ancestors) in respect of Ala (earth-goddess). They still observe her dos and don'ts and seriously hold tenaciously to Omenala (tradition as prescribed by the land). Most of the Omenala are founded concerning the traditional religion which is seriously dominated by worship and reverence of Ala (earth-goddess). This is accompanied by a series of taboos which spell out prohibitive acts. These taboos are called Nsoala (what the land prohibits) or Aru (abominations).

Contravention against any of the taboos is interpreted as an abomination, a serious affront to the earth goddess. Marriage of Osu, sexual relationship with an Osu and shedding the blood of an Osu are abominations (Aru) forbidden by the earth-goddess. Nobody would want to break her prohibition for fear of unpleasant consequences. Therefore, it is this stronghold of the Igbo traditional religion on the people that still sustains the Osu-caste system. The above fear is not much of what the earth-goddess, left alone will do but more of the punishment many in the community, the majority being Christians will do to them by ostracizing them, disowning them, denying the inheritance right and dragging their name into the Osu-caste. This is the crux of the matter; it is easy to break the Osu jinx if only Igbo Christians in each community will have a unanimous voice against it as a vestige of traditional religion and a mark of its supremacy in marriage and social relationships among the Igbo of south-eastern Nigeria.

Jesus Christ as the Paradigm of Osu, Oru and Amadi Liberation Praxis

Jesus Christ means freedom, not only in name and symbol but also in fact and history. It is in Jesus that we come to fullest understanding of the claim that humanity is created in the image of God. Jesus' response to God was one of filial obedience or *philia* piety which denotes social religious love, or affection for friends. There are many factors to these most complex biblical themes. Regarding most of them, love as service, sacrifice, forgiveness,

caring, compassion, charity, and love in its social manifestation as peace missions had exemplary records in most of the societies they served and died for (Asouzu, 2007). But there was one vital element missing. Brotherly love according to the New Testament is a willingness to serve and sacrifice, to forgive and make allowances, to share and sympathize, to lift the fallen and restore the erring in a community which owes its whole existence to the mercy of God and the sacrificial death of his Christ.

Since Jesus Christ means freedom, human existence and human response, he provides also us with the central paradigm of liberation. Four aspects of this paradigm will briefly occupy our attention personal, religious, historical, and social. With respect to the personal sphere, Christ entered fully into the task of what it meant to be human, and he demonstrated the full meaning of personal feelings, fears, limitations, relationships, openness, preferences, loyalties, commitment, and conflict. So Jesus opens up to all persons the possibilities of life-affirming priesthood, thereby enabling his followers to discern that God truckles to no one's person (Acts 10:34). Jesus is the paradigm of liberation in the religious sphere, His prophetic consciousness was so entwined with his filial consciousness that who he was to become was the essential message of what he was to proclaim by word and action. The historical paradigm of liberation praxis is a search for equality between Osu, Oru and Amadi in Igboland. The historical Jesus brings near to us the meaning of history as the sphere of God's activity, and most powerfully demonstrates that God is historically active in Jesus and through us. As the paradigm of liberation praxis in the social sphere, Jesus confronts and challenges the structures of society which inhibit the full realization of what it means to be human.

Galatians 3:26-28 (KJV): "For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus, For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ, There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus."

Historical Background of the Text

Probably no other teaching of Paul has such a clear narrative leading up to its proclamation. The Book of Acts tells how the new church was begun in Jerusalem, and how the Christians loved one another and held everything in common. As the church grew, persecution began and the Christians were scattered. With their scattering the gospel spread, eventually reaching the Gentiles. Conversion of Gentiles posed a problem for believers from the Jewish heritage. Were the promises of God for the Gentiles also?

The Book of Acts tells a fascinating story. While travelling from city to city meeting with new believers, Peter reached the city of Joppa, where he had a vision from God

instructing him to receive Gentiles into the faith. The voice said, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” Upon waking, Peter was summoned to the home of some Gentile believers. As he was talking with them “the Holy Spirit fell upon them.” Convinced that God was truly calling Gentiles, Peter extended New Testament baptism to them. He returned to Jerusalem, reported on his vision, defended his action and argued for the full acceptance of Gentiles into the church. “If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?” (Acts 10-11:18).

