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The Osu Institution in Igbo Society: *Outcasts, Priestly Functions, and the Atlantic Slave Trade*

By Idenze Ezeme

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FEATURE
IMAGE

Alusi shrine with its priest (seated) and the osu ('ritual slave'), Orsu, West Isuama Igbo. Photograph by G. I. Jones, 1930s. Jones Archive, Southern Illinois University

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In different Igbo societies, Osu are seen as outcasts or are part of a caste system. It has made people known as Osu discriminated against, especially in terms of who they can marry and can not, and even restricted from taking certain political posts. Osu gained protection from divinities, which protected them from slavery during the Atlantic slave trade in particular. To the extent that it was exempt from being charged for certain social duties and crimes.

01

Osu in Names and Religious Devotion

In Igbo names, osu is used in the sense of devotee of a deity, such as Osunjoku and Osuala. The concept of being linked with people cursed, such as being associated with good things like fame and beauty, doesn't align with those who are treated as an outcast group. The perspective of the OSU Foundation seems to be the same as that of some Igbo titles, such as Igwe and eze.

02

Social Death and Exclusion

When Osu's life was spared, he was considered dead in all social life. This led to a situation where anyone associated with him was assumed to have a ritual impurity, resulting in social contamination. This is the belief that he could not have anything to do with the living, and could also not attend the assembly of free-born. Osu, as a sacrifice, meant that they were avoided as ritually 'dead' people whom the 'living' should avoid.

03

The Osu and the Atlantic Slave Trade

Osu treatment was very different. For example, osu was not given full burials in so many places due to the belief, of which is that they were disconnected from a lineage and an afterlife. Wealthy people who were titled had large funerals and were the icons of their lineages. A lot of people who became OSU were during the Atlantic slave trade due to the inflow of people seeking sanctuary from slavery. It has a high chance of revealing the extent to which the current function of a group of people seen as osu is a legacy of that particular era.

04

Priestly Functions of the Osu

Osu's responsibility for tending shrines and rendering the suggestion that the institution presented a priestly function even before the

Atlantic slave trade, but then the trade turns out to change its character. After the market that Osu served, every market had a priest who was also called Osu, after the name of the market that he served. At the same time, there were Osuoke (for the Eke market), Osunkwo (Nkwo market), Osuawho (Awho market), and Osuoye (Oye market). In words, the Aro people used the term *osu* to designate the priest. And this is how they all sum it up.

The *osu* responsibility for tending shrines supports the suggestion that the institution represented a priestly function before the Atlantic slave trade, but that the trade changed its character (J.G. Okoro 1996; Umo n.d.:20). Every market had a priest who was also called *osu*, after the name of the market that he served. Thus, there were Osueke (for the Eke market), Osuawho (Awho market), Osunkwo (Nkwo market), and Osuoye (Oye Market). In other words, Aro people used the term *osu* to designate the priest.

Nwokeji, G. U. (2010). The slave trade and culture in the Bight of Biafra: An African society in the Atlantic world (p. 199). Cambridge University Press.

It was recorded that OSU was not treated badly for the community development levels or paying tax; this wasn't because they were neither well-off to pay but was because they were neither been asked to pay nor disturbed for failure to do so, this was the immunity that the "osu" appreciated that gave them the zeal sometimes to indulge with people's property and go free, since there was nobody to make such a demand.

Okeke, H. C. (2020). The spirituality of the Igbo People of Nigeria (p. 88). [Publisher]. The Aro adopted a group which the central Igbo people rejected. Why then did the institution appear in Arondizuogo towards the end of the century? If only the Atlantic slave trade had changed the character of the institution in other parts of Igbo land, Arondizuogo's generation would have generated the trades that changed the ending.

Thus, the Aro embraced a group which central Igbo people rejected. Why then did the institution emerge in Arondizuogu toward the end of the century?

If the Atlantic slave trade changed the character of the institution in other parts of Igboland, it was the ending of the trade that generated these changes in Arondizuogu.⁴⁰

One free family, running away from their creditor, sought refuge in the Haba deity in another lineage-group.⁴¹ At the destination deity, the refugee would say the ritual: "*Arusi, mbaa!*" (Shrine, I submit myself to your protection).⁴²

Nwokeji, G. U. (2010). The slave trade and culture in the Bight of Biafra: An African society in the Atlantic world (p. 199). Cambridge University Press.

As an example of how some attitudes towards people may have been different, OSU was singled out as a discriminated or outcast group. The fact that he is different from others is just how people perceive him. Cause he's been seen as an outcast. This was why, in all aspects of social, OSU was considered dead, even when the life of OSU was spared.

There's a history of people who were not considered OSU living near or incorporating those considered OSU. The people of Idemmili and most of the towns surrounding the Nri Kingdom did not actually practice the Osu system, as everyone was considered equal in their religious belief, which is the Nri Igbo cosmology. The protection OSU gained from divinity protected them from being sold into slavery. So this was that the Atlantic slave trade may have a hand in bringing about or making worse the discrimination against Osu.

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Nze is an Igbo history and culture enthusiast with an in-depth passion for exploring the rich cultural heritage, traditions, and historical narratives of the Igbo people. His works is mostly focused on pre-colonial Igbo societies, traditional belief systems, leadership systems, and the impact of European colonialism.



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