

Personality Distortion in Osu Caste System

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ABSTRACT

One of the characteristics inherent in Igbo Philosophy is the communitarian nature of Igbo worldviews. Man is a being in relation to others; he cannot exist alone but must exist with others within the community. One of the practices that threaten this relationality or communalism is Osu Caste System, which has been in existence for many decades in most Igbo communities of South Eastern Nigeria. Its origin varies because of the problems of documentation and oral traditions. The consequences of an Osu cut across all spheres of an Osu existence- socially, emotionally, politically, economically, et cetera. Osu could also be classified into: voluntary, dedicated, inherited and Osu by infection or contact. The system of Osu compared with the communitarian structure of Igbo worldview is a distortion of Igbo personhood. The search for African person, personality and personhood started as a reaction to such characterizations of an African person, ipso facto, Igbo person. Juxtaposing Osu Caste System and selfhood formation in Igbo setting, implications abound from the social, political, emotional, economical perspectives. The objective of this work is to show that any distortion of this relatedness that characterized Igbo Communalism has negative consequences on the formation of personhood. Thus, an Osu experiences a distortive personhood which is not integrated, related and presencing. The method of hermeneutics and analysis were used to interpret and analyze the concepts employed in this work. Furthermore, some experts in history and Igbo sages were interviewed. At the end, the intrinsic being of an Osu has been distorted by the tenets of Osu Caste System, thereby distancing an Osu from realizing his personhood in the community of brotherhood.

Keywords: Osu Caste System, Communalism, Distorted Personhood, Disoriented Personhood, Mgbugalu.

INTRODUCTION

Man, right from the time of biblical creation or evolutionary theories of origin, has intrinsic nature that is peculiar to him alone. One of these essential characteristics is the dignity of human nature and a being-in-relation-to others. These characteristics are inherently inscribed in the Igbo communitarianism. However, some obnoxious practices evidenced in Igbo cultural settings right from the ancient times, indirectly to the adherents, endanger these intrinsic values of Igbo personality orientations. Some of these practices are *Osu* Caste System, killing of twin babies, the killing of innocent children for developing first the upper incisor (teeth), the offering of human sacrifices, the problematic ideas of reincarnation and so on. The interest of this research work is the distortive nature of *Osu* caste system in Igbo cultural settings and worldviews.

The concept of *Osu* and its inherent problems have been in existence for many decades in Igbo communities of southern Nigeria. The consequences of being an *Osu* cut across all spheres of an Osu existence. Consequently, the social pariah

trailed unabated. Is this concept of *Osu* in tandem with the communalistic import of Igbo integrative personhood? Is *Osu* caste system built on the principles of communalism and/or integrative personhood? Can one justify that an *Osu* shares the same freedom with non *Osu*? Some of these are problems besetting this caste system when placed in comparison with communalistic tenets of integrative personhood.

Thus, this research work tries to make the point that human beings are created equal and are beings in relation to others, and all human beings are important to the society and are interrelated and interconnected. A distortion of this relatedness has negative consequences on the Igbo personhood. This study aims to expose the traditional and non-philosophical views and beliefs and traditions on *Osu* Caste System. These expositions and clarifications will expose the irrationality and inhuman nature of this obnoxious Igbo practice when juxtaposed with Igbo personhood. An *Osu* experiences a distortive and disoriented personhood which is not integrative.

A REVIEW OF THE CONCEPT OF *OSU* CASTE SYSTEM

The Etymology and Origin of *Osu*

In its nature, Igbo words generally do not have etymologies as could be seen in English and French words which have roots in Latin and Greek languages. However, in essence, '*Osu*' is a prefix name to a person who distinguishes himself or herself in any field of life. It connotes the notion and idea of 'exceptionality' and 'success' in the superlative degree. This was the original use of the concept before it came to be attributed to those who exceptionally dedicated themselves to gods and goddesses different from '*Ohu*'. Such exceptionalities are seen in such names like *Osuizugbo* (the greatest leader Igbo wide), *Osuagha* (a war commander), *Osuigwe* (the greatest in the sky), *Osuocha* (the whitest or the fairest in complexion in a community), *Osuji* (the biggest yam farmer in a community), et cetera. It was a prided name initially before it got corrupted with the influence of Christian missionaries who saw *Osu* dedicated to gods as fetish and against Christian faith. By this exposition, one can deduce two strata of *Osu*: exceptionally successful *Osu* and exceptionally dedicated *Osu*.

