

## Abolishing the Osu System in Igbo Land

Chinedu Ogoke

Department of English and Communication Studies  
Federal University, Otuoke  
[Chineduogoke17@gmail.com](mailto:Chineduogoke17@gmail.com)

### Abstract

It is miserable to exist as an outcast, Osu, or Ume. The consciousness of this identity robs one of happiness as a human being. The practice should have been abandoned decades ago, but it now defies any solution. Efforts have been made in this direction, but what baffles many interested parties is how the abolitionists cannot match those who insist on retaining the practice. Osu or Ume advocates make the concept appear attractive, saying it is among the traditions that define who Igbos are. The attempt to abolish it therefore suffered a setback recently. Thus, this crippling snag in Igbo life survived what would have been seen as a collapse. Osu is a system that excludes some members of a community from all the entitlements due to every man and woman in that community. An Osu may have desecrated some value systems in the community. An Osu can also be a slave or prisoner of war. Such a person is dedicated to the god of the land. This write-up is meant to provoke a thought that will make people cease to treat their fellow human beings less than those people's worth. It provides solutions for a final and most effective method to confront the proponents of a process that concerns Igbo society. The author has been moved to engage in this exercise after a series of arguments with some people on social media. This is also a call on state governments, writers, and concerned individuals to be more determined next time to save mankind. A human being deserves all the God-given rights and values of life. Extensive research has been conducted in this study using books, newspapers, and journal articles.

**Key words: Osu, Ume, Abolitionists, Colonial, Christianity, Ozo**

## **Introduction**

Igbo culture is woven into all the fabrics of Igbo life. It governed the political, economic, and social lives of the people. Obviously, from Igbo natural laws and language, there is nothing about the philosophical depth of Igbo ways. What an Igbo who is immersed in his cultural ways does not give up are the things that attach him to another Igbo. This is one of the reasons why most Igbos want to be buried in their ancestral lands. Igbos' tenacity towards any belief can be ferocious. Igbo slaves were reported to be the most rebellious slaves. They led the revolt in Haiti, where they were in the majority. It was the same story in Jamaica. One striking feature of this feature among Igbos is the famed Igbo landing in the U.S., where dozens of Igbo slaves collectively walked back into the sea, preferring to drown than to face perpetual captivity. A detailed study of the Igbo man's attachment to his cultural ways and land will leave one surprised at how they endured slavery (Udeani 9, Momodu). The Igbos resisted colonialism and Christianization fiercely. When they embraced the two, they became glued to them. They appeared very westernized in every form of the word. Concerning Christianity, it is hard to believe the religion was imposed on Igbos. Therefore, they do not let go easily of any practice. This might explain the tenacious hold on the Osu system (Matera, Bastian, and Kent 25, 112). In *No Longer at Ease* by Chinua Achebe, despite being a clergyman, Isaac, Obi Okonkwo's father forbids his son marrying an Osu named Clara. This is what Kruga tells us: "Obi has travelled to Umuofia to argue with his parents about his relationship with Clara Okeke, an Osu—one, in traditional Igbo society, dedicated to the service of a god and thus prohibited from marriage to freeborn Igbos (73).

## **What Is Osu? Origin of Osu and Ume**

What is Osu? Origins of Osu and Ume

Osu is a form of discrimination against fellow Igbos. It is abhorrent to have a direct relationship with Osus. Osus are avoided as much as possible. They are denied numerous rights that people who are known as free-born enjoy. An Osu cannot take titles in the community. An Osu, for instance, cannot take the ozo title. An Osu cannot marry a diala; otherwise, the land will strike the people. To get married, inquiries are made to ensure that the bride and/or bridegroom to be are not Osu. The blood of the Osus and the dialas must not mix. Abia et al. inform us that:

‘The Osu cannot dance where the Diala dances so as not to touch and contaminate the Diala. These functions are regarded very highly and superiorly; hence, an Osu cannot perform such things. In Igboland, the kolanut is sacred and has traditional and ritualistic functions. Thus, Osu people are not allowed to break kolanuts in public. The Ozo institution is one of the most important Igbo social institutions of all time. No matter how wealthy an Osu is, he cannot take a title. Because the ozo title holders constitute, for the most part, the narrow aristocracy of intellect, wealth, and political power in their societies. It becomes an abomination for an Osu to aspire to it. In the same vein, offering sacrifices as well as divination and oracular functions are prohibited’ (74).

The Igbo culture forbids incest or procreation between an Osu and a Diala. When it happens, the diala forfeits all the privileges of a diala and becomes an Osu. Osu status may have occurred as a result of the act whereby two people have a sexual relationship that leads to childbearing. It may result from someone taking shelter from rain under the roof of an Osu. It may also be the result of someone being taken into slavery as a consequence of war in another Igbo community, in which the person cannot belong to the host community following a pronouncement from a deity. To properly carry out the penalties prescribed by the deity, an area is provided at the fringes of the community, where the Osus are resident (Onwubuariri 20–26).

