

Culture Bias in Mate Selection: The Case of “Ohu” Caste System in the 21st Century Igboland

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Abstract

Human social life finds expression in culture. Culture is known to be dynamic. Change is one permanent feature of human existence in all spheres. However, in Igboland one cultural practice has refused to bulge to the vagaries of change that have transverse all the nook and crannies of that society- the ‘Osu’/’Ohu’ caste system. This very cultural practice pre-dates the coming of Europeans to Africa. It is an inhuman cultural practice that operates in the sphere of social relationship. It is discriminatory and unjust when viewed from all angles. Despite increased knowledge and the embrace modern religions this cultural practice has refused to die with time. The worst is that just as the culture makes it a taboo, people dread any open and frank discuss on the issue. Most people prefer to keep it quiet hoping that it will go away. Yet the undercurrent is very strong. This is buttressed when you consider the way society react and treat people who defy this cultural practice. There is an automatic lose of place is social ranking among the people of such community, no matter the height of your achieved status.

Keywords: social discrimination, outcaste, ‘osu’, ‘ohu’, Igboland.

Introduction

To a very large extent one’s cultural values influence one’s choice of marriage partner. Many factors are put into consideration before marriage is contracted. Many African societies have undergone some changes, but there are some cultural traits that have remained unyielding in the face of social changes. Some cultural factors are given preference in making choice of marriage partner. People of one’s ethnic origin are usually preferred. In some societies marriage is regulated by some strong cultural considerations. In the South-eastern part of Nigeria there are some societies that their culture stipulates who to marry and who not to, not as in incest, cousin marriage, but some are considered as unclean. It is considered a taboo for a ‘freeborn’ to contract marriage with a person from the ‘Osu’ or ‘Ohu’ caste. Chinua Achebe in his ‘No Longer at Ease’ highlighted this very cultural practice. There are always some cultural considerations before marriages are contracted. In the west, dating is a vital medium for mate selection. It affords the would-be couples the opportunity to know themselves better so as to determine if they can co-habit or live as husband and wife. In the process of agreeing to be joined together as husband and wife, the parties take a lot of factors into considerations. Such factors include psychological, physical, economic, and sociological factors.

Today in many African societies, young people are having greater say in who they marry. Many people are living outside their places of origin. This affords people opportunity of meeting people from different parts of the country and the world (thanks to internet). In Nigeria marriage takes two forms, the Western/Christian type that are conducted by the church and the traditional type. Many people go through these two types of marriage. The role of families and family members are very vital in contracting marriage in Nigerian societies. The consents of the intending couples’ families are sought for and in some cases approval must be secured before marriage can take place. They would-be couples may be leaving outside of their villages, even in foreign countries, yet families take pains to investigate the background of their would-be in-law in order to ascertain his or her marriagability according to their cultural prescription. The influence of culture as shared belief and experience is very strong. The common trend is that the Church/Western wedding can take place where the couples are resident, the traditional one usually take place at the home towns of the intending spouse (the female). Not many people will contract marriage that family members are opposed to, especially close family members. It is believed that parental blessing in marriage is very vital.

Despite the cosmopolitan appearance of our cities and the influence of religion in our life, mate selection in some cultures and sub-groups have continued to be guided by the dictates of long established traditions. The observance of the exogamy and endogamy traditions of these groups has continued.

The long held traditions of these groups have continued to guide the choice of partners despite their exposure to western influences and modern religious beliefs. One major tradition among the Igbo in the south-eastern part of Nigeria is the caste system; the classification of the members of the communities into free-born (diala) and outcaste (osu,ohu). Marriage between these two groups is forbidden by tradition. Over 80% of the people profess the Christian faith. A very good percentage of the people is exposed to western education and very well traveled. However, this culture of segregation has refused to fade away with modernity and Christian religion influence. This work is an attempt to assess the effect of this cultural practice in contemporary Igbo society. More people have received western education and the influence of western life style is very evident in the lives of the people. What is the state of this cultural practice on this people?