One of the problems besetting African philosophy is the absence of documentation. Thus, the origin of *Osu* caste system in Igbo land generally varies because the available sources depend on oral traditions. However, from critical analysis of different historical sources, one can trace it back to ante-transatlantic slave trade. It might have existed before then in different nomenclature rather than *Osu*. Thus, according to Arinze (1970) "the origin of the system is not certain. But propitiation of an angry spirit and the scapegoat idea seem to have been characteristic of it (p. 92). Put differently, most scholars, like Okeke (1986), claim that the *Osu* caste started with the dedications and sacrifices of human beings to the gods in order not to attract their wrath. They claim that such dedications or sacrifices were the terms of penalties for capital punishment. Isichei traced it to the Nri priests who instructed that the neighbours of those people who could not pay for the services they rendered to them should be isolated (Isichie, as cited in Okafor, 1993). More so, a school of thought has it that the spiritual supremacy of the people of Nri in Igboland, brought the concept of "the pure and the impure or the clean and the unclean people" which gave rise to the *Osu* caste system (Okeke, 1986, p. 13). In a likely account, Basden traced its origin to the man delegated to act in the person of an Aro priest. This was in the Owerri-Okigwe region and the reason for going to the Aro deity was to obtain the power needed to win a war with a neighbouring community (Basden 1966). Hence many versions of its origin exist.

Men *Osu* joined with women *Osu* to become husbands and wives. They raised children who by birth are *Osu*. There are people who by personal volition became *Osu*. If someone

commits an offence punishable by death, once such person runs to the shrine and climbs it, he becomes *Osu* and so untouchable. There are cases of women dedicating themselves and their children to punish their very wicked husbands. As the "*Osus*" cannot have any social relation with free born, any citizen found or suspected to have social relation with them is branded to be one.

The consequences of being an *Osu* cut across all spheres of an *Osu* existence. It was an anathema for the *Osu* to receive title, talk less of becoming a cabinet member. They were also forbidden from having the Ichi facial scarification or killing a cow that was symbolic of a noble status (Okigbo, 2004).

Finally, it should be noted that this caste system did not exist in all parts of Igboland. It is lacking, for instance, in Umuahia and Nike areas (Arinze, 1970). The victims of this are predominantly found in the Idemili, Nnewi, Ihiala, Aguata, and Nsukka areas in the old Anambra state and the Owerri, Okigwe, Mbaise, and Bende zones of the old Imo state. They could also be sparsely seen in other zones (Okeke, 1986).

The Concept of *Osu* Caste System

The concept *Osu* has diversified meanings among the Igbo: it is contextually based on its different origins. However, the central element in *Osu* Caste system is that it is closely connected with slavery, if not the same thing. To understand the central tenets of *Osu*, one has to digest the rituals connected to the consecration of *Osu*. This brings out the sacrificial nature of its consecratory rituals. Moreover, some authors and documents have tried to come out with related definitions of *Osu* in Igboland. Thus, Uchendu (1965) sees *Osu* as "a cult slave, a slave who has been dedicated to the service of the dedicators' deity, whose descendants are also *Osu*, be the dedicator an individual extended family or a lineage" (p. 89). In the view of Arinze (1970), an *Osu* "is a person who is specially consecrated to a spirit that has a shrine. He is symbolically immolated, and is then left to live on as a 'child' or 'slave' of his *alusi*" (p. 91).

More so, the Eastern House of Assembly gave us a legal definition of *Osu* as:

Any social way of living which implies that any person who is deemed to be an *Osu* or *Oru* is subject to certain proscribed social disability and social stigma. An *Osu* may be a person who was sacrificed to a shrine or a deity and that person and his descendants are therefore, regarded as social pariahs with no social rights which non-*Osus* are

bound to respect. (cited in Okeke, 1986, p. 9)

In the words of Mgbobukwa (1996) in his book titled *Alusi, Osu and Ohu* in Igbo Religious And Social life.

In Igbo traditional religion, *Osu* is seen as an accused human being sacrificed to a deity. In the prayer of consecration, he is made to be the absorber of the iniquities, weakness, and problems of the people. He is also made to take on himself the death of the freeborn. Hence the *Osu* could well be said to be the redeemer of the freeborns (p. 39).

In Macmillan Encyclopedia, Isaac (1986), defines caste as “the element of a system of social stratification in which social boundaries are very definite. A pure caste system consists of a hierarchy of endogamous occupational groups, in which positions are fixed and mobility from one caste to another is prevented by a ritual system” (p. 237). This definition brings out the stratified nature of the *Osu* caste system in Igbo socio-political system. They are people who either voluntarily or involuntarily are dedicated in one way or the other to the deities as their servants. Hence for Uchendu (1965) holds,

The *Osu* system of slavery constitutes the greatest contribution to the Igbo equalitarian ideology. *Osu* can, therefore, be said to be a people with a status dilemma: a people hated and despised yet indispensable in their ritual roles; a people whose achievements are spurred by the society which is aggressively achievement-oriented. Although *Osu* function as “special” priests, they are not accorded the high-status other priest who are “general practitioners” enjoy. Rather *Osu* are hated and feared, treated as if mean and discussed with the tone of horror and contempt (p. 89)

In the same vein, Akam (1995) holds that “*Osu* system is slavery and apartheid in a small scale” (p. 110). According to Okeke (1986) in his book titled ‘*Osu* Concept in Igboland’,

the *Osus* were the altar boys/the mass servers of the juju, cult and /or the deity priest, the significant roles they played in the traditional mode of worship just as the mass servers do today in Christian

Churches during offerings..., put succinctly, the services of the *Osu* were then inevitable and therefore a sine-qua-non in the scheme of worship of the Igbo mans religion (p. 10).

