

## **Democracy and OSU Caste Conflict Transformation in Eastern Nigeria: A Cultural Perspective**

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**Abstract:** *This paper argues that the material conditions of caste relationship among the Igbo of Eastern Nigeria are more integrally linked to institutionalized cultural practices building on the critical implications of stigmatization, discrimination and conflict on the basis of social status. Osu caste system is an old long cultural practice of discrimination in which the Osu who are dedicated to the gods as living sacrifices are socially discriminated by the Nwadiala who are free born. Through the articulation of a resultant conflict theoretical framework, the paper provides a critique of contemporary Osu caste practice in the era of nascent democracy in Nigeria. The study draws from recent and incendiary case analysis and argues that democracy seem to conceal rather than transform Osu caste practice as its founding ideals of equality, freedom, public opinion is limited or at variance with cast cultural practices which persists among the freeborn called Nwadiala and the out castes called Osu. The paper suggests that as an organizing principle for good governance democracy should assume a novel cause to reopen caste discrimination for policy reconsideration*

**Keywords:** *Democracy Culture, Osu Caste System, Conflict, Development, Igbo*

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### **1. INTRODUCTION**

In recent decades cultural studies have not made an enormous contribution to the study of periphery societies and institutions. Neither has it fully attempted to explore how some cultural practices account for the ways in which people interact with each other and the wider society.

As a formidable force for change, culture has established itself as one of the largest and most successful areas of inquiry in social relations and interactions. Some are categorized as positive others as negative. Despite the understanding of such practices as a heritage, norm, ethics and values, there are increasing need to re-evaluate some cultural practices of most periphery societies whose history were largely oral.

*Osu* caste system is a socially learned behavior generationally inherited and associated with two dominant social classes namely; the *Nwadiala* or freeborn and *Osu* or outcaste. It is a practice which is as old as the Igbo nationality. It is anchored on status discrimination of the *Osu* as member of a lower caste or status by the *Diala* or *Nwadiala* (freeborn) who belongs to a higher social status. The *Osu* are believed to be persons sacrificed or dedicated to the gods several years ago-they are living sacrifice.

The idea of *Osu* caste system as discriminatory is captured in a number seminal debates on Igbo cultural studies (Achebe, 1958; Afigbo, 1968; Arinze, 1970; Isichei, 1977). This has become a fundamental component of debates on Igbo local conflict, spirituality, identity, philosophy, social structure and hierarchy. Thinking about *Osu* caste system in culture contexts, thus provides a critical link between the old and new and how such links had calcified despite Christianity, Westernization and democracy.

Traditional scholarship describe this system within the context of patriarchy, as the ritual involves only males. Like the Indian caste system which falls within four principal varnas, or large caste categories. In order of precedence these are the Brahmins (priests and teachers), the Ksyatriyas (rulers and soldiers), the Vaisyas (merchants and traders), and the Shudras (laborers and artisans). A fifth category falls outside the varna system and consists of those known as "untouchables" or Dalits; they are often assigned tasks too ritually polluting to merit inclusion within the traditional varna system (Srinivas, 1996).

The Igbo are among Nigeria's three major ethnic groups, its distinct feature lies in their egalitarian and republican nature which provides an influential milieu to explore linkages between the *Osu* caste practice and democracy. They are the most widely travelled and constitute about (11.70%) of the

Nigerian constitution population (Census, 2006). Though this is not reliable as the Igbo speaking communities in Delta state South-South Nigeria is excluded.

The *Osu* caste system has had an enduring stigma and perhaps among the world's longest surviving status discrimination. A person is considered a member of the caste into which he or she is born and remains within that caste until death, there is no upward social mobility. This practice has had a significant effect on the socio-cultural and political emancipation of the Igbo.

In 1956, the Eastern Region House of Assembly passed a bill abolishing *Osu* caste discrimination.

“The fine imposed made people have some restraints in the public expression of the word, *Osu*. But it is mere fantasy as years after the law; people of substance in Igboland are denied traditional titles” (Dike, 1992:16).

The practice of “undesirability” or “untouchability”-the imposition of social disabilities on persons by reason of birth into *Osu* caste- remains part of Igbo caste system. The socio-cultural vulnerability of the *Osu* continued unabated as their options and views rarely count in community gatherings and key social functions. *Osu* caste discrimination is demonstrated in a number of ways such as separate facilities, separate caste-based neighborhoods, non- marriage relationships etc, such discrimination and stigmatization results to conflicts among the *Osu* and *Diala* in recent decades.

With democracy resurgence, the critical emphases in *Osu* caste discrimination among the Igbo are strengthened and reopened by an argument that democracy would be transformative and change oriented in an intensely conflictual and discriminatory cultural practice.

The contention by recent debates is that democracy will provide a political transformation of the key concepts and practices among the Igbo namely; *Osu* caste system. (Dike, 1992). Such persistent palpable cultural practices show how nascent democracy is losing its conceptual and political edge.

Cultural studies once sought to effect transformative social change by making visible the evidence of caste induced conflicts to demonstrate stigmatization, discrimination and inequality in social relations of production, distribution and exchange.

In two decades of democracy in Africa, local conflicts within cultural contexts is both important and relevant to policy makers and international development researchers seeking for in-depth understanding of local conflict dynamics and possible transformation. The *Diala/Osu* conflict is deeply rooted in the complex historical and structural processes of pre and post-colonial consolidation of class consciousness which fosters social inequality. Beyond inequality, it has perpetuated antagonism, stigmatization, conflict, acrimony and discrimination which derails the socio-economic progress and development of the Igbo nationality.

There is little or no debate over what is meant by *Osu* caste system. This study makes the argument that understandings of *osu* caste system needs to be re-examined for the ways in which the practice in social and cultural relationship among the two dominant classes namely; the *Nwadiala* and the *osu* affects the existential realities of the later, the quality of democracy and wider Eastern Nigerian politics is crucial.

Since democracy both cultural and development studies demonstrates the need to attend to equality as an organizing social category, *osu* caste practices and transformation have been critical in cultural studies, more than that, democracy has come to be taken as obvious both in governance, scholarship and policy discourses.