This work is carried out among the people of Oguta community in Oguta Local Government Area of Imo State in Nigeria. This is a sub-group in the Igbo speaking People of Nigeria found predominantly in the South – Eastern part of Nigeria.

Clarification of Concept

While ‘osu and ‘ohu’ are used interchangeably in many write ups, in Igbo culture, the two are not entirely the same. ‘Osu’ is one whose ancestors were dedicated to the servitude of a deity. The circumstance under which these people came to such servitude varies. However, ‘ohu’ is usually one whose parents or one of the parent were domestic slave. They share common features which include the following; their positions are hereditary, ascriptive, they are both considered inferior to the freeborns in the society. They are denied certain rights and privileges. Marriage between them and the freeborns are forbidden. They are of a lower status in the society. Despite these similarities, many consider the case of the ‘ohu’ milder than the ‘osu’. In some communities the slave can buy his/her freedom, in some it is not possible. Though these descendants of slaves are no longer in the service of their slave masters yet they are regarded as such. Some communities do not have the ‘osu’ while some have both. The community in which this research work took place has only the presence of ‘ohu’.

Objective of the study

This study is an attempt to ascertain the level of some cultural considerations in mate selection among the youths in the 21st century.

The objective of the study is to ascertain the extent cultural practice among a people influence their choice of marriage partner.

Significance of the study.

The lingering cultural taboos and discriminations in some societies have defied social change. Among some sub-groups of the Igbo of Nigeria, there exist some cultural discriminatory practices that divide the society into two parallel sub-groups; ‘Diala’ and ‘Osu’/‘Ohu’. Blossoming relations has been cut short on discovering that one of the partner is of the outcaste group. We seek to ascertain the prevalence of this cultural practice in contemporary Igbo society. It is our opinion that the extent of influence of this cultural practice is on the decline over the years. Therefore, this study is designed to test this view.

Discrimination and prejudice hinder social integration. They also impede development. A society where such practices exist may not enjoy the full benefits of committed collective contributions from its members. Therefore with this study, we intend to ascertain the level of belongingness that its different members feel and their readiness to contribute to the advancement of their society/community. A group or an individual will not show commitment to a society or organization that they/he feel discriminates against them/him. The study will help in assessing the commitments of the various groups to the larger group/society.

Scope/Limitations.

The cultural practice under consideration in this study is wide spread among the Igbo speaking people of Nigeria, it is absent in some communities. Imo State is one of the five Igbo speaking States in Nigeria. This ‘Osu’/‘Ohu’ caste practice is very strong in the State. The study did not cover the entire State, one Local Government Area in the State was chosen for the study: Oguta.

This study was carried out in Oguta, in Imo State. The respondents are indigenes of the town.

Due to fund, we could not extend this study beyond the one community for now.

Literature Review.

Goode (1970) writing on choice of mate among various racial and ethnic groups stated that norms of a group determine ‘eligible’ and ‘ineligible’ in marriage. He wrote that marriage is like a market which could be ‘open’ or ‘closed’, the rule of homogamy which group observe and other psychological factors like love, taste, etc contribute to determining who one chooses as a marriage partner. In this instance ‘eligible’ or ‘ineligible’, ‘open’ or ‘closed’ does not refer to norms such as incest or marriage forbidden among consanguine, but rather a practice that has to do with social labeling of a particular group. Likewise Thomas (1960), while observing that psychologists place emphasis on the individual physical and psychological characteristics, sociologists stress factors like ethnic origin, residential propinquity, race, religion, socio-economic status, little attention has been paid to cultural influence on marriage.