Initially, an *Osu* has a pride of place in the social order. The system of government was that of theocracy. It was the gods that gave laws, interpreted by oracles and enforced by the deity officials. In their own small way too, the *Osu* as the chief servant of the god is also respected as insulting him tantamount to insulting the god. Thus,

They are sacred persons. No one dares harm, mutilate, or worse still, kill an *Osu*. People are even afraid to touch them or to give them a hair-cut. Hence the *ndi Osu* often go about with bushy heads.... And what is done to them is regarded as done to the spirits to whom they are dedicated. Hence many devotees give the *ndi Osu* presents of yams, cocoyams, fowls, kola, oil, and money. The *ndi osu* serve at some minor functions in big shrines. Generally, what is left over in the shrines belongs to them. Where they are many, they live in special houses next to big shrines (Arinze, 1970, p. 92).

Therefore, “*Osu prided himself.*” They proudly prefix *Osu* to their names as *Osuchukwu*, *Osuakpu*, *Osuji*, *Osudo* or *Nwosu*. Thus “The *ndi osu* seem to have had an honourable position at the start. ‘On the whole, evidence from various sources goes to support their claim that in olden days they were regarded with awe and veneration rather than with the contempt and dislike they inspire now’ (Leith Ross cited in Arinze, 1970, p. 92).

But with time, they lost this honourable socio-religious right. Furthermore, Arinze (1970) holds that:

In social life, the position of the *ndi osu* was not an enviable one. They were regarded as the lowest in the social ladder, and as even more despicable than slaves. They could intermarry only among themselves and were excluded from many social gatherings. And where a person became an *Osu* all his descendants became *ipso facto ndi Osu* (p. 92).

Again 'to call a person an *Osu* is worse than giving him a knife-cut', says Igbo Kweni, interpreting the general traditional attitude (Arinze, 1970, 92).

Thus "to think of misfortune is to think of *Osu*, to think of ill health is to think of *Osu*, to think of death is to think of *Osu*. All these are expected to be the lot of an *Osu* and never of a free-born. Hence everybody tries to distance himself as much as possible from an *Osu*" (Mgbobukwa, 1996, 19).

The concept of *Osu* could be likened to the episode of Leviticus 16: 20-28:

Once expiation for the sanctuary, the tent of meeting and the altar is complete, he will bring the goat which is still alive. Aaron will then lay both his hands on its head and over it confesses all the guilt of the Israelites, all their acts of rebellion and all their sins. Having thus laid them on the goat's head, he will send it out into the desert under the charge of a man waiting ready, and the goat will bear all their guilt away into some desolate place.... The man who leads the goat away to Azazel will wash his clothes and body before entering the camp.... (New Jerusalem Bible, Study Edition)

Finally, Dureke (1985) writes on the rules and sanctions that inform the relationship between the free-born and *Osu*:

Umuosun (descendants of or children of *Osu*) were sequestered from society and as such suffered total ostracism. They could not sleep under the same roof with the so-called free-born citizens called *Diala* sons and owners of the land. They neither ate from the same pots nor drank with the same cups with the citizens. Marriage between the two groups was a taboo eternally. Children were forbidden to see the corpse of an *Osu*. An *Osu* could not be a chief or a leader of any village.... If the corpse of an *Osu* was to be carried through the village of a *diala*, palm fronds were placed everywhere to warn the people that evil was in the air and a bad event was to happen. If an *osun* had sexual intercourse with a *diala* woman, the offending woman was to be dragged to the *Osu* to marry for free. Under no circumstances would a *diala* run into the compound of an *Osu* even if it was raining or he was being chased with a gun or machet. If one did so, one

automatically becomes an *Osu*. (cited in Okeke, 1986, p. 64).

This social stratification and ostracisation of *Osun*s distort the essential characteristics of Igbo Personhood which is integrative in nature. It cries for social redemption, personality redefinition and identity reintegration.

Classification of *Osu* in Igbo Worldview

Okeke (1986) distinguished four distinctive classifications of *Osu*- voluntary *Osu*, dedicated *Osu*, inherited *Osu* and *Osu* by infection or contact.

In the case of voluntary *Osu*, such factors like victimization, frustration, and poverty could cause it. An *Osu* about to be killed for sacrifice or for the burial of his master could redeem himself by becoming an *Osu* and no longer *Osu* (Okeke, 1986, p. 35). Debt and laziness could make one dedicate oneself. There could be dedication by consensus: "this is when a community decides to dedicate a person. Such a person could be a notorious thief. The dedication ensures that he does not bring shame to his family, village and community" (Mgbobukwa, 1996, 16). A person could equally be dedicated by the pronouncement of the diviner in order to ward off imminent calamity. It should be noted that voluntary *Osu* and dedicated *Osu* go hand in hand. Arinze (1970) opines that "a person could have himself so dedicated to a spirit spontaneously, or in payment of a big debt to his *alusi*, or to escape the unscrupulous molestations of evil neighbours" (p. 91). Inherited *Osu* are those who become *Osu* by birth and *Osu* by contact are those who become *Osu* by mere contact with another *Osu*. In some places a person could become an *Osu* by the mere fact of crossing the innermost sanctuary of a shrine (Arinze, 1970, 91).

