OSU/OHU PRACTICE IN IGBO CULTURE: AN ESSAY FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract
This paper discusses Osu/Ohu practice in Igbo Culture from the insights of the Christian understanding of the dignity of the human person. The practice of osu/ohu in Igbo society and its folk religion is an ancient tradition. However, it is one of the most dehumanizing aspects of human culture. It defaces the image of the human person as God’s creature made in his likeness. This tradition which still rears its ugly head in many ways is believed to have been abolished in different places. Today, there still exist modern ways of practicing it. The people whose ancestors were said to have been bought as slaves (ohu) in Igbo land in the olden days are still marked and identified as such. Even though they have been liberated by relevant provisions of civil laws and the potency of Christian faith, the stigma still goes on with them in many communities. The osu on the other hand is a cult slave, dedicated to the service of his owner’s deity. The osu could be compared to the untouchables of India and even suffers worse marginalisation. He is seen as a “sub-standard” human being who is not fit for the association and companionship of the free-born in the society. He is an object and not a subject, an outcast fit only to be sacrificed to the idol in order to appease the gods of the land. The findings of this paper reveal, among others, that the osu/ohu is still discriminated against today. Therefore, the narrative of its abolishment is unreal and untrue in many families and towns across societies. The robust advocacy of this work is the need to sincerely abolish slavery in its shades and grades in Igbo land and beyond. The methodology adopted in this work is historic-descriptive which means that the osu/ohu (slavery) practice in Igbo culture was carefully studied and analysed based on its discriminating indices and dehumanizing consequences.

Keywords: Osu/Ohu, Igbo Society, Culture, Essay, Christian Perspective.

Introduction
Before the advent of the Europeans to the Coast of West Africa, slavery was already in practice across the Igbo land. Igbo people enslaved their Igbo kind as punishment for crimes, payment of debts, and as prisoners of war. Sometimes, slaves were buried alive with their masters to serve them in the next life according to the obnoxious belief system. They were as well sacrificed in religious ceremonies and a relative adjudged to be a disgrace would be sold off by the family. This practice of slavery is different from that practiced in America. This is because slaves in Igbo land were permitted to own property and to move freely. When the trans-Atlantic slave trade began in the 15th Century, traders of Igbo origin (extraction) were kidnapping people from distant villages and selling them to the European slave dealers.

The osu on the other hand is understood in Igbo tradition and religion as a person dedicated to the gods or a god as its property. Unlike every other member of the community, the osu does not have freedom. An osu strictly speaking is not an ordinary slave. He is distinct from the ordinary slave (ohu/oru). He is a property of the gods and when dedicated to a god he has no hope of regaining his freedom. He therefore restricts his movements within the ambience of this shrine to which he is attached. This implies that he is a property of the particular god which he is meant to serve. The osu is a living sacrifice totally dedicated to the shrine and only death can sever this demonic bond.

This paper discusses the facts, the moral implications of this practice and the proper evaluation of this status quo in the light of the Christian gospel and message.
Slavery and Osu Caste System

As an institution, slavery was real and existed in primordial Igbo society for social and religious reasons. The institution pre-dated the missionary activities of Christianity and the advent of European slave trade. This concept of slavery as an institution in Igbo land is called Ohu, as distinct from Ume or Osu caste system” one can say without exaggeration that these institutions are as old as the Igbo community system. Generally no Osu or Ume was found when the village descended from a single stock because at this stage there was homogeneity. However as the descendants increased in huge numbers to become a community, from their individual and collective experiences they were able to get their specific history. Some of these historic experiences were sweet like community collaborations while others were bitter such as the institution of slavery.

The Osu was driven when the community had to ask why, when the community bitter experiences followed a consistent and repeated pattern. To this end Jinehu (1981:7), wrote:

In those days of total paganism and near darkness. It was common place to resort to ‘dibia’ to know why the chain of bitter experience had plagued the community. More often than not, the ‘dibia’ blamed the mishaps on the invisible deities. To avoid future calamities in the community, Dibia would recommend that someone be consecrated to minister full-time to the cult of the community’s patron god.