It will be the work of this essay to call for a reconsideration of *Osu* caste system as the key organizing concept of social inequality, economic disempowerment and alienation of the *Osu* which affects both peaceful co-existence, social harmony and transformation of the Igbo.

The main argument of this article is that the socio- cultural constructions of *Osu* practice are more centrally linked to institutionalized oppression, victimization and stigmatization moreover, that caste practices is inextricably bound up with cultural belief rooted in traditional practices linked with the gods and ancestors of the Igbo nationality. Thus, such transformative prognosis may not easily work except the cultural component is redirected to create new meanings for an end to caste discrimination

Such novel value re-orientation is centrally linked to democracy practice where the people could recreate their orientation and re-engage in policy re-orientation to transform the socio-cultural practice that has resulted to socio-cultural dissonance

### 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

This study seeks to provide substantial theoretical evidence on *Osu* caste stigmatization in Eastern Nigeria in an era of nascent democracy. The study used case studies that could help provide sufficient evidence and enrich our understanding of the ongoing *Diala/Osu* conflict in “real-life” contexts. Two clans in two autonomous communities in Eastern Nigeria were purposively selected to reflect situations of *Osu* induced conflict relationships. The two clans selected are the Oruku Community in

Nkanu East, Enugu State and Ezianya Obi-Orodo autonomous community in Mbaitoli Local Government Area of Imo State. Both case studies are very important in the study of *Osu* caste system in Eastern Nigeria.

Enugu was the former capital of the defunct East Central State and perhaps among the politically sophisticated areas in Nigeria. Again, Imo was among the states where the anti- *Osu* caste bill earlier enacted in the Eastern region House of Assembly in 1956 was revoked in 1979 by Chief Sam Mbakwe the second republic Governor of Imo State.

Our case examples seek to illuminate the historical evidences with particular attention to the implications of this gamut turbulence to peace, democracy and good governance.

Also an in-depth review of literature on *Diala/Osu* conflict in Igboland, with particular focus on their implications for caste analysis and democracy was undertaken including newspapers, journals and books. The primary data sources included field survey of the study area and interviews with community leaders, chiefs, *ndi ichie* (elders) both of *Osu* and *Diala* extractions. The interviews were a constructionist approach aimed at discovering, as Silverman said, how subjects actively create meaning. The views of the media and other civil society organizations were also useful. So while the limited number of qualitative participants precludes any claim of being able to generalize the data gleaned from the interviews, our two case examples and theoretical literature provide the most appropriate method for the aim of this project, which is to explore the *Osu* caste and conflict in Igboland and its democracy interface.

*Osu* caste system is explicated within the conflict theoretical framework deployed in most popular discourses (Amadi and Agena, 2014) to explore a myriad of complex implications of caste discrimination. Class relationships involve conflict and opposition. Conflict occurs between people in all kinds of human relationships and in all social settings. Because of the wide range of potential differences among people, the absence of conflict usually signals the absence of meaningful interaction. Conflict by itself is neither good nor bad. However, the manner in which conflict is handled determines whether it is constructive or destructive (Deutsch & Coleman, 2000)

Don Fisher (2002) argues that conflict is defined as an incompatibility of goals or values between two or more parties in a relationship, combined with attempts to control each other and antagonistic feelings toward each other. The incompatibility or difference may exist in reality or may only be perceived by the parties involved. Nonetheless, the opposing actions and the hostile emotions are very real hallmarks of human conflict. This implicitly underscores the perils of overt stigmatization the *osu* are subjected.

Conflict has the potential for either a great deal of destruction or much creativity and positive social change (Kriesberg, 1998). It is essential to understand the basic processes of conflict so that we can work to maximize productive outcomes and minimize destructive ones.

If this is to change, the Igboland cultural system must develop a critique of institutionalized caste stigmatization transformation which is not precluded in the long historical and cultural belief system of the Igboland.

To benchmark our data for possible generalization after identifying the socio-political and economic consequences of the conflicts from our case scenarios, we advanced to link *osu* caste discrimination to the broader contemporary Eastern Nigerian politics since the return to democracy in 1999. The suitability of this methodology is to adopt a more participatory, evidence based approach. Again, this

helps to explore and illuminate the depth and pervasiveness of the *Diala/ Osu* discrimination both in public and private lives within two decades of nascent democracy in Nigeria.

### 3. CONCEPTUAL ISSUES: DEMOCRACY AND OSU CASTE SYSTEM

There is a specific conceptual and theoretical interrelation between the dynamic advance of the distinctive forms of organizing and ruling contemporary capitalist society and in particular, the patriarchal forms of contemporary Igbo society which explains the reoccurrence of *Osu* caste discrimination several decades after Christianity and Western education and puts nascent democracy on trial in Africa.

In Nigeria like most plural societies, several dimensions of democracy discourse and study have been advanced. Arend Lijphert (1977) has been skeptical in the majoritarian analysis of democracy and contends that the opinion of the majority may not presuppose opinion of the people. This contention aptly reinforces the *Osu* caste transformation dilemma who obviously are in minority.

Ake (1996) demonstrates that it is difficult to discern what kind of democracy is emerging in Africa and what unique features will give it depth and sustainability in African conditions.

Ake's line of thought has been insightful in understanding the cultural practices in Africa which the Western democracy project may not understand. However several discernible shifts are emerging on arguments on Africa's democracy especially at the post authoritarian one party state and return to multi-party system.

Richard Joseph (1997) had argued that Liberal democracy in the twentieth century, therefore connects processes of participation and contestation to a particular kind of economy and a preferred state structure. Joseph (1997) reinforces, "the genius of liberal democracy" in Adam Przeworski's

(1991) construction of the ability of democracy to generate "the appearance of uncertainty," which draws the major political forces "into the democratic interplay"; while it protects key vested interests, others are convinced to postpone fulfillment of their substantive demands to a later date.

