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The Practice of Afiye/ Aiyebe Caste System in Yala-Ikom (Yala Nkum), Ikom Local Government Area of Cross River State, Nigeria

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Abstract:

The practice of Afiye/ Aiyebe Caste System is an age-long practice among the Yala communities of Cross River State, Nigeria. Some works have been done on this practice among the Yala of Yala Local government and of the Obubra Local Government Areas, but no such work had been done on the Yala-Ikom of Ikom Local Government Area. This is not just for historical and record purposes, but also to appraise this practice among the Yala-Ikom and indeed the entire Yala; to get recommendations which will help in the growth and further development of Yala land in general. The paper reflects on the rigid cultural practices of the Yala people in pre-mordial times and the seemingly positive aspect that have taken place among the Yala -Ikom communities of Cross River State. Thus, this research is seen as a welcome development, which could be used as a parameter for the other Yala communities in casting to the dustbin of history these practices that are against the welfare, development and progress of Yala people in general.

Keywords: Afiye, Aiyebe, Yala-Ikom, Slavery

Introduction

According to the Ibos ‘Osu’ is a local Igbo name meaning ‘outcast’. From history, the Osus are seen as a group of individuals within the region who, according to some myths or unverified custom, culture and traditions were believed to be either “sold into slavery to others or offered as

sacrifices to the local deities ('Alusi) demanding human offerings during cultural festivals, ultimately leading to their enslavement. They are also believed to arise from ostracism, wherein "those who defied the king's orders or community decisions were banished", thus resulting in the victims and their descendants being labeled as Osu (outcast). The same applies to the Afiye, which is seen as a term used for the victims of caste system among the Yala communities of Cross River State. Literally, it refers to slaves. Its singular form is 'Ofiye' and the plural form is 'Afiye'. The classification of afiye was also made of some of these categories of people as 'Edro ofiye' meaning these are not principally regarded as full slaves; however, the stigmatization does not cease completely. Edro Ofiye is one whose father is an ofiye but the mother is not. There is also other terms used to address these group of persons, also known as 'Aiyebe' this literally means "children of animal". It is a derogatory term which is another name used to address the same category of human beings as Afiye or slaves. Some other names include- leghi Caste: this is a caste system among the Adamawa people. They face a lot of discriminations and ojola- literally meaning 'that thing'. In one sense, it refers to a thing not significant, by implication the Afiye.

The issue of incarceration of some members of the human society has been a very disturbing phenomenon in human existence. Though this research is based on a traditional and historical caste system among the Yala people of Ikom Local government Area of Cross River State, the practice is pre-dominant in most Yala communities and their kith and kin in Benue, Nassarawa and Enugu States of Nigeria. It also manifests in Igboland, most especially the Osu, Ohu and Ume Caste Systems. Among, the Adamawa people of Adamawa State, there are the Leghi caste system. This practice is not peculiar to Nigeria or Africa alone, it is a predominant phenomenon in the world, especially in countries such as India, Burma, etc. This caste invariably leads to inequality and all the ills that are associated with these practices (Ugobude, 2018).

The implications are therefore very enormous as the entire society is affected in one way or the other by the practice of Afiye and Aiyebe caste system among the Yala people in general and the Yala-Ikom in particular. As earlier indicated, this practice is predominant in many societies, however, its persistence among the Yala people calls for concern. According to Onah (2013: 225-

226), the implications include religious factors, cultural identity, socio-political factors as well as economic factors. The work therefore examined the practice in the Yala-Ikom area, indicating the areas of change(s) and therefore recommends a way out, which will invariably lead to a peaceful, developing and united Yala community.

Geographical Location of Yala-Ikom

Ikom Local Government Area is situated in the central part of Cross River. It is posited that the area has a long history that dates back to the 16th century. The Yala people are part and parcel of Ikom history. Using a handheld Germin-18 Global Positioning System (GPS), the geographic coordinates of the area lies between Latitude 5° 9' 06" and 6°12'N of the Equator and Longitude 8° 05' 80" and 9°11'60" E of the Accra meridian. Ikom covers a large area of approximately 1,861,9km². It is one of the largest Local Governments in Cross River State, Ogoja to the North, Obubra to the South, Etung to the East and Boki to the North East, Yala-Nkum as it is often referred to as one of the eleven (11) council wards of Ikom.

