

THE PRACTICE OF AFIYE (CASTE SYSTEM) AMONG THE YALA PEOPLE OF CROSS RIVER STATE.

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ABSTRACT

The story of incarceration of some members of the society is a topical and current issue that requires urgent attention. The culture of some societies of the world, and in particular the **Yala** communities of Cross River State of Nigeria, seems to ignore the essence of human equality and dignity. The aim of this article is the documentation of stratification of the Caste practices among the three **Yala** communities in Cross River State. From this article, it is obvious that for any society to be peaceful, progressive and to realize its full developmental capabilities and potentials, all forms of discriminatory practices must not exist. Nevertheless, where this is an acceptable socio-cultural practice of a people and in the light of present day realities of religious pluralism and globalization, the time has come that the **Yala** people should not preserve that aspect of culture which hinders its progress.

Keywords: Afiye, Yala Communities, Cross River State, Culture, Caste System, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

The saying that all animals are equal but that some are more equal than others is a true indication that points to the painful fact, that all over the world people are stratified. In one sense therefore one can say that, no one people are equal, rather people are ranked. This ranking can be based on factors such as achievements, positions occupied, occupation, ascribed status, family background, and historical or accidental events of life, depending on various societies. That is the salient point raised by Owen as cited in Stephen Ekenyong (2000:143)

...all people are not, nor are they any recorded instances that they ever have been treated alike in the presentations of the prizes of life such as food, money, education and human dignity. There is as well the paradox that all men are born equal but some are born equal than others.

This creates a puzzle, why the ill treatment of human beings by their own kind, while others are ascribed all the rights and privileges. Some are out rightly denied such rights and privileges. The obvious fact that these rights and privileges are not achieved but based on ascribed status calls for concern especially the **Afiye** (Caste system) among the **Yala** people.

Generally, one can say that observable differences exist amongst many tribes in the world. These differences can be attributed to inherited and ascribed status. This often results to social distinction, which can be based on occupation, possessions, prestige and authority, habits, interests, cultural accomplishments, etc.

From what has been said so far, it is very clear then that the Practice of Caste System in societies of the world varies from place to place and from one community to the other, and also emanating from various factors. How such practices could exist unchallenged and uncurbed in a nation like Nigeria, with its strong religious leaning and teeming adherent beat one's imagination and call to question the religiosity of millions of Nigerians, especially Christianity and Islam. It is in this light, we now look at the Practice of **Afiye** Caste System among the **Yala** people.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

AFIYE: literally means 'slave'. This is the term used for the victims of Caste System among the **Yala** communities of Cross River State. Its singular form is '**Ofiye**'.

EDRO OFIYE: These groups are principally not considered as full 'slave', such people are offspring of a slave, though the mother is not a slave, but the father is, he got married to an '**ayiiwoole**', children from such relationships are therefore regarded as edro ofiye. Though, not treated fully as '**Afiye**', but they cannot escape the stigmatization completely.

AYII- EBE: Literally, this means 'children of animals'. '**Ayii**' in **Yala** mean children while '**Ebe**' means meat or animal, depending on its context. This is a derogatory terminology often employed by the '**ayiiwoole**' (freeborn) to describe members of the Caste System.

OSU: This is a Caste System among the Igbo people of South-Eastern Nigeria. Oliver A. Onwubuiko (1993:25) quoting Fr. Anyichie has pointed out that among the Igbo, the good spirits are mediators between God and man; citing an example, he said, that a woman may pray to '**udo**' (a deity) for a son, when she eventually bears a son, she calls him '**nwa-udo**' or '**osu-udo-ga-ekwe...**'. The name '**osu**' in its etymology simply means one connected with a deity or the divine in a special way, as opposed to the ordinary man (**diala**), or those born under normal circumstances. Apart from the main '**osu**', there are others, which are referred to as '**ume**', '**ohu**', etc. These groups are today greatly discriminated among the Igbo people.

YALA: This is a name of a people and the language they speak. They are found in Cross River State, spread over three Local Government Areas of **Yala, Ikom** and **Obubra**. Their kith and kin are found in Benue (**Idoma**), Nassarawa (**Doma**) and Enugu States in Nigeria.

ACQUISITION OF THE AFIYE AMONG THE YALA PEOPLE

The practice of *Afiye* caste among the *Yala* communities of Cross River State is an age long tradition and practice that no one can precisely say today when it first started. **Iyaji Ogar Oche** (Oral Interview) has posited that it is a universal phenomenon. This segregation has generated and ignited a silent war between the members of the *Afiye* caste and the *ayiiwoole* (children of the house).

Literally translated, *Afiye* refers to slaves among the *Yala*; while *Afiye* is plural; *ofiye* is singular. The word slavery reminds us of the notorious slave trade of the sixteenth century, such as the one undertaken by the Portuguese ship Santa Maria da comceicam and, of course, the gigantic business known as the Atlantic slave trade which developed a century later and lasted up till the middle of the nineteenth century.

In the slaves trade cited above, we discover it was from one continent to another. In order word, the Atlantic slave trade was from Africa into another continent entirely. This trade lasted for about 300years, 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 European weapons carried out raids among neighboring tribes, to obtain captive whom they could sell to the Portuguese in exchange for more manufacture goods such as, guns, cloth, mirror etc (Walter Rodney 2000:104).

