

OHU AND OSU INSTITUTIONS: UPSCALING TOTAL ERADICATION OF SEGREGATION IN IGBO SOCIETY OF NIGERIA AS A PANACEA FOR UNITY AND MUTUAL PROGRESS

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ABSTRACT

Ohu and Osu institutions in Igbo society in Southern Nigeria is a long-standing issue birthed by dearth of information and attendant confusion. This historical survey interrogated the possible origin of the institutions. It is a qualitative triangulation historical accounts, oral tradition and a blend of exploratory inquiries. Findings show that the Igbos are actually from the same ancestral and consanguineous stuff. Migrations for various reasons and African traditional religious practices made them change base and created a baseless segregation. Ohu and Osu institutions became a thing implanted in the mind, not of the blood. Upscaling the total eradication of the baseless, primitive and counter-productive practices is a panacea for unity and mutual progress. This will engender unhindered relationships in marriage, chieftaincy, leadership and other activities for inclusive development and regeneration of social and political life.

Keywords: *Ohu and Osu caste system, oral tradition, Igbo society*

INTRODUCTION

The abounding human resources and personalities in all parts of Igbo society in Southern Nigeria could be better harnessed and tapped for leadership and development of the people and Nigeria at large, if certain man-made obnoxious cultural barriers are removed. They include social stratification or inequality or class consideration, especially the caste system.

Ohu (a secular slavery) and *Osu* (a ritual slavery) systems in Igbo society (Nwanunohi, 1992) were erroneously started and practiced by forebears, ancestors, or progenitors in many parts of Igbo Society. It ought to be an archaic injustice in the 21st century, scientific and information age and common sense. This systemic entrenchment of inequality in Igbo society of old does not stand the taste of natural and social justice, as it is not only

baseless, but impedes progress. The *Ohu* and *Osu* institutions cause division and disaffection and also affect mutual understanding as well as inhibit progress. The negative stigmatization they go with hurt, cause ill-feeling, raise negative emotions and lead to fights, litigations, destructions, and other negative consequences.

This obnoxious discriminatory practice of caste system has aborted proposed marriages of possible good life partners of the same Igbo consanguineous stock. People testify that other social, economic and political benefits are sacrificed on the altar of the caste system, separatism and dichotomy. The study aimed to illuminate the path with ideas and research findings to settle most of the misconceptions regarding the *Ohu* and *Osu*

caste system in order to engender unity and progress.

Research questions

1. How consanguineously different are Igbo people of Southern Nigeria?
2. How vast is the existence of *Ohu* and *Osu* castes in Igbo society?
3. How old is the practice of *Ohu* and *Osu* castes in Igbo society?

Theoretical literature

The Hilly Flanks Hypothesis of Robert Braidwood of 1948, The Oasis Theory also known as the Propinquity Theory, Tropical Forest Theory, and other theories on the origin of agriculture shows how the domestication of plants and animals domesticated man and led to rudimentary agriculture. It was early man's quest for better life that led to agriculture. Rudimentary religious worship was started by early men as a means of communicating with the supernatural. Human settlements and activities necessitated domestic help and other attendants. These two factors led to the first human non relatives living with both nuclear and extended family members. Specific factors that led to 'Ohu' and 'Osu' Institution include:

1. Primitive accumulation and primitive capitalism. This started as early men settled and the social contract (collective agreement for mutual co-existence) was reached to protect people and their acquisitions. It was primitive accumulation that led to the domestication of extra hands apart

4. How reasonable is the practice of *Ohu* and *Osu* castes in Igbo society?
5. How progressive is the practice of *Ohu* and *Osu* castes in Igbo society?
6. How has the practice hindered marriage and other socio-economic and political life?
7. How can the obnoxious practice be reversed?

from family members as men brought in non-family members for farm work mostly.

2. Traditional religious worships. Oral tradition and literature show that people were brought in as shrine attendants and dedicated to shrines, deities, gods, etc. (Eze, 2013).
3. Inter-tribal and inter-community wars. War captives were forcefully settled in victor lands.
4. Debt settlement. People were used to settle debts.
5. Slave trade. People were trafficked during the inhuman slave trade and resettled in new places (Equiano, 2007).
6. Friendship. People also moved because of mutual friendship and later settled in their new locations and formed communities through natural population growth (Nwanunobi, 1992).
7. Economy-induced migration. Peoples settled in other locations for long and tend to be integrated with the host communities. Eluwa et al (2013) captured this point thus:

Settled life brought about social organization. People began to store food, and accumulate wealth. This situation led to increased population and the growth of villages. Thirdly, agriculture brought about division of labour, social stratification and social control. There was specialization as some people engaged in craft production to supplement agriculture.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Man is a social animal and achieves more in association with others, deriving fulfillment from living in groups, especially as life and activities are appreciated (Idike, 2000). Man is also a highly mobile creature, using several modes of transportation from earliest times to date. Indeed, most people of the present generation and even the older generations are all off-springs of sojourners and migrants. Heyerdahl (in Ezeh, 2000) proved human migrations with expeditions to other parts of the world - a discovery that proved that human migrations started centuries ago and that humans would continue to move. Ancestors moved and settled in strange places.

The history of Ntuegbeneze – the progenitor and the tree, to which many communities in the present day Enugu State, trace their origin – is captured by Eneh (2001) and Onuigho (in Nwafor, 2013). The people descended from migrants that settled in the fertile valley that is known as Ogugu Town in Awgu Local Government Area of Enugu State of today. Love for the rich vegetative environment had made the settlers to inhabit and raise family there. The message is that humans have been on the move for favourable conditions.