Joel D. Bakan and David F. Gordon (1998) have been skeptical about "promoting" democracy in

Africa. They posit that Africa's mixed record of democratization, including the emergence of a large number of hybrid regimes committed to effective governance and real economic development but not

Western-style democracy, has led some analysts and foreign policy makers to question the wisdom of promoting democracy as a core theme of U.S. Africa policy.

Ake (1993:16) further argued that "in order for African democracy to be relevant and sustainable it will have to be radically different from liberal democracy. For one thing, it will have to de-emphasize abstract political rights and stress concrete economic rights, because the demand for democracy in

Africa draws much of its impetus from the prevailing economic conditions within".

Crawford Young (1989) observes that a number of African scholars argued that the form of democracy imposed upon Africa was choice less, since all regimes were compelled to march to the drummer of structural adjustment programs and the Washington consensus.

Lipset identified "Some Social Requisites of Democracy" including equality, consultation, public opinion etc which according to him are integral to the functioning of democracy. Perhaps the absence of these "conditionalities" gave rise to Richard Joseph's argument on "Africa's democracy as virtual democracy" riddled with series of "paradoxes".

Despite these controversies, African democracy is understood to be rooted in kinship ties especially in egalitarian and acephalous societies like the Igbo. Yet prevailing democracy discourses have not been able to narrow down an institutional democracy culture framework within which the *Osu* caste stigmatization and conflicts could be transformed.

The effect of this depiction of reality is that caste discrimination circulates as taken for granted, naturally occurring, and unquestioned, while *Osu* is understood as socially constructed and central to the organization of the Igbo philosophy and spirituality.

Studies on osu caste transformation tend to be in a flux or at the best poorly conceptualized. This challenge notwithstanding the understanding of novel trends and changes in the 21st century reinvigorates the need to re-engage in the Osu caste debate.

Osu caste conflict-the view that institutionalized stigmatization constitutes the standard for legitimate and prescriptive socio-cultural order, presents the *Nwadiala* as a member of the upper social class and the *Osu* represents the members of the lower social class as explicated. In fact in Igbo world view the *Osu* belongs to the lowest social class unlike *Ohu*(slave)who is a member of the lower social class that could rise to the upper class. *Osu* does not, it has a static social status and remains under such status without any form of mobility. Hence the *Osu* does not hold traditional titles nor member of the *Oha*(Igbo council of elders)who are the highest decision making body in the land as the Igbo social formation observes gerontocracy.

Despite the common impression of egalitarian attitude as abiding characteristic of the Igbo, there was as much ascribed inequality in their traditional society as in, the Hausa or Yoruba society. (Imoagene,1992).

This discrimination results tension, fissure and discord among the Diala and Osu over time. Two schools of thought are discernible in the conceptual debate among scholars on the Osu caste system namely; the pro and anti Osu debates.

The pro Osu or mainstream discourse upholds that Osu phenomenon is indispensable in the Igbo cultural heritage and forms an integral part of their existence, historicity, spirituality and worldview (Achebe,1958;Arinze,1970;Isichei,1977).

The anti Osu school of thought on the other hand argues that Osu is an inglorious dehumanizing façade of ugly past and should be cast into the bin of history for the Igbos to develop and advance (Imoagene,1992;Dike,1992,Obinna,1993).

Several scholars have discussed the socio-cultural, economic and political implications of the Osu caste discrimination in the contemporary Igbo society (Achebe, 1960;Afigbo,1964, Arinze ,1970; Isichei,1976;Imoagene,1992; Nwosu, 2008).

One of the main premises not only of the discrimination and stigmatization but of the Igbo ethos is that caste system is a cultural practice and heritage from the ancestors which was handed down and must continue as a value system and even moral ethos. In general the caste system is often seen as a norm and traditionally accepted by the osu in idyllic Igbo cultural system. As such, it underlies and defines the direction taken by the Igbo traditional value system. One of the elemental presuppositions of the practice is the possible fear of transmutation to an *Osu* by *Diala* either consciously or unconsciously as Dike (2002) underscores that the list of items that maintain a social divide between the Osu and the Diala grew and till today, but that they vary from place to place. Any person who breaches the rules regulating their interaction with the Osu automatically becomes an Osu. Even though the offenders may not physically relocate to cohabit with the Osu, they were (are) regarded and treated like an Osu by the rest of the community (Dike, 2002).

The *Osu* are treated as inferior human beings in a state of permanent and irreversible disability. They are subjected to various forms of abuse and discrimination. The *Osu* are made to live separately from the freeborn. In most cases they reside very close to shrines and marketplaces. The *Osu* are not allowed to dance, drink, hold hands, associate or have sexual relations with *Nwadiala*. They are not allowed to break kola nuts at meetings. No *Osu* can pour libation or pray to God on behalf of a freeborn at any community gathering. It is believed that such prayers will bring calamity and misfortune (Igwe, 2003).

According to Cardinal Francis Arinze(1970) an *Osu* is a person who is specially consecrated to a spirit that has a shrine. He is symbolically immolate and is then left to live on as a child or slave of his „alusi’. They are regarded as the lowest in the social hierarchy. They could only intermarry among themselves. Nigerian historian Adiele Afigbo(1968) contends that the *Osu* are a people with a status dilemma. A people hated and despised yet indispensable in their ritual roles,a people whose achievement are spurned by the society which is aggressively achievement oriented

In the views of Nigerian internationally acclaimed author Chinua Achebe a person whose ancestors have been dedicated to serve gods or idols.By virtue of this dedication, he becomes a member of an

exclusive social class, infact a caste. His exclusion from the other people does not affect him alone but also his decendants(Achebe,1958).

The Igbo people refer to the *Osu* in varied names; it is referred to as *Adu-Ebo* in *Nzam* in Onitsha. In the *Nsukka* area it is referred to as *Oruma*; it is called *Nwani* or *Ohualusi* at *Augwu* area.( Dike,2002 ).