That was not the end of the matter, however, almost immediately the church divided into two groups Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians. The division came about because a powerful faction of Jewish Christians refused to fellowship with Gentiles. These Jewish Christians insisted that Gentiles must first be circumcised. It had reached the point where certain Jewish Christians would not eat (the symbolic act of fellowship) with uncircumcised Gentile Christians. In some cities, Jews and Gentiles began worshipping separately. In Galatia, Gentiles submitted to circumcision to satisfy the demands of the Jewish Christians. Even Peter was going along with this development and had stopped eating with Gentiles.

Peter’s position in this matter was critical, he was the apostle who had received the vision and convinced Jewish believers to accept Gentile believers in the first place. He had eaten with Gentiles as the Lord had commanded, but when certain men came from James teaching that he should not, he drew back and separated himself from them. Paul, upon learning of this, opposed Peter “to his face” (2:1-14) and at the same time writes a strongly worded letter to the Galatians rebuking them.

The Implications of Galatians 3:26-28 on the Osu Caste System in Igboland

Paul who was of dual citizenship, Roman and Jewish, knew the innate human to look down on people. Roman citizens snubbed non-Romans. Greeks looked down on Romans and Jews with their exalted history and highly developed religion felt superior to other cultures. In the same way, the ‘Diala’s’ freeborn look down on the Osu’s in Igboland. Most people who profess to know God still hold strictly to this social stratification. They insist that intermarriage with the Osu will bring impending danger on the opposite side. This insistence on strict Igbo culture has brought with it a lot of side effects. Paul insists that Jesus Christ came to tear down walls between people not to build them up. In Christ, there is neither Greek nor Gentile, bond nor free, Osu nor Diala. Faith in Christ opens the door to acceptance by God. Paul is demanding change in the behaviour of the Galatians. Their mode of worship must match their theology. The Jews and Gentiles were to worship

together as people set free from the Law. Both the Jews and Gentiles needed to begin “acting consistently with the truth of the gospel.” The Jews were to worship with the Gentiles, and the Gentiles were to resist being circumcised. Kant (1898) asserts that Paul is not calling for a synod to meet and sign a declaration of “spiritual” equality. He does not want words; he wants action. Paul tells the Gentiles to stand for their freedom in Christ and to refuse to be circumcised; even though they were born as Gentiles, they have equal rights with Jewish Christians. “If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise.”

Paul suddenly expands the scope of the issue. It is not just a question of Jews and Gentiles getting together, but it is also about slaves and freemen, men and women, all kinds of people, all nations, all classes and both sexes. “There is no longer Jew nor Greek, there is no longer slave nor free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise” (3:28-29). Paul explains how with the coming of Christ those under the Law are set free. Speaking directly to the Gentiles who had not believed in God before, he said, “Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to beings that by nature are not gods. Now, however, that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and beggarly elemental spirits” (Galatians 4:8-9). Astoundingly, Paul equates the conditions of the Jews under the Law with the condition of the Gentiles who had been without God. Both are now set free by Christ. All humans are created equal and have an equal right to enjoy the comfort of life and the relationship with one another.

Recommendation

We want to use this medium to advise the Igbo Christians especially those that practice or believe this obnoxious system to annihilate the idea of division caused by the Osu caste system and import the idea of togetherness, oneness and unity both in the church and society at large, because with unity it is believable that both the Christendom and community will stand, but by division the people are doomed to fall. For the Igbo, let us invite the spirit of ‘Obinwanne’ and do away with ‘Obiakolo’. Igbo have a lot of external aggression from their enemies who have shown their aggression and wickedness to the Igbo in several ways, thus if Igbo are not united, they will not be able to defeat their enemies, and if they are fragmented, their enemies will find it very easy to defeat them. Thus, there is the need for them to always be one to fight their battles to finish. Like the sticks of a broom, if they are united in one bunch, it will not be easy for one to break them, but if one or few are singled out, you find out that they will be easily broken. Also, those who practice the Osu caste system should embrace the method of complementary

with which they will realize that each human being is as important as himself. With this, they will also come to the understanding that segregating or dehumanizing one fellow human being is evil as it hinders development.

Conclusion

A stranger may not fully appreciate the degree of discrimination, stigmatization and inequality the Osu in Igbo land, south-east of Nigeria face. Any belief and practice that make a twenty-first-century person suffer social inequality and loss of fundamental human rights should be jointly fought. The osu caste system, therefore, calls for concerted efforts local, national and international, and religious and secular authorities to intervene so that this stigma will be fought and won.

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