Osu caste system can be viewed from this perspective as an integral part of Igbo pagan religious practice. Osu means slave as well, but one distinct from the ordinary slave (Oru) by the single reason that he/she is a property of the deity. It was a folk religious value for the Igbo people to keep an Osu for the distinctive and elaborate care of a patron god of the community or of a particular kindred or family. However, as the level of sophistication in the society grew, the reason became naïve and simplistic.

The Osu or Ume in Igbo Traditional Religious Practice

Like the African progenitors, the Igbo were deeply religious. This is clearly seen in the establishment of several deities both in the private and public places. There was this absolute fear that marked the relationship between the people and their deities. While a typical Igbo person would receive favour from the deities joyously, he would not want to have long lasting dealings with them, lest he incurs their wrath.

In as much as an average Igbo person is enterprising, he may often go out of the community in pursuit of money, in total and utter negligence of the public or family deity. To avoid the calamities associated with this negligence, a contribution would be made by every adult male of the community towards the purchase of a slave who would be consecrated to the service of the deity. In order to avoid this yearly contribution for the procurement of slaves:

The marriage contract was entered into between a slave man and woman to serve the deities in perpetuity with their descendants. Therefore what the community cannot do for the deities in terms of care and worship, the Osu were commissioned to do or face the wrath of the deities instead of the community. (Omegoha 2006:15).

Slaves have distinctions in Igbo traditional society. In the next section, we shall briefly explain the types.

Types of Osu in Igbo Traditional Society

We shall distinguish, for the purpose of clarity the difference between Ohu and Osu as institutions of slavery distinct from those sold across the Atlantic and the Sahara. The Osu caste system is further divided into the ‘Ume’ and Osu caste. Even as the distinction however is made, they all come under one generic name “Slave” which Onwubiko (1993:19) describes as “…a person who is alienated from his home his only disability is that he is owned, he is not a free man.”
**Ohu, Oru (Slave)**

This type of slavery is not peculiar to the Igbo or the African people. It is wide spread to nearly all the races of the world. A slave seemed to be an indispensable element of a household, especially of the rich “and seems as an institution to have existed in most ancient societies. This type of slavery is opposed to the *Osu* that is owned by the deity or a god. The other type can be bought and owned by an individual. They live with their owners and attend to domestic chores as well as extra domestic activities. The *Ohu* (slave) in Igbo land cannot go until ransom is paid for his freedom.

**Osu Caste: This is divided into Osu and Ume**

This caste system is not common to all Igbo communities, but people testify in the areas where they are found, that it is the worst type of caste systems in existence. They are dedicated to the service of a shrewder god. For Jinehu (1981:15-16).

Perhaps the god to whom the *Ume* is consecrated is a “grabbing-god” who delights in destroying what does not belong to it while tending to augment what belongs to it by fair and good means. This quality is believed to reflect in the “Ume” which renders him asocial to both the “*Diala*” and the *Osu*.

They are avoided like plague because people believe they bring misfortune to the community

**The real “Osu”**

It is believed that this set of “*Osu*” is consecrated to a more benign deity/ies. This specie of “*Osu*” is further classified into public *Osu* and domestic *Osu*, depending on the type of god the *Osu* is dedicated to. If an *Osu* is dedicated to a community deity he/she is referred to as a public *Osu* whereas the domestic *Osu* (*Osu mgba-ulo*) ministers to family or kindred god/s (Jinehu 1981:17).

To this end, it is interesting to note that just as the freeborn discriminate against the “*Osu*” or “*Ume*” the “*Ohu*” or “*Oru*” discriminates against the “*Osu*” or “*Ume*”. The “*Osu*” or “*Ume*” discriminate against themselves. The *diala* feels superior when it comes to marriage and looks down and discriminate against the *Osu* and the *Ume*. The real *Osu* would be discriminated upon and looked down by the (*Osu mgba-ulo*). The real *Osu* would on the other hand discriminate and look down on the *Ume*.

As an institution the whole concept of slavery permeated into the fabrics, of the Igbo philosophy that it seemed, they could not do without the system. It is surprising that the influence survived up to the third millennium in spite of the impact of Christianity and her effort to eradicate this. Nevertheless, when we compare what it used to be and what it is now, one must rightly acknowledge that Christianity and the Catholic Church, for one, has done much and yet she has not relented.