These names, *Osu*, *Ume*, *Ohu*, *Oru*, *Ohu* , *Omoni (Okpu-Aja)*, have same connotation. The people referred to by the names are regarded as sub-human beings, the unclean class, or slaves. A clear distinction exists between *Osu* and *Ohu* (slave). A free born could become an *ohu*(Slave) if he is used to borrow money or could become an *ohu* in exchange for material wealth, in this case he remains a personal asset of the person who paid the debt, assists in family chores and cutting of the farm, planting yams etc. He is not dedicated to the gods rather belongs to the poor class in the society..

As it often turned out, the commoner or freeborn group could be subdivided into three sub-groups. The first sub group, usually a minority, comprised those we may call the Aborigines or original settlers of the community whose tradition of origin was more often than not lost in history(Imoegene,1992).In most cases ,this group provided the ritual leaders of the community .The second sub-group, usually the majority were the mainstream immigrants who had displaced the aborigines usually by force and had constituted themselves into a kind of dominant majority setting the pace for the community in terms of norms and values. They were usually able to trace their descent from the celebrated founders of the community who constituted the mainstream band of immigrants(Imoagene,1992).

However there are domestic slaves on the ascribed status ladder, the two groups that occupies the bottom position were domestic slaves and community outcaste(*Osu*) in that order (Imoagene, 1992).Domestic slaves were either captured in war or acquired by direct purchase. Persons which committed abominable crimes were sometimes sold by their kinsmen to appease the community. At other times persons were used either as pawns or else in settlement of debts. In either case it was often possible to redeem the slave when the debt was repaid.

Another perspective argues that the *Osu*, by definition, is a people sacrificed to the gods in *Igbo* community. And they assist the high priest of the traditional religion to serve the deities or the gods in their shrine (Basden, 1960;Imoagene, 1992). It is the belief of many *Igbo* traditionalists that the deities, which were (and are still) perceived in some quarters as being very powerful, would wreck - havoc in the society, if they are not appeased.

In this paper *osu* are a minority, discriminated, humiliated and stigmatized group in the *Igbo* society believed to be dedicated to the gods of the land. They are living sacrifices. "Minority" denotes the fact that they are numerically fewer than the *Diala*.

As a caste, scholars have examined *Osu* from divergent perspectives. One author defines caste as "an endogamous status group which places culturally defined limits upon the individual member in terms of mobility and interaction, and on his nature as a person(Humphery,1941) Afigbo(1968) and Achebe (1958)both call *Osu* a caste .

Castes are a group of families bearing a common name, claiming common descent from a mythical ancestor human or divine, following the same hereditary calling and forming a homogenous community. The name generally denotes or is associated with a specific occupation. A caste is almost invariably homogenous (1992).

In the context of class, the useful analysis put forward by Lenin is relevant to this study, "Classes are a large groups of people differing from each other by the place they occupy in a historically determined system of social production, by their relation(in most cases fixed and formulated in law)to the means of production, by their role in the social organization of labour ,and ,consequently, by the dimensions of the share of social wealth of which they dispose and the mode of acquiring it. Classes are groups of people one of which can appropriate the labour of another owing to the different places they occupy in a definite system of economy"(Lennin 1965).

The corresponding interface of economic, political and ideological stance in class analysis is important. Dos Santos (1970) contends that class definition incorporates criteria other than the economic .These criteria are the political and the ideological and refer to the importance of political struggles in class definition. In considering all three criteria-the economic, the political and the

ideological-the economic is seen as the determinant. The political and ideological criteria obviously lead to problems of just what degree of class consciousness should be associated with classes; these problems can become formidable when one is studying a social formation in which social classes „are in constant transformation toward new forms of relation.

To interrupt the ways in which the Igbo norms, myths and historicity naturalizes Osu caste system with relatively less cogitation on its retrogressive and marginalizing components in the Illusion of universality requires a systemic analysis of the ways in which it is historically enshrined in the Igbo world view.

#### 4. CASE EXAMPLES OF DIALA /OSU CONFLICTS

##### **Case1:** *The Oruku Community in Nkanu East, Enugu State*

In recent decades, Osu caste conflict among the Igbo has become more pronounced, violent and widespread to the extent of threatening the peace and unity of the Igbo ethnic nationality as will be explicated.

Following a long historical belief in their ancestors and cultural heritage, the Oruku community holds tenaciously on osu caste discrimination. Oruku community is made up of three clans, namely; Umuode, Umuchiani and Onuogowu. The people of Umuode has limited social interaction with the rest of the community because of their ascribed osu status. The other communities had a separate market and placed a fine of N1,000.00 (one thousand naira-about \$10 dollars) on any community member that buys or sells to the Umuode community. The Umuode caste struggle and conflict since the mid-1990s, is traceable to several factors, for instance in 1995 an incident occurred which involved the youths from two clans in the area that claimed to be freeborn which resulted the disruption of the reception organized in honour of a world acclaimed Professor of robotic engineering, Bath Nnaji, who flew into the country from the United States to take up an exalted ministerial position as the Secretary of Science and Technology under the Chief Ernest Shonekon Interim National Government (ING) (Umahi, 2012).

The foregoing combined to fuel the resurgence of caste induced conflicts on an unprecedented scale and manner including several decades of cultural exclusion, marriage relationship and traditional positions which fuelled strong feelings of discrimination and stigmatization among the Osus. Worsened by the failure of the church to intervene as Umuode people do not hold positions of trust in the church.

With the repeated and intermittent verbal and physical assaults between the osu and diala communities “A commission of enquiry... recommended the setting up of a separate community for the Osu, but a state governor reportedly annulled the autonomous status given to the Osu in April, 1999 because it was not acceptable to their neighbors. While the Umuode accepted it, the Oruku people, opposed it on the grounds that these were ex-slaves in almost every community in Enugu and in Igboland. Giving them a separate community would open a "floodgate of petitions for autonomous communities for this group wherever they exist in Enugu State" (Newswatch, 12 Jan. 2000).

In furtherance to this, an Umuode (Osu) son then Commissioner for Special Duties, Morris Ede in the cabinet of then Enugu State Governor, Chimaraoke Nnamani, protested and the Governor reshuffled his cabinet and dropped him (Dike, 2007).