These classifications gave birth to many implications to Igbo Personhood when viewed in the light of integrative personhood, commitment and co-operation, good name, unity of being, unity of purpose, et cetera.

Struggles for Freedom

The exploration into the social status or image of an *Osu* necessitates an ardent struggle for freedom. *Osu* is the worst human tragedy conceived by man and meted to man, worse than the infamous transatlantic slave trade. However, some *Osun*s have made subtle attempts to solve their problems but to no avail.

A practical example of this struggle is the Nnobi situation. Okigbo (2004), opines that man being naturally selfish, Nnobi people sought ways to retrieve their dear ones who by not their own making became *Osu*. Such include children made *Osu* by their mothers, or women due to

extreme hardship and suffering under very pugnacious husbands or slaves under very harsh treatments. Those from other communities captured and dedicated had no consideration. A method of substitution (**MGBUGALU**) was introduced. Ransom was paid for each *Osu* to become free. Such ransom may be goat, ram, cow or sheep or producing another person for replacement. Through this method, such slaves were redeemed and their freedom granted them. However, it did not last.

It worked well till the time when Obi Ezeokigbo wanted to retrieve one of his wife's slaves who was very hardworking and dear to Ezeokigbo. The council of Elders (OKOZALA) objected to Ezeokigbo's move as he had many others slaves equally hardworking. Ezeokigbo argued that if his *mgbugalu* was refused nobody again will do so. The elders religiously knocked their '*Ofo*' on the ground affirming it. Then Ezeokigbo made the famous statement "*chi-di-nohu*" (Never will there be substitution). It has been like that till the abolition of *Osu* caste system and even practically till today.

Such an obnoxious act like *Osu* caste system cannot be left unattended to by any serious government because it violates the fundamental rights of the citizens. Recognizing the problems created by this system, Eastern Nigeria house of assembly in 1956, passed the Bill that formally abolished the *Osu* caste system in the whole of the then Eastern Region. This bill was strongly motivated by GT Basden and Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe. Basden raised a strong alarm against this despicable practice and Azikiwe as the premier of the Eastern Region reminded the members of the house on that occasion of legislation: "it takes moral courage for any person to attempt to disturb what is revered as tradition but it takes social vision for the duly accepted representatives of the people to abolish such a tradition in the interest of social justice..." (Okeke, 1986, 73). The abolition law became effective from 10th may 1956. It goes thus:

....

***Osu* system abolished**

3. Notwithstanding any custom or usage, each and every person who on the date of the commencement of this law is *Osu* shall from after such date cease to be *Osu* and shall be free and discharged from any consequences thereof, and the children thereafter to be born to any such person and the offspring of such person shall not be *Osu*, and the *Osu* system is hereby utterly and forever abolished and declared unlawful.

Enhanced punishment on subsequent conviction

11. Any person who, having already been convicted of an offence under this law, or of an abetment of an offence, is again convicted of any such offence or abetment, shall on every subsequent conviction, be liable upon conviction to a fine not exceeding one hundred pounds or to imprisonment for a term not exceeding six months.

.... (Okeke, 1986, p. 113-116)

Though the efforts of this Bill were nipped to the bud, it served as the motivating force for many towns to abolish the system in their different towns. Notably among these towns is Nnobi in Idemili South Local Government of Anambra State, Nigeria.

COMMUNALISM AND PERSONHOOD IN IGBO PHILOSOPHY

Communalism and Personhood in Igbo Epistemology

The search for African person, African personality and African personhood started as a reaction to the dehumanising experience of slavery and colonialism in the hands of the European. Each race is endowed with peculiar talents which mark out its individuality, freedom and independence. Therefore, the Africans should be studied according to his pristine existential laws. Kenyetta (1975) maintains that African personality is defined by relatedness. The individuality of the person is secondary to the primary fact that he is several people's relative and contemporary. "His life is founded on this fact spiritually and economically just as much as biologically" (p. 258-259).

Mbiti (1969) laid the foundation for the communalist conception of African person with his tell-tale caption "I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am". He sees Africa person as a product of the community, as a part of the whole which owns and regulates him from birth to death, and even to after death, through its rites and norms. The African person is defined by being-in-the-community, and personhood is realized through progressive incorporation and integration into the life and being of the community.

Nyerere (1967) opines that the traditional African lived according to the principles of *Ujamaa* or familyhood. Personhood is therefore tied up with familyhood and personal consciousness involves relatedness and a recognition of mutual involvement in one another. The person is a realization of the nature common to all humans, which can only be done in community with other persons.

Iroegbu (2000) first working definition of a person is that a person is “one who is there with others, living and communicating humanly with other human beings” (p. 26). The elements of the first enquiry must be possessed by all persons. These elements include community, rationality, self-hood, reasonableness and transcendence. Experience constitutes the fundamental element in the second enquiry. Human person is “the communally and self-embodied being that is in search of full transcendence.”