**Insensitivity to Human Life and Dignity**

The debasement of the human person as seen in the Ohu/Osu caste system can still be experienced in various forms in Igbo land as can be perceived from the following:

**Slavery**

In most ancient societies, slavery was a vital part of the household system, especially for the rich. Distinction must be made in Igboland between the god-owned slaves-the *osu*, and man owned slaves – the *ohu*. The slave traders in their bid to depopulate Africa in the trans-Atlantic and trans-Saharan slave traffic, capitalized on the *osu* and the *ohu*. Tracing the origin of slavery in Igboland is two-dimensional, economic and religious. Human sacrifice had been there, the victims were often kidnapped people, war captives, abnormal children and the never-do-wells.

These could become a status symbol when they were bought and owned by their masters for domestic purposes. Let us therefore x-ray the social status and life of these slaves. According to Uchendu (1956:88):
The *ohu* is a person who is alienated from his real home… His only disability is that he is owned, he is not a free man. He cannot go where he wants unless he is redeemed. He enjoys the company of the people and is not stratified and discriminated against in the society, except in participation in certain religious matters like he being the priest of a deity.

His *diafake* status is acknowledged as distinct from the *Osu* status. The *Ohu* works for his master and lives in the same home with him. He can, if he is hardworking, earn money to redeem himself within a space of time. Through marriage he could be absorbed into the family of his master in which case it was not permitted to mention facts of his origin. A slave *ohu* in Igboland could carry on business, save money and have his own slaves; historical evidences abound pointing to the fact that;

Some *ohu* rose to the positions of honour and importance in their masters home in Igboland and eventually became men of great influence. The case of Jaja of Opobo, an Nkwerre man born in Amaigbo and sold for cutting the upper gum first, is well known. He became a king in his land of slavery (Isichie 1976:98).

African slavery was of a different kind when compared to slaves in Europe, Rome or America. At this juncture what is to be noted is that;

The *ohu* enjoyed their rights as “free-borns”, and when restricted, in some areas, from participation in social life, especially in politics (taking titles), it is because they were not free-borns of the community in which they lived. But they could become members of other association which had social rather than political functions in a strict sense. They could not hold offices in them (Nzimiro 1972:21).

In this vein Nzimiro (1972:21) was of the opinion that:

The servile class could not become the head (Okpala) of his (that is, of his master’s) lineage even though he became the oldest man in it, since it was impossible for a slave to trace his genealogy to the ancestor of the lineage he could not hold their *ofo* and as such could not serve as their representative. Slaves were in these areas, also barred from using or wearing various regalia.

Before the colonial era it is true that the *ohu* enjoyed social rights yet their rising above some particular disabilities, their total emancipation is a social evolution of significance in our time. Historical and archaeological evidences abound showing that the exercise of power over life and death by the master over his slave existed. This fact is much evidenced in the burial rites. Facts abound in the Igbo Ukwu excavation which was carried on by Shaw showing that: “a ruler or a religious dignity was buried in a seated position … and with several others, probably slaves at his feet.”(Isichie, 1976:12). It was a common practice in Igboland to bury chiefs and wealthy men with their slaves. “And those who could not own and keep slaves for their funeral rites had to purchase human skulls for the rites before they died. As late as 1911, Chief Oriaku of Owerrinta was said to have been buried with eight of his slaves, a matter for which his son who carried out the rites, was executed.”(Census Committee, 1973:9).

In the Nigerian village of Ukana it was a similar problem that faced the Administrative District Officer – Mackintosh as shown in the novel – Many Things You No Understand by Adora Lily Ulasi – set in Igbo village background. “The crux of the problem was how to understand the burial of Chief Obieze II, with twenty human heads. It was difficult for Mackintosh to see this practice as a local custom or to prosecute Obieze III, the successor and son of Obieze II, for murder” (Ulasi 1970:97). The colonial administrator as later instances showed, tried and succeeded in stopping this practice. Before the formal abolition of slavery in Igboland, it was true that the ‘Ohu’ had once risen against the practice of burying dead chiefs with human beings. In 1850 it was on record that a group arose known as “Bloodmen” that led the uprising. Isichie buttressing this fact wrote;

They did not want to abolish the slave institution and thus effect a transformation of the Igbo society by removing the slave status, rather
they wanted the ritual use of slaves obliterated, hence they attacked and “won victory over human sacrifice.” (Isichie, 1976:97).