At the post 2000 conflict, an Umuode indigene (Osu) had this to say; “we have long been discriminated in this community. We all have equal status before God” (naijarules, 2014). On the other hand, the nwadiala group described their position in the conflict this way; “, all we want to do is to preserve our cultural heritage, the violation of which cannot be in our lifetime” I was born and I met Osu, it might be senseless to go contrary to this practice we don't hold anything against them.” (naijarules, 2014).

Although no deaths were recorded there were several implications accompanied, including a severed relationship between the osu community and the rest of the diala community. “To further highlight the savage practice of Osu caste system, the people of Umuode created their own market quite different from the Eke Oruku market, owned exclusively by Umuchiani and Onuogowu clans (Agbaegbu, 2000; Umahi, 2012).

The osu caste agitation to an extent becomes a sort of agitation for social liberation. Class antagonism thus became a marker of the quest for change, while itself undergoing transformation within the dialectics of the struggles for the “liberation” of the osu from the diala.

**Case2: *The Eziamia Obi-Orodo Autonomous Community in Mbaitolu Local Government Area(LGA), Imo State***

In late 2009 in Nigeria’s fourth Republic in Eziamia Obi-Orodo autonomous community, in Mbaitolu LGA of Imo State, “the Osu people .., were attacked by some Dialas from Umunya, a neighbouring community. Those attacked lost both their property and money. Their houses were razed, the community town hall and transformer were not spared.

Chief Christopher O. Ezeh, Chairman, Eziamia Development Zone, wrote a letter to the State Government and stated that one of the victims, “Mr Nicholas Iwumezie, died of heart failure as nothing was left in his shop, his wife became a hopeless widow. The said dead man was deposited at the mortuary. On the day of his burial, the mob (attackers-nwadiala) seized the corpse but for the intervention of one Rev. Father Emmanuel Oparaugo of Stella Maris Catholic Parish Orodo, who caused the release of the corpse”(Umahi,2012).

The letter further stated; “The people of Eziamia need the intervention of good spirited individuals and organizations so that the people shall be free like South Africans and so-called Negroes in America”(Umahi,2012).

Another Osu in the Eziamia conflict, Chief Comrade Placidus Anujoru, an indigene of *Uhuechendu Umuezeoke Akata Orodo*, narrated his ordeal; “Unfortunately, I happen to belong to the sect they call Osu but naturally, I don’t believe I am Osu. My grandfather, the late Andrew Duruezeocha, was a native of Ubahu Orodo. Ofekata autonomous community is in Orodo and Orodo has five autonomous communities. Ubahu is one of them. The story had it that my late grandfather was powerful. His relations wanted to use his fowl to offer a sacrifice, which he refused. And knowing that he was powerful, they had to create rainfall; that night, they caught him and was moving him down to sell into slavery when the great grandfather of our Eze here interceded and said he should be allowed to live. They said they required money for their sacrifice and he paid them money and returned him here.

The evil they wanted to sacrifice his fowl to, which he refused, caused him to be sacrificed to the same devil. So, he had to stay like that(Umahi,2012).

The cause of the conflict was explained as: “One man from Umunya, who lives at Amaku called one Alvan, an Eziamia man, Osu. Alvan got annoyed and dragged the man to *Ihu Ezealla*, that is the deity and offered him to the deity just as our own great grandfather was offered to the deity, which made us to become Osu (Umahi,2012).The diala regrouped and attacked the osu community. The people of Umunya, Amaku and other Orodo people teamed up and attacked the osu and destroyed a lot of things (Umahi,2012). Many people fled the community, about 35 mobile policemen were deployed for about two weeks, guarding the osu community (Umahi,2012). The Osu were paying each of them N500 (about \$5Dollars)everyday throughout the period they stayed. The Osu informed the traditional ruler of the community as they got wind of the attack of the diala, he dismissed their fears and told them go and be law abiding. He promised to communicate to the Eze of Umunya (the diala community attacking them)the osu believed him and went back home. That was why they caught the Osu napping(Umahi,2012). When the osu invited the police and about 10 of the diala were arrested, their big brother, a Professor, went to the police and bailed them immediately (Umahi,2012).

The Osu complained to Mbaitoli Local Government during the administration of Osita Opara. Opara instituted a commission of inquiry, which came and investigated the incident and nothing was heard again. That was the end of it all. The Osu resorted to newspaper publication. Some people were writing and calling on the then Governor, Ikedi Ohakim, to compensate the Osu but nobody ever come to their aid(Umahi,2012).

”The victims of the conflict from the osu extraction such as Mr. Aloysius Ekenta lamented that those who regard him as an outcast looted his wares. He said: “When the incident happened, they came into the market here and broke into my shop and carted away my goods. I sell fairly used motorcycles for sale and they burnt all of them, plus all the things inside my shop.This happened a few years ago but up till now, nothing has happened to the people that perpetrated this crime and we have not gotten any



compensation” (Umahi,2012).Such has been the magnitude of the osu caste conflict in Eastern Nigeria at the wake of democracy.

## **5. OSU CASTE SYSTEM AND DEMOCRACY TRANSFORMATION IN IGBO POLITICS SINCE THE 1990S**

In this section, we seek to demonstrate how the Osu status has remained such an enduring stigma with linkages between the Osu caste discrimination and the broader Eastern Nigerian politics in an era of nascent democracy.

The Osu caste trajectory could be delineated within three historic epochs. First is the pre-colonial era which dates long before political independence in 1960,the post- independence era and the post cold war era which dates from 1990 till the present.

In the pre-colonial era, Osu caste practice was not internally challenged. The Osu themselves acquiesce to their social status. The practice continued till formal colonization and arrival of the missionaries gave rise to early Osu caste symbolic agitations in places like Umuewereke Umuawuka Mbaoma Owerri North,Imo State in the 1930s,where they took up arms against the diala.After days of conflict it was settled by the missionaries at Emekuku Catholic Parish.Similar experiences were recorded in Ngwoma in Ngorkpala reputed to have the highest number of Osu in Eastern Nigeria,Umuokere Lagwa in Aboh Mbaise all in Imo State.