Integrative Personhood vis-a-vis Distortive *Osu* Personhood in Igbo Epistemology

Integrative personhood cannot be understood outside the confines of Igbo communalism because the community creates a person; an individual is the product of the community. Hence, proper understanding of integrative personhood is tied to the communitarian conception of Igbo worldview. The philosophical enquiries of Odimegwu (2006) gave a systematic credence to this concept of Integrative personhood. Integrative personhood is the dialogic presencing of being whereby to be is to become and to become is to integrate. Therefore ‘to be’ is characterized by ‘in potency’, meaning that ‘to be’ is not a static state but a transitional or motion state. To be is dialogic process that is characterized by relatedness, dialogue and communication. Presencing is a term coined by Otto Scharmer. In his work co authored by Katrin Kaufer, *‘Presencing: 7 Practices for Transforming Self, Society, and Business*, presencing refers to the ability to sense and bring into the present one’s highest future potential, as an individual or a group. This term is derived from Theory U. At the heart of Theory U is the practice of presencing, which involves a shift in consciousness from ego-centric to eco-centric awareness. Presencing means to operate from the emerging future: sensing, turning in, and acting from one’s highest future potential- bringing to life the future that depends on us to bring it into being. Therefore a dialogic presencing of a being is the capacity and capability of a being in relation to actualize his future potentials through dialoguing, relating, communicating and sensing with other potential beings in the community.

I. Odimegwu opines that the basic constitutive elements of integrative personhood are:

- (a) Individuality: this is the view that human being is basically an individual being. Thus, corporeality brings us to the quality of particularity of the human person. Individuality refers to the selfhood of the person.
- (b) Communality: this is the view that the individuality of the person is discovered in its communality. It is in the relatedness of my being that I strive to define and achieve the particularity and unity of my being as a self in this community.
- (c) Presencing: this is the view that the intendency of my being reveals my presencing to me as the conclusive constituent of

my personhood. Intendency refers to the insufficiency of the self wherewith it is said that no man is an island. The human person in its intendency is ever looking outside itself towards the others, towards its environment and towards the future.

In conclusion, a systematic analysis of personhood from Igbo perspective has to be anchored on the communitarian nature of Igbo worldview. Distortive Personhood is when the formation of a person is stagnant, static or one directional and lacks presencing that is dialoguing, sensing, communitarian, communicating and relating. The intrinsic nature of *Osu* caste system distorts this essential feature of Igbo Personhood- Integrative Personhood. It is therefore a distortion of integrative personhood which touches the very nexus that characterized Igbo communalism.

***Onweonye* vis-a-vis Disoriented *Osu* Personhood in Igbo Epistemology**

Okpalike (2020) in his work, *‘Onweonye: Introducing the Concept of Self-Personhood in*

Igbo Ontology’, introduces *Onweonye* into the Igbo ontological discourse to give a new perspective and shed light on certain observable social behavioural patterns among the Igbo. He centres his discussion on self-knowledge in Igbo Ontology/Epistemology on the concept of *Onweonye*. He remarks that

Onweonye is a composite word made up of ‘*Onwe*’ (loosely ‘Self’) and ‘*Onye*’ (loosely ‘Person’). In other words, *Onweonye* could loosely translate as ‘Self-Person’. Remarkably, personhood and selfhood could be treated in isolation of each other in western thought. On the other hand, in the integral/profound expression of individuality in Igbo, *Onwe* and *Onye* cannot exist in isolation in Igbo understanding of “*Mmadu*” (human being). Both together constitute the integral/profound expression of “*Mmadu*” as an individual in the universe of other entities. Therefore, *Onweonye* is the integral/profound expression of the essence of the Igbo existential being (p. 92).

He went further to discuss the formational morphologies and ontological contents of *Onwe* and *Onye* which led to the ontological derivation of *Onweonye*. *Onwe* can easily be transliterated as “Possessor”; it is the noun form of the

verb “*Inwe*” (to possess). The verb root “*Nwe*” simply means “Possess” (p. 92-93). He argued that the functionality of the self in Igbo understanding is characterized by possession. Thus, possession connotes and correlates with *being in-charge* and *in-control of one’s life*. *Onwe* is the absolute self-seeking and self-centred individual. The capacity of the Igbo *Onwe* is limitless; it aims at possessing the world and all it contains (p. 93). *Onwe* embodies the inherent duty to possess and not be possessed by another. *Onwe*, though is a counterpart of Cartesian ‘I’, is differentiated from it.

He identified *Onwe* as a force behind Igbo industry and enterprise; it is the force that subjects the universe to the Will of the individual; it is the resolute and invincible Will which aids the Igbo in his engagement with the universe.

He further asked the question, what then does the possessor possess to attain the status of a possessor? The Igbo does not think of this possession as materiality alone as seen in such idiomatic couplets like “*Ife akụakụ na ife enwe enwe*” and “*Akụ na Ụba*”. Thus, at the full disclosure of *Onwe*, it is “*Akụ na Ụba*” and “*Ife akụakụ na ife enwe enwe*” which best describes the content of possession. It is important to note, that “*Akụ na Ụba*” and “*Ife akụakụ na ife enwe enwe*” is the singular objective for all Igbo struggles, industry and enterprise.