These wards serve as the smallest administrative units. According to 2024 Google population projection of the area, the estimated population of Yala Ikom is about ninety two thousand, one hundred and sixty three (92,163) persons. The Yala-Ikom community is located between Ikom main town, Nde three corners to the North, Owom to the East and Etteyang to the south. The Yala in Ikom still maintains the Yala language though with a slight distinct word from that of the Yala of Yala Local Government Area.

The Practice of Afiye Caste among the Yala Ikom (Yala-Nkum)

Osioma and Obi-Obiora, (2024) while looking at the Osu-caste system in the South-East region of Nigeria and international protection of vulnerable and disadvantaged group from a legal appraisal perspective observed that , in some Ibo communities there is still the existence of the Osu-Caste practices, these practices are degrading, dehumanizing and discriminatory despite its abolition many years ago. The authors further posited that the continued practice of the caste system has been perceived as constituting a violation of the provisions of the Nigerian Constitution1 as well as regional and international human rights treaties.

The authors posited that the objective of their study is to investigate how the practice of the Osu caste system violates certain provisions of domestic, regional, and international human rights laws and to make recommendations as to how it can be eradicated. The author found, inter alia, that the practice of the Osu caste system flagrantly violates the provisions of the Nigerian Constitution as well as regional and international human rights instruments. The authors therefore concluded among other things, that the continued practice of the Osu caste system in the South-East region of Nigeria is gravely discriminatory, illegal in all its ramifications and runs contrary to the core principles of dignity of human person and equality of persons inherent in all human beings as enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations and Chapter IV of the Nigerian Constitution.

The author, therefore, urges the Nigerian Government to, as undertaken in article 4(a) of the International Convention for the Elimination of All Form of Racial Discrimination and other human rights instruments, take the necessary legislative measures towards amending its existing criminal laws or enacting new ones, criminalizing the practice of Osu caste system by making it an offence punishable by law.

The practice of Afiye/Aiyebe among the Yala people is often times very difficult to trace. However, it could be described in the words of the Human Right Watch 2001: 1 thus,

Discriminatory and cruel inhuman and degrading treatment of a vast global population has been justified on the basis of Caste. In much of Asia and Africa, caste is the basis for the definition and exclusion of distinct population groups by reason of their descent. Over 250 million worldwide continue to suffer under what is often hidden apartheid of segregation, modern day slavery and other extreme forms of discriminations, exploitations and violence. Caste imposes enormous obstacles to their full attainment of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights.

This caste system among the Yala Ikom people runs from cradle to grave in primordial times with every restriction and discriminatory practices. However, what is interesting about the Yala Ikom Caste is the fact that most of these practices have been abrogated without any repercussions from

the Ancestors, or the effect of ‘igbaniku’ as being advocated by the Yala-Ogoja as reasons for the persistence (Onah, 2013:225). We shall therefore examine this practice in primordial times among the Yala-Ikom and then proceed to establish the practice in modernity.

According to Chief N.N.Ojiji (Ugobude, 2018; Oral interview, 20-04-2022), the discriminatory practices involve the following:

1. They are regarded as a thing or worse an animal, that is why in Yala Obubra, there are referred to as “Aiyebe” literally meaning ‘children of animals’.
2. They are never allowed to become Chiefs of any kind among the people and therefore were barred from using red caps which is a symbol of royalty among the Yala people.
3. They were never allowed to be married to a freeborn or a freeborn marrying any of them. This is believed to be a great taboo (oral interview, Ogar, Enege 10-12-2023).
4. They were buried on a separate date from that of the freeborn, usually a market day (oral interview, Ogar, Osuole, 20-2-2025).
5. In the far primordial times, according to Johnson Odey, (oral interview, 15-3-2025) they were made to escort their owners at death.
6. Another discriminatory treatment is by naming the Afiye/ Aiyebe after a woman (Elder Prince Pius Odipuole, oral interview, 5-2-2024)
7. They were equally never allowed into the traditional ruler’s palace since they were never considered or regarded as true sons and daughters of Yala land.
8. They were always treated with suspicion and disdain.