In the 1940s following regionalism and the rise of several Osu communities through educational empowerment and white collar jobs and the 1948 Universal Declaration on Human Rights, caste agitation rose.The former Eastern Region House of Assembly in 1956 passed anti Osu stigmatization bill which provided momentary triumph for the Osu.However the legislation waned with time.

In the 1970s Osu caste conflicts re-emerged as the Imo state State government under Chief Sam Mbakwe revoked the anti-stigmatization legislation, subsequently violent conflict ensued in Umuaka in Njaba Local Government Area in 1980 with eddies of violent attacks, other places included Afara,Ifakala,Orodo etc. In a particular conflict in Umuaka the osu sought to desecrate the diala to feel the pains of caste stigmatization.

As explicated in our two case examples, Nigeria’s nascent democracy since 1999, provides contradictory images of the Osu caste transformation. A central contention and expectation of the Osu minority group has been that the return to democracy in Nigeria would rejuvenate the “liberal” currents of democratization, through the institutionalization of such salient features as “equality and freedom”, with a novel leadership unfettered by cultural dogmas and practices of sturdy norms.

Ironically, the Osu still suffers similar fate in the broader Eastern Nigeria politics today as was several years ago. In January 2000, Nigeria’s influential news magazine the *Newswatch* reported that; In Imo State alone, over 60 incidents have been documented since 1979 showing the inhuman treatments to which the Osu are subjected. In Akwa-Etiti, Anambra State, the osu and diala live in different sections of the town (*Newswatch* 12 Jan., 2000).

Till date the Osu are forbidden to be members of the Igbo council of elders-*Oha*-the Igbo apex body and highest policy makers who are the custodians of the *ofor* –the symbol of authority. Thus Osu do not “hold” the *ofor* nor related Igbo traditional symbols. Similar political limitations are found in several Osu communities. “In Umuaka, Njaba Local Government Area of Imo State, the Osu who are interested in politics in the community are not getting the necessary support from the rest of the community. This has greatly hindered their social upward mobility in the community (Dike, 2002).

Leo Igwe Director of the Centre for Inquiry in Nigeria, provided a lucid case in this regard; “In 1997, a person alleged to be an Osu was made a Chief in a community in Imo State. But six months later, the community was engulfed in a crisis. And when the case was brought to the court, the presiding judge noted that though the abolition of Osu caste system was in the statute, it was an unenforceable law. The chief was dethroned so that peace would reign in the community” (Igwe, 2003).

According to J.O.L. Ezeala, “The Osu were socially avoided, discounted, isolated, denigrated, victimized, abused, dehumanized and denied fundamental human rights, in some schools, the children of Osu are cajoled, mocked, spat upon, ridiculed by pupils and their leaders, while in villages, they suffer all manner of opprobrium and odium”(African Concord 7th January, 1988:6)

After the 1980 conflict in Umuaka, similar stigmatization decanted into another crisis in October/September, 2003(Dike, 2007). The 2003 conflict and its ferment spread across the entire Umuaka community.

In a 2011 interview, Elder C. G. Alozie, Administrator of Church of God (Seventh day), Abia state, from a religious perspective observed that we find those negative practices among Christians because Christians read the bible but do not internalize the scriptures. “There is a problem somewhere, most Christians, even church leaders practice Christianity superficially and not in truth and spirit” (Umahi,2012).

A diala from Anambra State recounted; “the practice is very strong till date across rural Igboland, in my hometown we don’t associate with the Osu nor allow them to represent us in political offices” (Ojobo,2013).Equally, a councillorship aspirant demonstrated how his social status caused him his political ambition. “I lost the position because of the usual discrimination, otherwise I am the most credible” (Ordu,2013)..

In 2011 an influential traditional ruler in Eastern Nigeria, His Royal Highness Eze Edward Nwosu Nwokorie, the Okata 1 of Ofekata, said; “Truly, Osu or whatever you may call it exists till today and it started about 1840s. There is no Osu who is up to 30 years of age that will not be able to trace it to his great grandfathers. God did not create Osu; it was a human creation. It was created between 1840s and 1920s (Umahi, 2012).

There has been a strong Christian perspective to cast transformation in post -colonial Eastern Nigeria.

In October 2012, following growing efforts to institutionalize the clamor for Osu caste abolition, the catholic Bishop of Owerri Arch Diocese His Grace, the Most Rev.(Dr) A J V Obinna commenced the Catholic centenary celebration at the Mount Carmel Catholic Parish Emekuku (mother parish) former provincial headquarters of the old Niger Delta Ecclesiastical Province. In his homily, the Arch Bishop rededicated the faithful to God and asked them to answer;

Bishop: Have you rejected Satan and his worship?

- Congregation: Yes I have
- Bishop: Have you renounced all deity worship?
- Congregation: Yes I have
- Have you renounced Osu caste discrimination?:
- Congregation: Yes I have(Field Survey,2012)

This “renunciation” remained superficial in the context of interrogating certain assumptions on the Osu caste system and practice in an era of Christianity and more importantly nascent democracy. Thus after 1990, while local conflicts persisted across Africa, the Osu caste conflict was not left out. In 1999, the Osu caste transformation challenges reappeared as nascent democracy in Nigeria reopened a novel vista for social interaction. The fate of the Osu opened to view an entirely novel and unanticipated outcome: local conflicts. Other cases were to follow, most notably in Oraku community in Enugu, extending to Umuaka in Njaba LGA,down to well-known Ngwoma skirmishes in Ngorkpala LGA, the Amafor Ifakala in Mbaitolu LGA, the Umuewereke Mbaoma Emii in Owerri North LGA, the 2011 Eziama Orodo conflict in Mbaitolu LGA Imo State etc.Virtually in all communities in Eastern Nigeria there are obvious or latent discrimination of the Osu from holding political offices. The eddies of similar stigmatization in an era of nascent democracy is provided in literature (Africa Economic Analysis 13 June, 1999; Africa News 24 May 1999; Newswatch 12 January, 2000; Dike,2002, 2007)

Among the five states of Eastern Nigeria namely;Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi,Imo,Enugu,and parts of Igbo speaking Delta State, related discrimination continues to swirl, spilling into neighboring Osu communities. Howerever there are a few Igbo communities devoid of Osu such as Ngwa land in Abia State where the caste system does not exist (Ogbuni, 2013).