Okpalike, on the concept of *Onye* argues that *Onye* can be transliterated as “Giver”. It is also the noun form of the verb “*Inye*” (to give). The verb root “*Nye*” simply means “Give”. *Onye* is rendered as ‘Person’ in English parlance. However, *Onye* is much more than Person. By nature, the Igbo individual is internally structured to give and this is measured by the quantity and quality of material and non-material possessions of *Onwe*. *Onye* underlines the indebtedness of the Igbo to the Other; this Other includes entities other than *Onye*, humans and things, living and dead, created and non-created.

Furthermore, there are no beggars in the pristine Igbo socio-economic milieu and those in any way incapacitated to afford their means are taken care of within the structured web of giving. Such people are referred to as *Ogbenye*, which is another composite word. “*Ogbe*” means “Community” and “*Nye*” means “Give”. In other words, it is the responsibility of the community, within a moral encoding sensitive to hurting their pride as *Onye*, to give such persons (p. 94).

On the ontological derivation of *Onweonye*, he holds that *Onweonye* is the Igbo understanding of the individual. It is both the essence of being and existential becoming. Put differently, *Onweonye* is at the same time what the individual is and what the individual constantly becomes. It represents the internal constitution and external functionality of the individual. The composite word *Onweonye* literally transliterates as the ‘possessor of the giver’. The full-fledged Igbo individual possesses the capacity and power of an ultimate possessor/giver- *Onweonye*.

In common folk language, words like “*Ima onweonye*”, “*Inwe*

onweonye”, “*Ibụ onweonye*” feature in this ontological derivation. *Ima onweonye* is used for Self-knowledge/awareness/consciousness. *Inwe onweonye* is the ultimate possession of the full capacity/potentials of possessor/giver, loosely translated as “Independence”. *Inwe onweonye* is the beginning of a purposeful life and perfect existence. *Ibụ onweonye* could be translated to mean self-confidence/composure, like the English phrase “To be oneself”. In this sense, *Onweonye* is a state of being or condition of the mind.

Finally, Okpalike concludes that the integral ontology of *Onweonye* as essence and existence, being and becoming, concealed and unconcealed, known and unknown is immutable by the dynamics in epochal-temporal epiphany (p. 95). *Onweonye* is at the same time selfhood and personhood. As self, it is the individuating principle and as person, it is the individualizing principle.

Okoye (2011), in his work “‘*Onwe*’: An Inquiry into the Igbo Concept of the Self” discusses the ontological exposure of *Onwe*. Following the common pattern of Igbo cosmological discourse, he locates the place of *Onwe* in the hierarchy of being in Igbo cosmology. He claims that *Onwe* is located at the third sphere of the Igbo cosmos, characterized by material existence and interpenetrated by spirit forces. In this sphere, he argued:

We thus see the three categorizations of the self as follows: The Soul - *Mkpuruobi*; The Spirit- *Mmuo*; The Body-*Aru*. The trio above constitutes what we call the ‘*onwe*’-self in African (Igbo) thought.

However, Okpalike (2020) argued that although C. Okoye like many others may understand *Onwe* as the human person which translates to *Mmadu*, it should be noted that *Mmadu* is the essence and existence of the human being, while *Onweonye* of our rendition is the integral expression of that being, it is both passive and active; both being (*secundum esse*) and becoming (*secundum fieri*) and sustains the idea of social gradation. In as much as *Mmadu* can also be used among the Igbo to express gradation and becoming, like in the expression “*Ọ bụrugo mmadu*” to mean “He/she has attained maturity”, it is *Onweonye* which in itself contains and expresses that maturity into the ideal individual.

The concept of *Onweonye* despite its different nuances is an offshoot of communalism and its tenets. *Onwe* is an absolute self-seeking and self centred individual that can only define his identity within the community. *Onye* underlines the indebtedness of the Igbo to the Other- humans and things, living and dead, created and non-created. The nature of *Osu* falls short of these features of *Onweonye*. When viewed from this perspective, *Osu* personality suffers from disorientation, disequilibrium

and dislocation from the centrifugal force of the community. Of course, his personality is not static per se, but is not progressive. This concept of *Onweonye* is similar to the integrative personhood of Ike Odimegwu. Hence, an *Osu* suffers from personality disorientation.

CRITICAL EVALUATION

As stated above, the consequences of being an *Osu* cut across all spheres of an *Osu* existence. It was an anathema for the *Osu* to receive title, talk less of becoming a cabinet member. They were also forbidden from having the *Ichi* facial scarification or killing a cow that was symbolic of a noble status. Initially, an *Osu* has a pride of place in the social order. The system of government was that of theocracy. It was the gods that gave laws, interpreted by oracles and enforced by the deity officials. In their own small way too, the *Osu* as the chief servant of the god is also respected as insulting him tantamount to insulting the god. But with time, they lost this honourable socio-religious right. Again 'to call a person an *Osu* is worse than giving him a knife-cut', says *Igbo Kweni*, interpreting the general traditional attitude (Arinze, 1970, p. 92).