Modern Trends of the Practice in Yala-Ikom (Yala-Nkum)

As earlier mentioned, one of the most cogent reasons presented by the Yala Ogoja for the persistence of the practice of Afiye Caste System is hinged on religious, historical and cultural factors. As affirmed by Onah, (2024:343), the purity of the royal blood stands at the heart of family marriage in Yala Nkum Okpambe. This is mainly and certainly to avoid any blood of Aiyebe to infiltrate into the royal blood. However, as we will see, most of these practices enumerated as primordial among the Yala Nkum (Yala-Ikom) have been abrogated and simply

modified. Borrowing from the works of Osisioma and Obi-Obiora, (2024), it is observed that some of the purpose for the practice of the afiye/aiyebe in Yala Ikom.

1. In primordial times, they were considered as a thing, a being that has no benefit to the society. Though this form is not brazenly and openly in display any longer, but it is still being surreptitiously practiced especially in matters of land and chieftaincy.
2. In primordial times, they were never allowed to become traditional rulers (ochuole), however in modern times, they are allowed to become chief in satellite towns (Wooleche). However, it must be noted that in Yala-Ogoja till date, no member of this caste is allowed to become chief, either in the satellite town or the main settlement. In Yala Obubra, presently, 1st, 2nd or 3rd generation of members of this caste are never allowed to become traditional rulers (Odey Oche, Oral interview, 10-3-2025).
3. In primordial times, as mentioned earlier, Afiye/Aiyebe are not allowed to inter-marry with the freeborn. This is also true in Yala-Obubra (Nkum-Okpambe), and that is one of the key reasons the royal family marry within themselves. However, among the Yala Ikom today, this discriminatory act is no longer overt. Nevertheless, in some instances and in many families, questions are often raised in this regard (Oko John oral interview, 11-4-2024).
4. On the burial of members of this caste on separate days of the week, as it is exemplary and evident in Yala-Ogoja till date, the Yala Ikom has taken a radical departure from these. According to Onah (2019:260; Paik, 2018). the Yala-Ogoja adopt usually traditional market days for the burial of the members of this caste, and usually market days are days that people are usually busy with buying and selling of goods and services and hardly have time for ceremonies. By implications, therefore, members of this caste in life and in death are treated with disdain and rejected as bonafide members of the Yala community. However, the Yala has chosen weekends as the burial days of the departed members of the community, be it Aiyebe , Afiye or Ayiwoole (freeborn), (Christopher Ogar, Oral interview 10-10-2025; Paik, 2018).

5. In Yala Ogoja and Yala Obubra, there is this strong and outright discrimination against members of this caste in aspiring to become traditional rulers (Ochuole, Osuole, Ogamode). In Yala Obubra after the third generation, that may become possible. This is so rigid because among the Yala People, one's ascension to the traditional stool is by hereditary. However, among the Yala Ikom, even though, it is still challenging to become traditional rulers of the main settlement (Ipuole), members of this caste today may become chiefs in satellite towns. This is often referred to as 'Oyibo chieftaincy' (Prince Pius Odeipuole – oral interview, 12-1-2025).
6. As regards the act of killing a slave with his master at death, it has been argued that this acts, though judged to be inhuman in modern times, has its significant purpose and place in the Yala cosmology of Abuboaku. However, the Yala undertone is the fact that, the slave owner having lived on this part of eternity as a great man, it would be a disservice for such a great man, to be carrying his loads in the great beyond, hence the need to send alongside the servant who will as usual be his helper on the other side of eternity. This practice is completely abrogated in the three Yala communities of Cross River State. (Matthew Achigbe, (oral interview, 8-12-2016).
7. One striking aspect of these discriminatory practices is the fact that they were never allowed into the King's palace. This is because members of this caste are equated with that of a dog or he goat whose appearance by tradition are never allowed in the palace. The society is contemptuous of them. They still have limited privileges. (Denis Ogar, oral interview, 10-3-2025). The king (Osuole, Ochuole, Ogamode) is regarded as the father of the entire community; this fatherhood is essentially for the freeborn. This special aura of the king is what makes it a free for all day, whenever he steps his feet into the market, especially on market days. Once he steps his feet into the market, it becomes legal for the goods there to be looted by all and sundry. This is still in vogue till date. However, on the restrictions of members of this caste from the Chiefs' palace, there is a little manumission in most Yala communities. Today, they are freely allowed into the King's palace especially