Similarly, in Arochukwu, the traditional base of the slave merchants of the old, the issue of Osu caste system is not well pronounced as both the Amadis (freeborn) and the non-Amadis (settlers) intermarry

and live together. Mr. Chris Oji, a journalist, said that Aros, however, only allow Amadis to be in-charge of their ancestral deity at Arochukwu known as "Ibinukpabi" otherwise called "Long juju" by the white man. (Umahi,2012).

Mid way in the late 1990s amidst the stigmatization was the Catholic Bishop's Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) in 1994 which called for the abolition of the caste. Archbishop Anthony Obinna of Owerri reportedly "regretted that customs like the Osu/Diala system created a situation of real apartheid" (Africa News, 24 May, 1999).

This representation of an Igbo spiraling downward into a maelstrom of uncontrollable disorder achieved popular currency through a number of discourses such as the reinvention of an Igbo cultural assemblage through two veritable initiatives namely; *Ahiajoku* lecture series in 1979 during Nigeria's second republic and *Odenigbo* by the Catholic arch Bishop of Owerri diocese His Grace the Rt. Rev Dr A J V Obinna in 2006 with the aim of reinstating Igbo cultural heritage. These seem not to have meaningfully transformed the Osu caste stigmatization.

The torments of Umuaka, Ifakala, Orodo and Umode were a mere preview of what lay in store for a wider understanding of caste stigmatization. The Igbo inevitably has turned into a symbol of subtle but uncontrollable discrimination in which conflict repeatedly resurfaces as the real threat to their development. The inimical effects of such trends show the enormity of the conflicts in the broader Igbo polity.

Whereas the Diala are comfortable with the status quo, the Osu on the other hand, clamour for status transformation, value re-orientation and institutional overhaul in accordance with constitutional and democratic principles.

In 2011, a discourse on the 2003 conflict in Umuaka in Njaba LGA recounted that ; "the caste phenomenon is deeper than you see it, we had a similar conflict in the 1980s, we acknowledge its abolition but do not wish to bring curse upon ourselves intermingling with the Osu, we have limits and boundaries to our interactions" (Ordu, 2013).

Victor Dike elsewhere linked the "ethnic action set" to a closer approximation of the Osu caste practices in Eastern Nigerian politics when he observed that; "Like ethnicity, the system could influence a person's voting behavior. In some communities, the die-hard would not give political support to an "Osu" for political office to represent the community, even if that person is better qualified politician than the "Diala". His group could vote against any person who suggests jettisoning of the system" (Dike, 2007:9). This scenario played itself out in a "civilized" town around Owerri Imo State axis where an influential and highly educated female Osu politician in the majority Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP) in Nigeria's nascent democracy could hardly win any elective position. Similar restrictions to political office holding is documented. Allport (1979:52) recounts that; "The discriminatory Osu practices involves inequality in freedom of movement and choice of residence, inequality in the right of peaceful association, inequality in the enjoyment of the right to marry and establish a family, (and) inequality in access to public office".

In the post-1990 Igbo, a major challenge remains the need to design institutions with procedures and practices that are socially rooted in the task of constructing equality, unity and anti-stigmatizing practices. Between 1990 to 2012 the social interaction of the Osu and Diala communities in Igboland were no better than they were in the pre-colonial era except for the esoteric cultural practices such as use of the former for occasional rituals and sacrifices. For instance across twenty Osu communities in Eastern Nigeria sampled between 1999-2013 there were only 1% evidence of Osu females married by the Diala males. On the contrary, 3% Osu males married the Diala females amidst threats and violent opposition by Diala relatives and family members (Field Survey, 2012).

Okechukwu Adeniyi President Oruku Town Union (OTU) Enugu supported the strained marriage relationship and states that there are two thing(s) one cannot change in this life i.e destiny and identity.... If you are an Osu and wants to marry, go to an Osu society or Town after all no girl is more beautiful than the other, because if you see a girl in Enugu and think that she is the most beautiful you are making a mistake because if you go to Imo, you will see another one you may call most beautiful (Adeniyi, 2012).

The severity of marriage discrimination in Orodo community was reinforced by an Osu, Ezebunwa who opined that it is easier for a cow to pass through the eye of a needle than for a Diala to marry an Osu (Umahi,2012).

In 2011 at Ogbaku community in Mbaitolu local Government Area Imo State, “A talk-of-the-town wedding took place between Mr. Vincent de Paul Ohiri and former Miss Ann Nwokeocha at St. Kelvin’s Catholic Church, Ogbaku, in Mbaitoli Local Government Area of Imo State on Saturday, July 30, 2011. Conferring a historic status on the event, over 10 priests officiated, even as the episcopal Vicar of Ogbaku, Zone III branded the bride a martyr because of the circumstances surrounding the marriage....The Ohiris saw the wedding as a conquest of sorts, but for the Nwokeochas it was a catastrophe, an abomination. According to a source, “Ann, a Diala was ostracized from her family for consenting to marry a man, who the family described as Osu.” It was gathered that even while going through the three months wedding counseling, she stayed outside the family, who made mockery of her and generally treated her with utter contempt and disdain (Umahi,2012).

The long history of Osu caste stigmatization which from every calculus is a norm among the Igbos, will be difficult to transform as the processes of social transformation are not just concurrent events rather part of a broader dynamic of human existence and interaction. While substantive cultural changes may have occurred following Western christianity, many of these “changes” also exhibit an illusory quality .

