



Nigeria - Researched and compiled by the Refugee Documentation Centre of Ireland on 26 and 27 September 2012

Information on the current treatment of the Osu caste by the Igbo tribe

A report by the *UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD)* under the heading 'Concerns and recommendations' states:

"While noting that the 1958 Osu Abolition Law legally abolished work- and descent-based discrimination, the Committee remains concerned about persistent allegations that members of the Osu and other similar communities are still subjected to social exclusion, segregation and mistreatment, as well as discrimination in employment and marriage (arts. 2, 3 and 5)." (UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) (27 March 2007) *UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination: Concluding Observations, Nigeria*, par.15)

A response by the *Australian Refugee Review Tribunal* under the heading 'Are there traditional Igbo beliefs which cause people to be treated as outcasts and driven from their communities?' states:

"In 2003, a professor of anthropology and expert on Igbo socio-cultural issues advised that Osu is more of a status than a caste, although it shares certain caste characteristics, including the belief that it is contagious. Osu status is hereditary, although it can also be acquired through marriage. Osu status 'cannot generally be overcome'. A University of Lagos scholar similarly advises that Osu status is designated 'by virtue of birth'. As such, 'it is not a person's actions but their heritage that marks them as Osu'. According to expert advice provided in 1999, the Osu are 'hereditary cult slaves'. Although outwardly indistinguishable from the wider Igbo community, Osu live in separate villages and are unable to marry Igbo 'freemen/women'. If an Igbo child is given to an Osu as a slave, or a sacrifice, that child and their descendants are outcast from the general Igbo community. A late Nigerian professor who was also an Igbo advised that Osu is 'still a status people know but don't talk about'.

In 1999, the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (IRB) cited a professor at the Africana Studies and Research Centre at Cornell University, who advised that the Osu are a slave caste 'in terms of their loss of freedoms'. Osu are regarded as 'socially inferior to other Igbo' and are 'despised'. Osu members could be sacrificed on order of the High Priest of the Court, although since 'the designation of persons as Osu was abolished through legislation over thirty years ago', it is unlikely that Osu members would be sacrificially killed today." (Australian Refugee Review Tribunal (22 October 2010) *Nigeria – NGA37560 – Igbos – Osu – Outcasts – Segregation – Internal relocation – Employment – Education – Marriage*, p.2)

In a section titled 'If so, how do communities treat outcasts?' it states:

"The IDSN reports that the Osu system 'enforces segregation of one section of a community on the basis of an inferior social position'. Osu and their children face ostracism and mistreatment, including being described as 'impure' and 'contaminating', based on the 'widely held belief that touching an Osu automatically turns you into an Osu'. 'Marginalisation of Osu severely impacts on their ability to attain equal rights within the community. Furthermore, in extreme cases, Osu have been the subject of violence in attempts to reinforce the Osu caste system. For example, in 1999, a group of Osu was attacked when attempting to resettle to escape discrimination, resulting in the death of at least one person, the rape of Osu women, and the destruction of their homes." (ibid, p. 3)

A report by the *International Federation for Human Rights* under the heading 'Reality' states:

"...The Osu Caste system evolved out of the cultural/religious practices in Ibo land. The 'Osu Caste System' is an ascribed or imposed status. It is 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. Serious relationship of love or intermarriage between the lower caste and the rest of the community is usually forbidden. At best, the society's contact with the caste group is purely superficial. The Ibo culture has influenced the behaviour of the people, and the pace of its socioeconomic development. The prejudice amongst the Ibos is still very strong that the Osus are sacrificial lambs to the gods or dedicated to the gods. This impacts negatively on the rights of persons in this group in several respects. For instance, Osus that are interested in public office do not get the necessary support from the community except where they were appointed by the Federal Government.

[...]

Everybody in the designated Osu area is automatically pariah, irrespective of one's beauty, level of education or wealth. They are regarded as the lowest species of mankind and are treated with contempt. In a society such as Nigeria where laws are disregarded, they are often exposed to public ridicule. The subjection of an entire community to perpetual social misery is an irrational human behaviour, which has brought the entire democratic ideal to ruin." (International Federation for Human Rights (August 2005) *Status of the Implementation of International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination in Nigeria: an Alternative Report* - pg.6)

This report also notes:

"Although Osus are more educated than the free born, the discrimination restricts their level of social attainment or self actualization. The practice makes all Osus to be in the minority, however, the practice impacts negatively more on women. Ordinarily women are not effectively represented in government. Osu women face double discrimination as no Osu woman will get elected into political office when she faces a freeborn at the polls. This reduces the chances of evolving policies that will eliminate the prejudices. Consequently, they do not have a platform to express their views and resentment about the social prejudices. Even when the Federal Government appoints them into public office, there circumscribed within the Federal

sphere whereas the prejudices are at the state level.

The Eastern regional government enacted the Osu Abolition Law of 1958. This law has been adopted by the five states created out of that region over the years. Though the law exists on paper it has not succeeded in removing the prejudices because of lack of enforcement mechanism; furthermore nobody has been prosecuted since the coming into being of the law." (Ibid, p .8)

A report by *BBC News* states:

"Pastor Cosmos Aneke Chiedozie is about to make an admission that virtually no Nigerian like him would be prepared to make.

'My grandfather was an Osu,' he says.

[...]

Among the Igbo people of eastern Nigeria the Osu are outcasts, the equivalent of being an 'untouchable'.

Years ago he and his family would be shunned by society, banished from communal land, banned from village life and refused the right to marry anyone not from an Osu family." (BBC News (7 April 2009) *The story of Nigeria's 'untouchables'* - Andrew Walker)

In a section titled 'Marriage' it notes:

"The vehemence of the tradition has weakened over the last 50 years.

Nowadays the only trouble the Osu encounter is when they try to get married. But the fear of social stigma is still strong - to the point that most would never admit to being an Osu." (ibid)

References:

Australian Refugee Review Tribunal (22 October 2010) *Nigeria – NGA37560 – Igbos – Osu – Outcasts – Segregation – Internal relocation – Employment – Education – Marriage*
http://www.ecoi.net/file_upload/1788_1336829729_nga37560.pdf
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BBC News (7 April 2009) *The story of Nigeria's 'untouchables'* - Andrew Walker
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/7977734.stm>
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<http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/pdfid/46f1468e0.pdf>
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UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) (27 March 2007) *UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination: Concluding Observations, Nigeria*
<http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/pdfid/462f5dea2.pdf>
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This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Refugee Documentation Centre within time constraints. This response is not and does not purport to be conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Please read in full all documents referred to.

Sources Consulted:

All Africa
Amnesty International
BBC News
Electronic Immigration Network (EIN)
European Country of Origin Information Network
Human Rights Watch
Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC)
International Federation for Human Rights
Lexis Nexis
Minority Rights Group International
UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD)
UN Human Rights Council
United Kingdom Home Offices
United States Department of State