those that have attained some level of social status in the society. However, among the Yala Ogoja there are crucial matters that they may not be entertained. (Eje John, oral interview, 9-3-2024).

8. They were always treated with suspicion and disdain. This aspect still remains a hallmark in the relationship between the Aiyebe and Ayiwoole. Despite the dramatic and evolutionary changes sweeping through Yala land on this caste, the issue of trust is yet to be fully settled. (Oliver Onah, oral interview, 20-1-2025).

Those sold as slaves

The issue and challenges of slavery is not peculiar to the Yala people alone, but it is a global phenomenon. Bereman (1972:203) has pointed out that caste is an elaborate and complete social system that combines some or all elements of endogamy, hereditary transmission of occupation, social class, social identity, hierarchy, stratification in which membership is determined by birth and remain fixed for life; caste are also endogamous and offspring are automatically members of their parents' caste.

In the light of the above it is very important that the status of those considered as Afiye/ Aiyebe be clearly stated and the factors that has led to their present status. Onabamiro, (1983: 8-9) and Paik, (2018) in their respective writings on the slave trade stated that the sixteenth century slaves trade was restricted to traffic between the Nigerian slave markets and the Portuguese Island of Sao Tome in West Africa where they bought slaves and used as cheap labour in the sugar cane and tobacco plantation and El-mina in the Gold Coast where the slaves were put to use in goldmines.

Throughout the century, the people carried away from all the slave market in the whole of west Africa were computed to be one million. But in the three succeeding centuries, twenty million slaves were carried away from west Africa (Rodney, 2000:107). Eshiet and Iloeje (2002:168) in their work entitled *Orality to Play Design: Ethnic expression in Amiri Baraka's Slaveship, A historical Pageant*, has poetically pointed this out;

“Launches in ritual style upon a journey of the middle passage, that horror filled period lasting nearly three hundred years during which millions of kidnapped human beings were transported from Africa to America for use as forced slave labour for the benefit of American and European mercantilism”

In the slave trade cited above, we discovered it was from one continent to another. In other words, the Atlantic slave trade was from Africa into another continent entirely. This trade lasted for about 300 years, through the involvement of west African trading kings and chiefs. This was made easier with the help, support and encouragement of the Europeans, armed with the Europeans' weapons carried out raids among neighbouring tribes, to obtain captive whom they could sell to the Portuguese in exchange for more manufactured goods such as guns, cloths mirror, etc, (Rodney 2000:104; Bhati, 2024). The countries of North America, England, Holland, France, the Arabs and of course the Portuguese were all involved in the slave trade business. Slavery has however, been institutionalized in African history from ancient times.

The traditional African slavery such as practiced by the Yala may then be described as a life-long practice with the servant perpetually under the masters' order yet strictly and absolutely on slaves- masters' relationship. No wonder then that Odey (2006:231) has described the practice of slavery as a shameful act. The practice of Afiye/Aiyebe caste among the Yala is significantly different in its origin from that of the Osu caste system among the Igbo of Nigeria. The Osu caste with its antecedent and obnoxious practices are said to be a sudden change, one that initially began with reverence, respect and support to a discriminatory act (Victor Dike; Osu Caste in Igboland: <https://www.nigerdeltacongress.com/articles/osu-caste-system-in-igboland>)

Among the Yala communities, there are various ways in which members of the Afiye/Aiyebe were made caste members. It was never at any point a strange or sudden development. From inception, it has been derogatory. It must however be mentioned that today, these acts that brought them in as Afiye/ Aiyebe are no more in practice and however, since there is no manumission once one is aligned to such family by birth, the caste still exist, it is known and the

practices, depending on which part of Yala still exists in high degree, moderated or surreptitiously. The following therefore are ways and manners that this domestic caste came to exist among the Yala.