### **Christian Missionaries’ Interpretation of Osu**

The Osu system among Igbos is often mistaken for the Indian caste system. The Indian caste system is a class-hierarchical structure where some people are lower than others in cultural status. is inferior to the other. While it has similarities with the Igbo version, among the Igbos, the Osu or Ume can grow to become economically powerful and is not actually regarded as inferior. There exists only a

barrier that prevents biological mixtures or crossbreeding. The Christian missionaries in Nigeria understood the Osu or Ume to be akin to the Indian lower castes. Till the present moment, many Igbos do not understand what makes someone Osu. They simply obey the rule of limiting their relationship with an Osu (Viswanath 66, Onwubuariri 28). An Igbo is not expected to eat food or fruits provided by an Osu or Ume. In the households of Osus, fruits grow luxuriantly, whereas other people may not enjoy the fruits on their trees as a result of stealing; those of Osus remain intact. When a child mistakenly accepts gifts from an Osu, the child is instructed to throw the package into the bush, unseen by the giver. Osus give generously.

### **Myths**

Myths abound that the sons and daughters of the dejected are generously provided for by their Creator and nature. The question is often asked why the Osus are usually the most beautiful in the clan. Whether this is true remains to be researched. But it was discovered that they were among the most educated and progressive in various societies, following the advent of Christianity. The reason is that the Igbos rejected Christianity initially. Christians became the first saboteurs. Those discriminated against saw an opportunity to escape from the chain of Osu and Ume systems. Christianity was the new gateway to success. Being the first set to step into education and leadership and what the new religion had to offer. The Osus and Umes moved rapidly socially and economically. Today, they are still quite rich. Interestingly, being rich and successful changes nothing. An Osu or Ume cannot cross the line. On numerous occasions, people have yearned to enjoy the benefits that may come from a conjugal relationship with Osus but still cannot. They can today be domestic help, gardeners, office workers, and bosses. They still will not go out of their way to marry the daughters or sons of their servants or masters. Many marriage engagements have been called off because of this phenomenon. Foetuses have been aborted as a result. A lady who was unaware of her status, having been in an urban area all of her life, will be informed upon inquiry that she is Osu. It breaks people's hearts (Rogers 172-180).

### **Across the Generations**

The Osu or Ume status does not have an expiration date. The people so identified cannot escape it. They are condemned to everlasting Osu or Ume life. Some may have started two thousand years ago; it does not matter. Innocent descendants who never knew when the pronouncement was made or how it occurred have to live with it. The ladies sometimes find a way out of it by marrying outside Igbo land or Igbo communities where it is unknown. Such communities are few. They may be in boundary areas where Igbo communities meet with non-Igbo communities.

Egbujo writes,

On any moral scale, neither Botha nor Hitler nor the Klu Klux Klan conjured the hatred and discrimination being meted out to the Osu. This discrimination happens within and among people of the same ancestry, colour, language, and culture. The conceited Diala harbours more contempt for the Osu than the usurping white Australian has for the Aborigenes.

### **Insults and other challenges surrounding the Osu Dilemma**

In arguments or conflicts, someone can be reminded that he or she is Osu or Ume. Wailing and lamentation are what ensue. When two Igbo strangers meet, they refrain from talking about it. Once they realise none of them is one, they are immensely gladdened. It can be an uncomfortable situation. All parties are suffering. Thus, from murmurings to open comments, people want this sad episode to be erased. They feel the embarrassment too. As Christians, people know they should not discriminate on that score against their own people. Enlightened people wonder why an Igbo can relate to a non-Igbo at any level but will desist from doing so with a fellow Igbo. While it is acceptable for an Igbo man to marry and procreate with a Chinese or European, it is forbidden for an Igbo to do the same with a female Igbo. Chances are that the ancestors of the foreigner may have also offended humanity. The ancestors may have been slave masters. Igbos steal and breed children with their own children. Some escaped slavery in Libya and returned home. A lot of them engage in heinous crimes. But since these acts are committed outside the time of the Osu pronouncements, people are not taking count any longer (Egbujo).

The Christian religion has not been able to disconnect the people from this act. Many Christians, despite their religion, will remark that it is a spiritual phenomenon the church should not be involved with. Fortunately, there has been a shift in this attitude. Attempts have been made to free Igbo land from this shame. When the first process was carried out, people who termed themselves traditionalists claimed adherents of a foreign religion dared to interfere with a native concept. They therefore proclaimed it a failure. Three years ago, the momentum gathered to deal with the problem once and for all. Consultations were extensive. The Christians allowed the king of Nri, who is believed to be the traditional head of Igbos, to accept being fully involved. Christians went out of their way to permit native rituals. A procession started that covered all Igbo communities that observe the Osu and Ume concepts. It was going to be a success. Shockingly, opposition came from young Igbos on social media. They swore they would never allow enemies of Igbo tradition to prevail. They claim to be non-Christians and traditionalists. Their strength and determination came as a shock to people. They did not hide their identities. They are people who have friends, Osu and Ume among them. They claimed Igbo ancestors would place a curse on Igbos should the misinformed lot have their way. They are the people who succeeded in the end. They buried the great opportunity, setting Igbos backward. How did these people emerge on Earth? They were formed as fluids. They had no choice in their humanity or whether they would be Diapas, Osus, or Umes. They certainly will leave this world someday. A lot of them bemoan discrimination in Nigeria. They decry racial discrimination outside Nigeria. Many who have not left Nigeria are yearning to relocate, even with the full knowledge of the racial discrimination that might await them. Several of them are physically less endowed naturally than Osus and Umes (Ogechukwu 8–9).