Basden (in Eluwa et al, 2013) also argue that the Igbos are part of the lost tribe of Israel, as their culture and ancient

religion have similarities with that of the Hebrew. The tribe that is known as Igbos today lived around Egypt about 2000 B.C. and migrated down south, passing through Sudan to the area now occupied by people believed to be offspring in Anambra State of Nigeria. Dike (in Eluwa et al, 2013) posits that the Igbos are aborigines to the environment they now occupy but that movement took place from the ‘core or centre’ which to them is Awka-Nri and Isuama (Orlu) axis to other parts of present day Igbo speaking communities.

So, everyone is a settler or a part of the decent of a settler. One settles in the original location or moves a little or farther away from where the ancestors had lived. The push factors make people to leave their abode and move, while the pull factors attract them to other areas and environments. Indeed, the story of the human race is the story of migrations and interdependence (Udeh, 2014).

Occupying a territory together confers a community immediately there is shared values and mutual interdependence. Living together for long should create bonds and linkages not antagonism and hatred. Eze (2013) holds that historical experts tend to agree that the Osu caste system came into existence about six centuries ago.

METHODOLOGY

The study location is the Igbo speaking society of Southern Nigeria. Triangulation research was adopted for oral

tradition, historical studies, participant observation, and a blend of exploratory enquiry.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Ohu secular slavery and *Osu* ritual slavery are real, primitive and unprogressive, only existing in the minds of people and not in the blood in Igbo society of Southern Nigeria. It can be addressed. Many

communities have declared mutual brotherhood with their kins and even to all kinfolks and acquaintances. A few years ago, Ozallu town in Nkanu West L.G.A. of Enugu State had cause to say no to

segregation. Many communities in Anambra State like, Nnobi, integrated all her people (Eze, 2013). Oraeri abolished all forms of *Osu* caste and associated segregation (Ujumadu, 2010). Communities in Imo State and other parts of Igbo land have denounced this barbarism with its divisive and subjugating tendencies. Governor Obiano of Anambra State renewed the call for the abolition of *Osu* caste system and the evils it goes with (Ujumadu, 2019). It is only rational that we do it.

In modern times, people ought to think and behave like an intelligent community and to reform. A freethinking people think solution, rather than be part of the problem of this quagmire of mutual suspicion that retards progress. Thinking freedom, equality and justice to all is imperative. Upscaling and accelerating the journey to total justice and unhindered mutual relationship calls for stopping all stigmatization, discrimination, segregation, subjugation, oppression and suppression.

Discrimination is injustice. Racism of the Euro-American World is saddening and hurting. Apartheid calls for hate with passion because of its system of separate development in Southern Africa. Same apply to colour bar in some other parts of Africa in the colonial days (Kaunda, 1977). In Nigeria, complaints of injustices and marginalization from power and resources/development infrastructure in the hands of Hlausa Fulani Oligarchy abound. In Eastern Nigeria,

derogatory statements about/directed to people from some parts of the Igbo Society hurt. The insults to people rights and happiness ought to be done away with. Martin Luther King Jr fought injustices and discrimination from the late 1950s to 1968 when he was assassinated on April 4, 1968 after a message the previous day. All blacks fought against Apartheid in South Africa. Emancipation from political deprivation and dehumanizing practices is a fundamental human right just as right to life and other inalienable rights. All must stand up for justice to advocate equal access to all good things of life, obligations and responsibilities.

The position of the law and legislation

Baseless discrimination, unfounded segregation, palpable injustice and the likes enjoy constitutional abolition – see the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (chapters iii and iv on Citizenship and Fundamental human Rights respectively) (FGN, 2011). Discrimination based on one's ancestry or lineage and segregation based on who one's parents or grandparents are/were, or dichotomy on the bases of one's family tree is a crime in the modern world. National and sub-national legal provisions on equality, freedom, and justice ought to be embraced. Changing times call for adaptation to new social order. All citizens are equal in the face of the Law, the ignorance of which is no excuse for violating it.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is incumbent upon this generation to stop injustice. Fanon (1963) holds that every generation has a historic mission. It is either the generation discovers the mission and fulfills it or betray it. Men started the secular and ritual slavery; it is for men to end it.

Ohaneze Ndigbo – the Igbo socio-cultural organization – needs to urgently set up a high-powered committee to work on:

1. the project of stopping the obnoxious practice of *Ohu* and *Osu* caste practice;
2. stopping all other sorts of open and covert discrimination;

3. creation of awareness on all sorts of open and covert traditional discrimination;
4. advocate action on the part of the State Houses of Assembly in designing penalties against defaulters of social rules against secular and ritual slavery;
5. prompt legal instruments for recognition, honour and encouragement for unhindered fraternity, mutual brotherhood, friendship, and closer bonding of all sons and daughters of Igbo nation.
6. collaboration of Ohaneze Ndigbo with traditional rulers and elders to perform any ritual/ceremony necessary to end/terminate the unwanted, unwarranted and old-fashioned secular and ritual practice of *Ohu* and *Osu* caste system;
7. abolish inculcation of divisive and discriminatory ideas in our younger ones.
8. disseminate the abolition of the *Ohu* and *Osu* caste system in Igbo society of the Southern Nigeria beyond the Igbo society.

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