- A) Those who were captured in inter-tribal wars according to Ada Iyaji Ogar Oche (oral interview, 16-16-2012). It means they were brought in from other places as prisoners of war and therefore became the properties of the person who either captured such an individual in war or who outrightly bought such from the captors.
- B) Poverty: another possible reason it exists is because of poverty. Those who had many children and may not be able to feed all of them may decide to sell one or two in order to take care of the remaining children (Paul Eje Odey, oral interview, 10-12-2024). Items used for such purchase according to Pius Odeipuole (oral interview, 16-4-2024) as narrated by his father Ogamode Odey Ipuole includes items such as handful of money, food items such as ihi (yams), igigri (yam beans), etc. these factors seen above clearly distance the means of one's initiation into the Yala Afiye Caste as compared to that of Osu, that were only dedicated to serve the gods.
- C) Another category of people sold into Afiye/Aiyebe caste are those who must have committed a great abomination such as incest, murder of one's kinsman, witchcraftcy, poisoning one's kinsman or one generally believed not to have a good heart (Odey Ogar, oral interview, 11-3-2025). That is to say persons with ignoble characters are among those considered to be sold out.
- D) Gluttons: this comes to play in a quest for economic survival. A situation whereby one child eats very much, the parents may decide to sell such a child in order to have enough to take care of the remaining children (Matthew Sunday Obe, oral interview, 11-1-2025).
- E) Used to repay Debts: a family that cannot repay his or her debts could offer one of his or her own to repay debt. This usually happens when one borrows a certain amount of money but cannot repay. In such instance, one of their children is given out to settle such debts. According to our informants, the means of acquisition could be through outright sale,

settling debts, those captured from war, children who are gluttons and those with ignoble character.

However, those sold out are not just brought in but certain rites are administered upon them. This rite is called ‘Igbaniku’ (oral interview with Ada, Odama Peter Onah, Ogar Otebe, Ogar Odey and Onah, Ogar, 12-12-2024). This particular object or ceremony called ‘Igbaniku’ is one area of this research limitation because despite every attempt, even from the three Yala communities of Yala-Ogoja, Nkum Okpambe and Yala Nkum (Ikom), no one seems to know specifically what the rites or the leaves or roots administered for the initiation is all about. It is believed that the Igbaniku is essentially meant to make those slaves sold out for various reasons to become foolish, sober, timid, indecisive and senseless, and it is also believed that this is passed down from one generation to another (Denis Ogar, Prince Patrick Egbe, Bonny Ihieje, Linus Odey, Friday Adayi and Ochelebe Odey, oral interview 11-12-2024; Iyaji Ogar Oche, 20-1-2025).

It is very vital to note and understand that one of the basic hurdles to revoking this caste practice has been hinged on the inability of the contemporary Yala nation to discover the leaves or roots used for the initiation or the expertise to remove the power and influence of Igbaniku on members of the caste system. In fact, Ada Onah Otiala has pointed out that this caste system from origin must have been planned to be irreversible or irrevocable and perhaps made the forebears never to disclose to anyone the secrets behind the rites commonly referred to as ‘Igbaniku’ (10-02-2025).

Having enumerated the points above, it is worthy to state few important facts about the Afiye caste to the act of selling of family members into Afiye/ Aiyebe is usually in secret, hence the word ‘Ofiye’ (which is singular of the Afiye Caste) literally translated to mean a thing done in secret (Ogar Odey, oral interview, 14-2-2024). In such closed transaction, the one sold is not even told he was being sold out rather, he will be asked to go and live with one of his relative “ga age ho too oonee yiada wo” meaning go and stay with your fathers’ relative (Dominic Ogwihi oral interview 11-2-2025; Bhati, 2024).