With the new liberation crusade they initiated and with the advent of Christianity and colonial powers to continue their old struggle of extricating themselves from the dominating grips of their masters, the ‘Ohu had to capitalize on it. The powerful weapon in their hands for this was education. They were the pioneers in western education and the foundation members of the Christian village. (A home built by the missionaries for the slaves, the orphans, the less privileged and the outcasts) In due course of time this opportunity, elevated them and placed them in a class above their masters and their descendants. Buttressing this fact Nzimiro (1972:27) pointed to the fact that:

As education developed and eventually became the index of superior social status, many of the servile class who had already acquired it were able to move up the educational ladder to participate fully in the modern ‘open’ and achievement oriented society of Nigeria, and rise to the top to occupy responsible posts in the new political and administrative institutions of the country. Paradoxically, however, discrimination still continued against them in their communities. Wealthier and better educated Ohu were able to organize their fellows and demand the removal of some of these discriminations (Nzimiro, 1972:27).

This discrimination was officially removed with a bill passed in 1966 in the Eastern Region of Nigeria banning the calling and prohibiting any form of discrimination against anyone on the basis that he or she is an Ohu. In the socio-political context, this has not been practically realisable.

We can see from the foregoing that the practice of slavery is demonic, because it tends to deface the image of God in the human person. Even though this practice has been abolished, there is still a modern way of practising it. In the entire Igbo land the people whose ancestors were bought as slaves, those days are still being marked and identified as such. Even though they have been liberated, the stigma still goes with them. Even till today they are not allowed to hold certain functions in the village even in some Churches. The freeborn have even invented passwords they use to call and identify them, unknown to them, the slaves.

The Osu Caste System

Of all the classifications that described the Osu, Achebe most clearly puts them across in his Things Fall Apart. According to him, the Osu:

Was 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 free born. He was in fact an outcast, living in a special area of the village, close to the great shrine. Wherever he went he carried with him the mark of his forbidden caste, tangled and dirty hair. A razor was a taboo to him. An Osu could not attend an assembly of the free born, and they in turn, could not shelter under his roof. He could not take the four titles of the clan, and when he died he was buried by his kind in the evil forest (Achebe 1958:143).

The Osu was renounced as a person sacrificed and sacrifice naturally involves; a transformation of a person, object, animal from the natural to the sacred state. A psychological change of attitude in the one who provides for, contributes and offers or performs the real sacrificial act. This change of attitude in the case of the Osu effects and determines would be relationship with the people that sacrificed him.

The Osu was considered dead in all aspects of social life, even when his life was spared, anyone interacting with him was believed to bear a consequent social contamination and incur a ritual impurity. In this belief then, he could not attend the assembly of freeborn and thus he could not intermingle with the living. Not belonging to a common ancestral lineage is another belief that counts for the dehumanizing attitude towards the Osu. They are believed to have no morality and no after life and have no symbols of a common real and known ancestor, namely “ndichie”, and “ofo.”
This is why they were thrown into the evil forest and no formal funeral ceremony organized for them. They were not diala of the community among whom they find themselves. Since they cannot go back to their original homes in this life, it was further believed that they could not also trace their ancestor in the spirit world, and, as such, they could not reincarnate (Onwubiko, 1979:33).

Their very presence was abhorred and it was believed that people could not trade safely with them. To mystify their condition myths were invented. “It was put forward that yams bought from them, when planted, would cause the yams of the diala not to yield abundantly. They were believed to be rich and extremely beautiful as a special mark from their owner-god” (Onwubiko, 1979:33). They were stigmatized.

There were no traces of consanguinity and affinity between the osu since they were people from different and unrelated places, so in the exogamous institution of marriage that exist in Igboland they were allowed to marry. In due course they gradually developed, increased and multiplied into a social group, sharing interests’ common values and attitudes among themselves. The osu is conditioned to stay with, or chose the deity as a last resort, he is not chosen by the deity itself. He is not numbered among the hierarchies of those who own the deity. He performs no sacred function but the servile work he did, thus;

The duties of the ‘ndi-osu’ consist of clearing the compound of the god which as a rule, is in the market place. They must cut the bush and grass, and keep the precincts tidy; they are permitted to farm the land assigned to the god and they, alone, may eat of the fruit thereof (Basden 1921:249).