Straus (1969), in his research on how people within the same class marry themselves measured race, class, religion, ethnic origin and age established a correlation between these factors and culture. Culture places limitations on individual’s choice of mate. Smith (1973), in his study established that parents have influence over their children’s choice of mate. Apart from parental influence over children’s choice of partner, the culture of the people that places its people on different ascriptive strata prescribes sanctions in case of violation of the rule. Just

like one can be demoted to a lower case in India in case of inter-caste marriage, so also in some Igbo societies. Achebe in his novels revealed this cultural norm in Igbo land. In “things Fall Apart”, he described the ‘osu’ as a “person dedicated to a god, a thing set apart – a taboo forever and his children after him. He could neither marry nor be married by the freeborn. He was, in fact, an outcast, living in a special area of the village, close to the Great Shrine. Wherever he went, he carried with him the mark of his forbidden caste – long tangled dirty hair”, while it was the theme of the novel “No Longer at Ease” where he gave an account of how the marriage between Obi Okonkwo and Clara could not go ahead because Clara is from the ‘osu’ caste. Writing on the ‘osu’ caste system, Dike, V. described it as ..., “a relic of the indigenous religious practice of the Igbos is the dehumanizing Osu caste system, which has divided and alienated the Igbos.”

The extent culture influence who we marry has received little attention among sociologists. Sociologists have over the years shown little interest on this area. This is one of the factors that inspired us to carry out this research.

Methodology

This study was centered on one the communities that we understand this practice have endured. It was carried in two stages; the first stage, we conducted the research with the sample we generated from among the people that are permanent residents of the community. Stage two; was with partial resident of the community. This group of respondents is indigenes of the community but is resident outside the community; they visit from time to time, or come back during special occasions. To get this group we scheduled to come around during the period when large numbers of them come back home and the best time was either Easter or Christmas. We chose the latter. This is borne out the facts that apart from the Christmas break it is also the end of the year and it attracts more returnees.

In selecting our sample, we adopted the purposeful/judgemental sampling technique. This was chosen for the following reasons. One, there is the need to capture the two groups of people within the community. Two the objective of the study demands we get their diverse views as one group opinion or experience is not enough to draw conclusion.

The knowledge of an indigene of the area was vital in identifying and distinguishing between the two groups of people. Therefore we recruited some indigenes of the area that helped in the research. A total of 210 samples were taken and each group was assigned 105. The sample was divided into married and unmarried. Third group was the elders (elders in the community). For this group, we carried out interviews as majority of them are illiterate.

Table 1: showing raw figure of the sample distribution.

Fig.1

Permanent residents	105
Occasional residents	105
Total	210

Among the married we allocated 40 samples apiece i.e. the two different groups, among the unmarried we allocated 50 samples apiece i.e. the two different groups, and the remaining 10 samples were taken from the elders in the two groups, 5 samples apiece. This last group was not administered questionnaire. Due to their level of literacy, we held interviews with them. The questions were structure and tailored to reflect the objective of the research. After the questionnaires were returned we solicited and held further interviews with some of our respondents for further indept discussion on some of our research questions.

Table 2. distribution of population sample showing the various categories of population sample.

	Married	Unmarried	Elders	
Permanent Residents	40	60	5	105
Occasional Residents	40	60	5	105
Total	80	120	10	210

Data Presentation, Findings and Analysis

From the research the following findings were made;

The factors considered are; physical attraction, compatibility, economic comfort, educational attainment, family background, social group: ‘ohu’ (outcaste), ‘diala’ (freeborn), religious affiliation, religious (God fearing).

On the test question, “if you are a freeborn, will you marry an outcaste?” 68% of our respondents said NO, 28% said YES, while 4% said NOT SURE (undecided).

The above responses could be because our respondents included both ‘freeborns’ and ‘outcastes’. The 4% undecided came from the young unmarried ones. We believe that majority of the 68% respondents that answered NO to inter-marriage must come from the ‘freeborns’ and some outcaste who feel that they will not like to be subjected to discrimination and humiliation that ‘outcastes’ are subjected to if they inter-marry.

All of our respondents claimed to be aware of the existence of this cultural barrier between freeborn and

outcastes in their community.

For question was asked people who are parents; if they will sanction a marriage between their child and an outcaste less than 15% said YES.