The Osu system reminds us of the dangers that are prevalent in Igbo society. The practice surely has defied various efforts made to eradicate it. The opposition that turned up was surprisingly overwhelming. The resistance had been ignited by Igbo traditionalists who were making a comeback after ending their relationship with Christianity. Traditionalists had claimed they were by-passed by Christians, which accounted for the failure of the first Igbo-wide attempt. The procedures they pointed out the first time were followed; they were also included, but those people laid down and waited until the dying minutes to dismantle all work with their numbers. Their reaction completely negated what their ages suggested, which was in the range of 45 years and below. At that age range, people were thought to be quite liberal. Those people had been provided with all the knowledge

education could give about humanity, as they were mostly people with university education or were active users of social media.

There is hope that the problem can be solved. There are many ways to resolve it. The committee that coordinated the last exercise can go back to work. The governors of all the Igbo states must be involved. A study will be done on why that last attempt failed. Since it is certain that the traditionalists form the group that mostly stands against it, a strategy should be devised on how to compel them to relent. There should be penalties spelled out for them. They must be exposed and their identities revealed for people to see and take note of those behind an appalling system. When found guilty, they must be compliant to qualify to enjoy some services, which may include appointments or in the area of business. There should be an edict that must pass, compelling everybody to accept it. When slavery was abolished in the U.S., not all free U.S. citizens supported it. A war had to be fought to enforce it. The state can make those who object to it pay severely. There can be compliance cards issued to various people. Each village should single out those who love the perpetuation of the Osu system for defamation.

The campaign should be a ground-sweeping one. It should be a gigantic movement. The victims must be empowered. All the obstacles in their way must be removed. They should occasionally be made community leaders. A forceful pronouncement should be made. The campaign has not been forceful enough. There should be huge compensation for the victims. Every other Igbo person should be made to feel guilty for the act that has lasted for several centuries. The non-Osus and non-Umes should be made to apologize to the Osus and Umes.

It should not be seen as a process that has been discontinued. This time should be used as a learning period for a second assault on the Osu system. The strategies of the anti-abolitionists should be studied. The pattern of the advocates of change must change. People would not want to be permanently identified as those who stand in the way of the eradication of the Osu system. The Igbo state governments should compile a list of the names of these people. The list should contain all relevant information that will indicate where they come from, their places of residence, and their places of work. It is cruel to insist on a practice of this nature. Those who advance the perpetuation of the Osu system did not choose their own statuses. Osu could also have been their lot. The argument that tampering with the institution would have spiritual consequences for the Igbo people is an

ill-conceived joke. The fire in the Igbo tradition was extinguished by aliens, yet nothing happened. Igbos were humbled by people who came thousands of kilometres away to Igbo land; the Igbo ancestors that have been serially mentioned and the earth Igbos stepped on did not raise any objection. Their submission is even an indication of how they have reduced the discourse and why they should be ignored or how their acts will be overcome. Writers must wake up. Social media users should no longer be indifferent to the issue at hand. This burden must be lifted.

### **Conclusion:**

The Osu system, deeply rooted in Igbo culture, continues to persist despite various attempts to eradicate it. Efforts to abolish this discriminatory practice have faced overwhelming resistance, particularly from traditionalists who view it as integral to Igbo identity. However, there is hope for change through concerted and strategic efforts involving government intervention, community engagement, and empowerment of affected individuals which will lead to meaningful change and the eventual eradication of this discriminatory practice.

### **Suggestions:**

1. **Government Intervention:** State governments in Igbo communities should take a proactive role in addressing the Osu system by enacting laws and policies aimed at its eradication. This could involve penalties for those who perpetuate the system and incentives for compliance.
2. **Community Engagement:** A comprehensive campaign involving community leaders, religious institutions, and grassroots organizations should be launched to raise awareness about the negative impacts of the Osu system and promote inclusivity and equality within Igbo society.
3. **Empowerment of Affected Individuals:** Victims of the Osu system should be empowered through education, economic opportunities, and leadership roles within their communities. This will help dismantle social barriers and challenge existing prejudices.
4. **Learning from History:** Studying past abolition movements and understanding the strategies employed by anti-abolitionists can inform a more effective approach to tackling the Osu

system. This includes adapting tactics to counter opposition and rallying broader support for change.

5. Social Media and Advocacy: Writers, social media users, and advocates should actively engage in discussions and advocacy efforts to raise awareness and mobilize support for the abolition of the Osu system. This includes challenging outdated beliefs and promoting a more inclusive vision of Igbo identity.

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