According to Green, (1964:158) “At times they can go on errands for the priest of the deity, especially as messengers of the god, to someone sued before the court of the deity, and in this capacity, they could collect debts.” The Osu became a state within a state and organized themselves as they gradually developed into little communities. They claimed lands beyond those assigned to them originally. This is because they took advantage of the people’s repulsive attitude towards them; they started equally working themselves for emancipation.

Among the Igbo who are mainly Christians by religion, this practice still exists in a different dimension. All accepts ephemerally that this no longer exists but life experience with the Osu and the slaves prove the contrary. Greater majority of the Igbo profess Christianity, partake of the same Eucharistic meal with the Lord, belong to the same charismatic fellowship; but when it comes to marriage this distinction rears its ugly head. The diala who marries them is considered an osu and treated same with them silently. This is a sign begging to be addressed because, “in Christ Jesus, there is no Jew or Gentile no slave or free born, no male or female, all are one in Christ.”(Galatians 3:28). Speaking on the eradication of the Osu caste system Kurunwanne (1976:17) informs us that:

Two groups are responsible for the continued existence of the Osu caste system – the sentimental “Dialas” who believe that it could be eradicated by resolutions and legislations. The second group comprises those who till now believe that they are Osus. No one in the first category has given his son or daughter to an Osu for marriage. It is only by this practical way that they help to eradicate the existence of Osu. The so called Osus on the other hand innocently continue to encourage the controversy or discrimination by forming societies like “manuwuotu”, etc in which no Diala can be admitted into their fold. In choice of marriage, they have never had the courage to approach any Diala.

It is the common responsibility of the Igbo people to see her lack, her indifference and apathy, her blindness to the plight of these people who still carry this insignia.

**The Catholic Church’s Pastoral Strategy to Resolving this Issue**

To tackle the problem of slavery and the Osu caste system, the Roman Catholic Missionary came up with a pastoral strategy. The method of purchasing slaves and opening Christian villages was adopted by the early missionaries. This approach won the approval of *propaganda fide* (the mission for the propagation
of faith) who supported the missionaries with fund. Encouraged by such grants, the building of the village was rapid.

In the village where these groups of people
i. Re-purchased slaves,
ii. Children entrusted to the missionaries.
iii. Abandoned children, orphans often twins who were supposed to have been thrown into the evil forest as the custom was then, and the refugees.

The freedom village thus brought back life to those who have lost the taste of meaningful existence. This positive venture is not without setbacks, when converts increased in number the free born did not find it easy to mix up with the “so called slaves and taboo children”.

**The Introduction of Cemeteries**

According to the practice in their home land, the early missionaries introduced cemeteries. The Osu were favoured in two ways by the practice. In traditional Igbo culture it was the Osu who was buried in a common grave yard, even though in the negative sense. Cemeteries therefore were in keeping with the *osu* tradition as against the *diala*. In the light of this Onwubiko (1993:67) was of the opinion that:

> The introduction of cemeteries where all dead Christians were buried was believed to fight the idea that the *Osu* was buried by his kind and in a particular place. Therefore, the burial of the *osu* and *diala* together in a common grave yard was to show that all are one. But this did not last long?

Many Christians, prefer to be buried in their families according to the traditional practice including the *osu*. Thus the attempt of a common grave yard did not solve the *osu* problem.