Thus "to think of misfortune is to think of *Osu*, to think of ill health is to think of *Osu*, to think of death is to think of *Osu*. All these are expected to be the lot of an *Osu* and never of a free-born. Hence everybody tries to distance himself as much as possible from an *Osu*" (Mgbobukwa, 1996, p. 19).

Central to the understanding of Igbo Personhood is the communitarian nature of an Igbo person which is communalistic *in esse*. This is succinctly captioned in John Mbiti's assertion that 'I am because we are and since we are therefore I am.' This communitarian nature of Igbo personhood has been further developed by different African philosophers. One of the offshoots of this philosophical progress is the concept of integrative personhood, a personhood that is integrated with others and the society; a personhood that is presencing.

I. Odimegwu defines Integrative personhood as the dialogic presencing of being whereby to be is to become and to become is to integrate. It is not a static process but a progressive process of integration of a person and the community.

The nature of *Osu* caste system is itself a deviation of the communalistic nature of Igbo worldviews. Igbo Anthropology sees a person as a being constantly in relationship. It is characterized by relatedness and integratedness. Taking the characteristics of integrative personhood as the prism of deconstructing the *Osu* caste system, one sees that the objectives and aims of *Osu* caste system are distanced from Igbo communitarianism. They do not completely tally with the individuality, communality and presencing of Igbo integrative personhood. Consequently, it is a distortion in the personality formation of Igbo Personhood.

How is *Osu* caste system a personality distortion in Igbo

Epistemology? Epistemology is simply defined as the study of the origin, nature, purpose, method of human knowledge. One of the critical areas of epistemology is the study of self/person which comprises of the origin, nature, purpose, consciousness, et cetera, of self/person. Every Epistemology must face this critical problem of defining selfhood or personhood. This proper epistemological understanding of self/person forms the basis of understanding man in other disciplines of study-psychology, anthropology, sociology, et cetera. Hence it is very important to know who a person is and what characterized him. This is done in this work from the perspective of Igbo worldview. The tenets of *Osu* Caste System are not in alignment with the formation of Igbo Personhood. For effective personhood, there is a need for integration and progressive synthesis of individuality, communality, sensing and presencing. The self must be in communion and relation with other selves in the community and must be able to look outside itself towards the others, towards its environment and towards the future. The *Osu* social stratification has debarred him or her from these communal impacts and self-actualization. Thus, the personhood of an *Osu* is depersonalized leading to identity crisis and loss of identity and self-consciousness as a true Igbo person. This is the root of self-distortion in his knowledge of himself. Hence to exit from this distortion of selfhood, there should be a rediscovery of his self and identity in the formative community and he must be able to look outside itself towards the others, towards its environment and towards the future for effective integrative personhood.

The concept of *Onweonye* despite its different nuances is an offshoot of communalism and its tenets. *Onwe* is absolute self-seeking and self centred individual that can only define his identity within the community. *Onye* underlines the indebtedness of the Igbo to the Other-humans and things, living and dead, created and non-created. The nature of *Osu* falls short of these features of *Onweonye*. When viewed from this perspective, *Osu* personality suffers from disorientation, disequilibrium and dislocation from the centrifugal force of the community. Of course, his personality is not static per se, but is not progressive because it lacks the ingredients and substance of progression- the community touch. Hence, an *Osu* suffers from personality disorientation.

Furthermore, I. Asouzu in his work '*The Method and Principle of Complementary Reflection in and beyond African Philosophy*', developed the concept of Complementary Reflection in order to show the intrinsic relationship and interactions of human beings (person) in the society. From this complementary view point, the Igbo may be seen as a people that believe in the mutual complementarity of every body's effort and ability. This

may be seen in their dictum '*agbakota aka nyuo mmamiri ogbo ufufu*' which means 'if all efforts are brought together, the desired goal will be achieved'. Another similar view is the concept of '*Ibu anyi danda*' which simply means 'if everybody will bring their efforts together, there will be no load that too heavy for them to carry.' Moreover, they believe in the mutual unity among all parts that forms the absolute or the whole. The sayings '*Egbe bere Ugo bere*' and '*ka som adina*': simply show the belief in the conglomeration and the mutual unification of every human being and their efforts. In line with the view of complementarity, Francis Onwubuariri argues that *Osu* caste contradicts this view, because of its teachings on seeing some people as being inferior, less humans, et cetera. Thus, it becomes a serious problem that is begging for a rational solution.