However, when we put the question to them “if they can marry anybody that meets all their criteria for marriagability who is an ‘outcaste’ (‘ohu’); more than 52% said THEY WILL NOT.

We also discovered that inquiry into background of intending in-law are still carried out by many parents today even among the highly educated. A story was told of two people of Igbo extraction who met in the United States of America went into courtship and agreed to marry. Eventually when they came down to Nigeria to notify their parents and to carry out their traditional marriage rite according to Igbo tradition. On one of the visits of the would-be groom to the village of the would-be bride, he ran into a friend from the States who happened to be an indigene of the town. When he told his friend his mission in his town, the friend informed him of the status of his fiancé in the village, that she is ‘ohu’. And that was who the marriage was called off.

We can therefore argue that people yield to cultural dictates when they are confronted with choice that goes against their personal opinion. ESPECIALLY WHEN THEIR ACTION REQUIRES SOCIETAL EVALUATION AND IT HAS LASTING EFFECTS.

One cultural prescription was tested among our respondents to ascertain the extent it can influence their choice of partner: that is inter-marriage between the ‘freeborn’ and ‘outcaste’, to this we discovered that among the youths they care less about this distinction as long as the individual meets other variables such as being well-to-do, being attractive, loving or caring, or religious. However among the married, the finding showed that cultural prescription mattered. There were two cases of failed attempts to marry the persons they would have loved to marry. According to their narrative when they discovered that one of the comes from the social group their culture prohibits inter-marriage with, they could not receive the support and backings of their parents for the marriage, and they made cancelled the marriage. There was one case of a marriage against such cultural prohibition. They couples said that the family of the ‘freeborn’ has ostracized and deserted the woman as she refused to yield to the pressure from parents and relative to opt out of the marriage.

The offsprings from such wedlock are neither here or there (Ubu na Ifuru’) but more of there than here because they are not accepted as freeborns therefore they tend to identify with the discriminated group. Such practice breeds strong resentment by people for no fault of theirs see themselves subjected to stigmatization and discrimination. No wonder the underlying, smoldering anger erupts once in a while into open confrontation that turn violent.

There is another trend that we discovered; the issue is much stronger when such marriage involves individuals from the same community or neighbouring community. When marriage involves persons from distance places the desire to ascertain the status of such would-be spouse reduces. In our community of study, we discovered that some men from the community who are from the social group of the outcaste married women who are ‘freeborn’ but not from that community. However, this was with no knowledge of the woman who gets trapped because upon finding out, much has been committed into the union, for example children have been gotten.

From this community one can say that social change has had little impact on the reality on ground. More than 75% of our respondents spoke against such culture. However 57% said that there is nothing that they can do to change the situation. 86% of the respondents agreed that the culture breeds mistrust and hatred among the people. The fear of the ‘freeborns’ who desire to see this culture proscribed is that legal laws have not been effective, it is like a contagious disease, once you contract it, others flee from you.

While some cultural norms are strictly not followed when marriage is between people from different cultures or ethnicity, there is always strong observance of cultural taboos when the individual comes from the same ethnic stock. The closer the cultural affinity, the stronger the observance of the cultural taboos.

Conclusion

From our research we discovered that there strong cultural consideration when marriage is between individual from similar cultural background. The influence of culture is very strong when it comes to taboo of ‘Osu’/’Ohu’ or caste system in practicing Igbo communities. We discovered that they practice persists not purely out of religious consideration but significantly out of aggrandizement. There is this attitude of ‘it is not my making’ on the part of the freeborn. There is some weariness regarding the practice by a good percentage of the people but the crux lies on who will take the initiative? And how can you carry everybody along? In today’s society, they acknowledge that the practice serves little or no use.

Recommendations

We discovered that the major obstacle to abolishing this cultural practice is segregation. Therefore, the Government should work with the communities to desegregate those traditions that support this practice. No member of the community should be denied any right to attain or be conferred with any traditional title on the

basis of being an outcaste. The Christian community should due more to practice what they teach.

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