**Inculturation and the Osu/Ohu issue**

The term inculturation is an offshoot of the Second Vatican Council, expressing the determination of the Church to make a shift from the approaches of the earliest missionaries that hardly recognized anything good in the culture of the people. To define this term inculturation, many attempts have been made. Inculturation, is therefore seen as a process by which a people in their native culture meaningfully make Christ present with a view to enable them to become what they are, and in our context becoming what they are, entails being African and fully native. A major problem has been imposed by inculturation in Igbo land and the African Church at large. This has adversely affected the development and growth of the Church in Africa. Furthermore, the importance of inculturation in our mission is reiterated by Pope Pius XII in his Encyclical of 2 June, 1951, *Evangelii Praecones*, when he wrote to say that:

> Let not the gospel on being introduced into any new land destroy or extinguish whatever its peoples possess that is naturally good, just or beautiful. For the Church, when she calls people to higher culture and a better way of life, under the inspiration of the Christian religion, does not act like one who recklessly uproots and cuts down a thriving forest. No, she grafts a good scion upon the wild stock that it may bear a crop of more delicious fruit. (Pius XII: 2005:56).

The significance of inculturation can also be proved from this perspective. On this note, Iwe wrote that:

> What happens when missionaries engage in the work of evangelization without inculturation? The results are misunderstanding, prejudice, suspicion, conflicts and strive. History testifies to this. For example, it was lack of inculturation that bred the clash between the early missionaries and the natives on the advent of Christianity in Africa (Iwe, 1979:78).

One sees from this, the reason why in some areas the gospel has not been properly incarnated. This is because the missionaries tend to ignore the culture of the area in question or completely disregard it or see it as barbaric and pre-technical.
The inculturation process which was adopted by the Catholic Church did a lot to solve the problem of the osu. The Catholic Church reviewed the culture of the locality and adopted the good aspects of the culture and did away with the obnoxious ones that debases and dehumanizes the human person. On the other hand the church purified the ones that are not totally bad in themselves. The funeral rite which was not accorded to the osu hitherto is now being accorded to them, thanks to the Catholic Church. According to Igbo belief and tradition the Osu was not entitled to any funeral at death because of the taboo he was believed to have inherited and was carrying. This is one of the reasons why traditional funeral rites were neither examined nor purified.

Secondly the traditional Igbo titles which the Osu and the slaves were not allowed to take ab-initio (earlier on) have become a thing of the past. This is because in many towns in Igbo land the osu and the slaves can now take the prestigious ozo, ozioko etc. title. This is a leap and a quantum achievement by the Church.

Recommendations
The Osu problem is now more with Christians since the advent of Christianization in Igboland. Among many Christians, discrimination still persists. An escapist approach has been taken by most Osu who avoid Igbo land and live abroad. Some have left the Church entirely. The Newswatch Magazine captures it thus:

Before now, the Osu sought subtle ways to solve their problems. The escapist step was to move to the other towns and cities in other parts of the country… Others in similar situations escaped abroad. But escaping abroad or moving away provides only a temporary reprieve. When they return home, they find, to their shock, that nothing has been forgotten (Obasi, et al 1989:17).

In order to abolish slavery sincerely in Igbo society and elsewhere, the following recommendations are made:

1) The Churches should address this issue openly and publicly in their homilies, teachings, synods and pastoral councils and not leave it lie under the carpet.
2) There should be a formal and ceremonial re-absorption, re-integration ceremony and prayer session organized for them. This way the issue will be resolved, abolished and forgotten.
3) In their teachings and catechesis the Church in Igbo land should uplift the image of God in the human person and condemn unequivocally this debasement and the de-facing of the human person obtainable in this remote, primitive and pre-technical culture.
4) The Church and her Justice and Peace Commission should be alive and should champion the course of setting these maltreated and ill-treated social and cultural prisoners free. They should be properly financed and encouraged.
5) The government with the Church should condemn and destroy the cultural institution embodying this dehumanization of the human person.
6) Non-governmental Organizations should be set up by people and properly financed by the government and some wealthy citizens to fight this hydra-headed cause.

Conclusion
The practice of Osu/Ohu is a sin against humanity, an aberration and deviation from the original plan of the creator. It is demonic and thus destroys the image of God in the human person. By this practice the subject that is the human person (Osu/Ohu) is subjected to an object which belongs to animals and inanimate beings. If this ugly and godless tradition, devoid of sensitivity to the sacredness of the human
person continues, time shall come when this sacredness and sanctity of this image of God (*imago Dei*) in the human person would lose its value. This would be catastrophic, cataclysmic and highly regrettable. It is therefore our collective responsibility to rescue this eroding dignity of the human person found in the *Osu/Ohu* from sinking into the debris of gutted trivializations.

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