There are many implications of *Osu* Caste System to the understanding of integrative personhood of Igbo Epistemology. One of the implications is the social implication. This x-rays *Osu* Caste System vis-à-vis the daily inter-relationship of the people of the society where the system is practised. Although, *Osu* Caste System has been known as a social issue which simply depicts that it is something that has to do with the social life of the people, its alleged problems abound. Such problems are segregation, discrimination, dehumanization, the chieftaincy of an *Osu* and several other essential problems

Another important implication of *Osu* Caste System is the ethical implications. Is it morally right to see one's fellow human being as inferior and less human? Is it just to discriminate, subjugate and stigmatize fellow human beings? *Osu* Caste System is one of the obnoxious cultures and traditions in Igbo land that sees some as inferior beings, half human and views others as real human, good and pleasant beings. The *Osus* were socially avoided, discounted, isolated, denigrated, victimized, abused, dehumanized and denied fundamental human rights. Even in some schools, the children of *Osus* are cajoled, mocked, spat upon, ridiculed by pupils and their leaders. They suffer all manner of opprobrium and odium in some villages. However, human beings have accordingly been defined as rational animals which show that they should always use their rationality other than emotions or feelings in their social relationship with one another. The Stoics had maintained that reason should suppress passion in order for us to maintain our moral standards. Spinoza too, having seen how human beings are dominated by passion and emotion instead of reason, called for the emancipation of reason from a mere emotion for the determination of morality. *Osu* caste system in its tenets is founded on emotions and feelings and not on rationality which is an essential attribute of man. Since it failed to produce a person who is communally identified, free from identity crisis, socially free and ethically responsible, the system is not ethically justifiable and commendable.

On the other hand, a pertinent and interesting question needs to be asked here- why is it that *Osu* people are usually successful in all spheres of life. Is it because they are dedicated to gods or they are hardworking? '*Osu*' is a prefix name to a person who distinguishes himself or herself in any field of life. It connotes the notion and idea of 'exceptionality' and 'success' in the superlative degree. It was a prided name initially before it got corrupted by external influences as exceptionally dedicated to God. It seems that *Osu* men and women are successful in life. Exceptionally dedicated *Osu* could be divinely assisted by the gods to be successful in life while exceptionally successful *Osu* achieve their success through hard work and determination in conjunction with favours from the gods. Statistically, those that have *Osu* prefixed to their names are always the riches in their communities and towns. This calls for further researches to determine the intrinsic causes of their success syndrome.

CONCLUSION

In the course of this writing, we have tried to show that initially, *Osu* was something to be proud of because of its special significance among Igbo socio-religious context. But as time went by, it came to be a derogatory social status. The pertinent questions here are, what really made the former system of *Osu* to be prouder than the later one? Did becoming an *Osu* change one's intrinsic nature or hereditary make-ups? It is noteworthy that it is intrinsic in the life of an Igbo man to undergo one kind of ritual consecration or purification or another in life. Some of such purifications are completely evil and morally not acceptable, but were welcomed by the community. Dedication an *Osu* for the purpose of propitiation is completely inhuman and irrational. Such a caste system cannot be allowed to live in this age where most of those answering *Osu* know nothing about it, talk less of knowing what such a dedication means. We cannot blame them for what was done to their fore fathers. Remember, we are blaming the westerners for cruel tortures meted to our dear brethren sold into slavery. But what is more than trans-Atlantic slave trade is right here co-existing with us. The onus is left on all of us to say no to this kind of social, cultural and moral estrangement.

The zeal to identify the crisis of African personhood (Igbo personhood) leads to the search for the causes of this crisis; among which external causes are: transatlantic slave trade and slavery, colonialism, the entrance of religions as Christianity and Islam and neo-colonialism. These causes have interplay with the internal causes as tribal communalism, economic poverty and political corruption to situate the Igbo man into the state of crisis in which he finds himself today. These crises are further

sustained by various aspects of globalization that keep promoting such obnoxious practices. In the nearest past are also such derogatory practices like *Osu* Caste System.

The Igbo man in his pristine nature is communalistic in nature. There is a great interplay between the cosmological and anthropological conception of man. It is in fact a systematic chain of existence in which all beings causally interact with each other in a hierarchical structure. Man cannot be understood outside the confines of his culture, environment and community. The community creates, produces and identifies a person. Thus, the identity of an Igbo man is dependent on the community's definitions of his being. Anything that endangers this wholistic nature of man poses a great threat to his identity and personhood.

Lastly, *Osu* Caste system violates the fundamental human rights. The knowledge of integrative personhood of an Igbo person exposes the distortive nature of *Osu* Caste System in Igbo Epistemology. The selfhood of an Igbo person is characterized by strong integration and interconnection with the Igbo society. Igbo epistemology discards *Osu* Caste System as a false image of the communalistic and communitarian nature of Igbo communities. Hence, the tenets of *Osu* Caste System are not in alignment with the formation of Igbo Personhood. For effective personhood, there is a need for integration and progressive synthesis of individuality, communality, sensing and presencing. The self must be in communion and relation with other selves in the community and must be able to look outside itself towards the others, towards its environment and towards the future. Therefore, to exit from this distortion of selfhood, there should be a rediscovery of his self and identity in the formative community and he must be able to look outside itself towards the others, towards its environment and towards the future for effective integrative personhood. Again, the nature of *Osu* falls short of the features of *Onweonye*. When viewed from this perspective, *Osu* personality suffers from disorientation, disequilibrium and dislocation from the centrifugal force of the community.

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