A vital appraisal of the practice of Afiye/ Aiyebe as pointed out in the practice of Aiyebe /Afiye caste system among the Yala Nkum Okpambe and Yala Ogoja, so it is with the Yala Nkum (Ikom). There are a lot of implications of the practice on the Yala people. These implications are both negative and positive. However, considering the times especially in terms of modernity, globalization and the common humanity and brotherhood, there is an urgent need to re-appraised the belief system and abrogate these practices in whatever forms; because, the negative impacts are grievous (Onah, & Odey 2024: 346-347, Onah, 2013: 623-628).

It is therefore the position of this paper that since the persistence of this practice have advocated and opined that religious, cultural identity, socio-political and economic factors are actually the reasons behind its persistence practice (Onah, , 2013: 224-228); and the fact that this is most hinged on the religious factors, including but not limited to the fear of the ancestors, taboos on mixed blood, consequences etc. It is also noticed that over time, most Yala communities have abrogated some of these practices and without any of the aforementioned reactions or effects from the above, that the Yala in its entirety abrogate the practice of the Afiye caste as it is the norm in other climes. As reported in Daily Post of December 24, 2023, two communities of Amume Omanze and Oboro Amurie in Isu Local Government of Imo state have abolished the practice of Osu. This is well intended to avoid unpleasant consequences as it happened recently in Enugu State where lives and properties were destroyed because of the persistence of such practice among the Akpawfu town in Nkanu West Council of Enugu State (Daily Post Online Newspaper, May, 3, 2023).

The Yala Nkum Okpambe in modern day has abrogated all discriminatory practices against the members of this caste except for ascending the royal stool as the Osuole, including the dance of one or both hands behind during the burial of a traditional ruler by members of this caste. The Yala Nkum (Ikom) has even allowed some members of this caste to become Osuole in satellite towns and abrogated the special days for the burial of this caste system by reducing burial days to weekends, without any repercussions from the factors enumerated above. For the fact that the Yala Ogoja has struggled overtime to amend, modify and explicate some of these practices without any

negative effect, it is therefore pertinent to advocate the practice be completely abolished; for this will give opportunity for growth, development, trust, love and understanding between the Aiyebe/Afiye on one hand and the Ayiwoole on the other (Ugobude, 2018; Osisioma & Obi-Obiora, 2024).

This paper will not claim that it has done justice to this issue, one basic challenge is the place of ‘igbaniku’ and its effect on the entire race of the caste members. Not knowing actually what this concept Igbaniku is all about is as good as being in the dark of the possible solution. As this paper recommends a deeper research on Igbaniku, whether it is a ceremony, leaves or roots or an ointment that is administered and since it has to do with a belief system, the paper recommends that the peoples’ religion be it African religion, Christianity or any other should be used to abrogate the power of this Igbaniku on members of this caste, hence giving room for a free flow Yala society with inter-marriages across board.

Conclusion

This paper has critically examined the practice of Afiye in Yala-Nkum (Ikom), it noted carefully this practice in the Yala-Ogoja and the Yala-Obubra (Nkum-Okpambe). The origin and factors that encouraged this practice were enumerated as well as the discriminatory practices in primordial times and its practice in modernity. The factors responsible for the persistence of this practice were mentioned. From the analysis from other areas, it is eminent that the time has come and it is now that this primordial practice be abrogated. The paper argued that since many aspects had been abrogated without any consequences, the entire discriminatory and obnoxious practice be completely wiped out as it is being done in some part of Igboland. The effects of igbaniku, one object believed to have been administered to members of Afiye/ Ayiebe caste with its everlasting effects was also addressed.

Recommendations for policy directions

It is the submission of this research that the entire Yala communities gather to deploy their religion and its power in order to abolish this practice, since it has to do with belief system. This could be African religion or Christianity, which of course are the predominant religions among the people.

The practice of afiye, aiyebe, ojola and the osu system should be abolished in the entire Yala race and Nigeria in general

Any transaction that has to do with discrimination against human dignity must also be abolished in a hurry.

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Ada Odama Onah. Ogar Otebe, Ogar Odey and Onah Ogar oral interview. 12-12-2024

Prince Patrick Egbe, Bonny Iheje, Linus Odey, Friday Adayi oral interview. 11-12-2024