In a 2009 sample of twenty Osu and Diala communities in urban and rural areas with focus on a decade interaction and outcome matrix -1999 to 2013, the results showed that severed social relationships exist between the osu and the diala as follows;

**Table1.1.** *Diala and Osu Interaction/Outcome Matrix 1999 to 2013*

Areas of Interaction	Interaction		Outcome	Percentage
	Rural Areas	Urban Areas		
<b>Marriage</b>	Obvious discrimination of the Osu by the Diala	Subtle diala/osu casted discrimination	Marital Dissociation	98
<b>Cultural</b>	Obvious Stigmatization, discrimination and alienation of the osu by the diala	Covert Stigmatization, and discrimination of the <i>Osu</i> by the <i>Diala</i>	Cultural de-alignment and withdrawal of the <i>Osu</i>	75
<b>Ezeship Tittle</b>	Obvious Disputes, rivalry, wrangling, crisis, clashes	Subtle tension, fissure, rivalry, latent and manifest discrimination	Alienation of the <i>Osu</i> from traditional title holding	97
<b>Employment Opportunities</b>	<i>Osu</i> discriminate the <i>Dialas</i>	Pervasive discrimination by the <i>Osu</i> over the <i>Diala</i>	Strive by the <i>Osu</i> to outsmart the <i>Diala</i> in white collar jobs and western education.	88
<b>Elective Political offices</b>	Obvious Discrimination by the diala against the osu	Subtle discrimination by the diala against the osu	Subtle discrimination by the diala against the osu Marginalization of the osu by the diala in elective political offices.	76

Source: Author’s Field Survey 2013

## 6. CONCLUSION

Rearticulating some of the critical strategies of democracy and caste transformation is important to both redress and disrupt the caste stigmatization in practice in contemporary Igbo society in particular, in the age of Western liberal democracy. Osu caste discrimination, "is a distinctive and interesting yet contradictory cultural practice. The paper injects a historical character in the study of Igbo caste system, it deployed case analysis to provide concrete evidence of caste stigmatization in the era of democracy.

Igbo historicity provides a rich cultural heritage anchored on osu caste practices. Such historical exploration is important to both, new comers, researchers and policy makers seeking to understand the dynamics of Osu caste system among the Igbo. It has a long history which dates back to several decades.

The egalitarian and republican Igbo society has a stratified and systemic mode of social relations. The *Oha* or elders council is the highest policy making body encompassing heads of every extended family (Amadi and Agena, 2014). This is followed by the *Umunna* which forms a wider family unit headed by the most senior male member of the extended family.

The Igbo cultural practice is in relation to the historically varying institutions of patriarchal domination. Women are less integrated into such key discourses as caste system and practices although the systemically structured patterns gives room for women participation in key development projects as members of specialized social groups such as the *Umuada* (daughters of the land) but not in core decision making processes on governance or similar traditional issues of high temporality and spirituality such as rituals.

Reframing Osu caste system as patriarchal presupposes male domination and aptly foregrounds the asymmetrical relationship between men and women. Democracy supposedly confronts the equation of inequality riddled in the caste system and similar cultural practices, and suggests that such practices are socially constructed, open to other configurations and possible transformation (Dike, 1992).

As a traditionalist will argue, caste concept depicts cultural values as the starting point for understanding the Igbo identity and connects institutionalized heritage with the norms and ethos and the patriarchal relations of social relations of production including the slaves, laborers and vagrants involved in the dialectics of material production.

Although cultural formations are centrally linked to the Igbo traditional family system which extended family system constitute an integral component of role specifications such as security, traditional agricultural practices and ability to own several large farms and yam bans as basis of material wealth.

In response to a series of global social changes and associated critical currents in intellectual and political contexts, the colonial state fostered similar inequality through the divide and rule mechanism and poorly had a firm grip on the logic of cultural transformation other than propagation and imposition of Western values, economic exploitation and specifically Christian religion which mutated the African cultural values. Such cultural dislodgements are well documented in debates on contemporary culture mutation (Amadi and Agena, 2014) yet the colonial state was ineffectual in abolishing the osu cast practice. (Dike, 2002). This is one of the numerous failures of colonialism.

Repealing caste system attempts to expose and disrupt the interface of patriarchal social structures with Western values, expanding the sphere of accumulation ethos to the resurgent globalization and neo imperialism.

Critical perspectives on the ongoing cultural disarticulation abound (Kwame, 2006; Amadi and Agena, 2014). Some largely implicate Western interests as disrupting the entrenched patriarchy inherent in African culture. Most of the debates oppose the capitalist debates as anti –developmental and riddled with exploitation and inequality, thus does not provide a prospective development prognosis (Amin, 2002; Calinicos, 2011)

These criticisms were buttressed by escalating claims in the West that issues such as modernization are synonymous to development of the periphery societies resulting to the alternative and post modernity scholarship (Appadurai, 1996; Ferguson, 1996; Weinsten, 2008). Thus, such alternatives could

bridge the gap of inequality and redirect the false development claims of Western supremacist, at the expense of an emancipatory project which could reinvigorate more equitable social formation.

This calls for an internal re-evaluation of Osu caste system intersected with the circulation of newly forming critical knowledges such as Afrocentrism, postcolonial criticism, post-structuralism, eco-Marxism, and post-modernism, and post- developmentalism brought about a rethinking of democracy transformation.

Democracy is seen as a form of government which can directly channel Osu conflicts like similar local conflicts into proper directions for resolution. However in Igboland as in most periphery societies the classic elements of liberal democracy –freedom, equality, rule of law etc are in question because democracy seem not to have delivered such dividends effectively. The central defect has been lack of democracy culture.

Thus, the challenges of holding tenaciously to democratic ideals for radical caste transformation might be bleak as the current workings of democracy seem challenged. However, this does not presuppose a pessimistic view point rather a clamor for novel awareness for broader policy discourse to redirect the taken for granted Osu caste discrimination and similar local conflicts, thus such drivers are evidence of fair play ground provided by democracy for different sheds of opinion and varying social classes to interrogate the basis for their marginalization.

A key question is what this imperative imply for the “quality” of Igbo and indeed African democratization. Issues of democracy, Osu caste system and peaceful social order will continue to remain topical in the political landscape of the Igbo especially at the dawn of Nigeria’s nascent democracy.

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