The countries of North America, England, Holland, France, and 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 lifelong practice with the servant perpetually under the master's order yet without remuneration, except that which they or their forebear were acquired with. In other words, among the *Yala* people, the *Afiye* caste has been treated strictly and absolutely on slaves and master relationship. No wonder then, that Onah A. Odey (2004:231) has described the practice of slavery as a shameful act. This seems different from the **Osu** Caste among the **Igbo** that has been described as a sudden change in the treatment of the caste members.

(Victor Dike; **OSU** caste in **Igboland**, <http://www.nigerdeltacongress.com/articles/osu-caste-system-in-igboland%20.htm>)

Sanya Onabamiro (1983; 4), in his description has objected to the usage of the term life-long servants to describe this type of slavery. It must however be affirmed again, that among the *Yala* people, there is no amount of loyalty or diligence on the part of the slave to his master that can make a slave buy back his freedom, though **Iyaji Ogar Oche** (oral interv. 16-6-2011) has stated that a well behaved and wealthy slave, can buy another slave to replace himself (a kind of manumission), yet he acknowledge that even at that, the stigma does not go away in its true sense. The question one must answer at this point then is, how these traditional African slaves were acquired, especially among the *Yala*.

Among the *Yala* communities; *Afiye* were acquired through various ways, According to Iyaji Ogar Oche , most of the *Afiye* were bought from other places, others were bought from a distant area because of inter-tribal wars especially among the '*Isankwala*' (a nick-name for the *Obudu*, and *Obanliku* area). He further asserts that reasons, ranging from hunger, especially on the part of parents with so many numbers of children, an ignoble child, while the quest for economic survival has also contributed for such drives.

Dr, M.O. Achigbe on his part has affirmed that *Afiye* were acquired through direct adoption by criminal activities e.g Murder, which cannot be atoned for, a replacement is treated as an *Ofiye*. Dr, Achigbe classified the sources into four as being reason's for the acquisition of *Afiye* among the *Yala* people

- To empower the family especially if the family is small in population or their destiny seems to be dwindling or it seems such families are not strong enough. In that case, another member of a different family is bought and brought in, to change the destiny of such family.
- Someone with an ignoble character such as stealing, murder, drunk are equally sold
- A family who cannot repay its debts, could offer one of its own to effect the debt and lastly, often times, they are acquired as source of labours (oral interview. 24-5-2011). Okori Adoga (31-12-2007) Ogar oko (4-1-2008), Ogar Orji of (28-12-2007) Emmanuel Ofana (18-11-2007) Ogar Odey (14-1-2008), all of *Yala Ogoja* in *Yala* local government area of Cross Rivers State, did agree with the point raised above, that the means of acquisition are through outright sale, people used as means of settling debts, and those captured during inter-tribal wars. The fact that the factors that can result to such sales include children who are gluttons and those with ignoble characters is also attested to by Odama onah (Oral interview 7-2-2008).

Ogamode Otuji Ipuole of Olachor-Okpoma in an oral interview (14-12-2007) bluntly stated that;

Some men and their offspring became Afiye because either they or their forebears killed a fellow town's man and as such, the culprit was sold out, and automatically, the man and his offspring would become members of the caste.

Otuji Wonah and Ada Inalegwu Odey in a separate interview (3-1-2007; 4-2-2008) have alluded to the fact that, the means of acquiring **Afiye** amongst the **Yala** are virtually the same across the Yala communities of Cross Rives state. He however added that;

*If one see's a runaway **Ofiye** in his farm, the **Ofiye** automatically becomes his own except his first master had to redeem such **Ofiye**....*

One of the item's used for purchase, according to prince pius Odipuole (oral interview(4-1-2008) as narrated from his father includes items such as a handful of money, food items such as '**Thi**' (yams), **Igigri** (yam beans) could be used depending on the need of those willing to offer. These factors seen above clearly distance the means of one's initiation into the **Yala Afiye** caste as compared to the **Osu** caste in **Igboland**.

Having enumerated the points above, it is worthy to state few important facts about the **Afiye** caste to the fact that, the act of selling of family members into **Afiye** caste is usually in secret, hence the word '**Ofiye**' (which is the singular of the **Afiye** caste), literally translated to mean a thing done in secret (Ogar Odey-Oral Interview 14-1-2008). 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, (*gaa ge ho taa oone yiada wo*) meaning to accompany ones relative to assist them. Among the **Yala** especially in **Ogoja** area, there is a particular secret cult known as **alekpe** (a society's soldier or watchmen) that is vested with the power and authority to arrest people with ignoble characters and sell them out. This act by the **Ekpe** group is normally done in the night with sporadic shooting with local firearms and shouting to scare off relatives of the victim who may try to recognize the voice of one captured and may attempt a rescue. That is why among the **Yala**, there is a common saying which states, **Obide Kweeji, Ekpe de dwonye**, meaning when the gunpowder is exhausted, **Ekpe** become uninteresting. By implication; without the sound of the gun, relatives of the one captured may attempt to rescue him thereby, rendering the power of **Ekpe** society inactive. (Simon Ogar Oko: oral interview 7-1-2008). Iyaji Ogar Oche did offer an explanation to why **Afiye** are often being regarded as stupid, foolish and indecisive and timid. According to him at the point of capture, certain rituals are carried out, which includes the use of what he called **Igbaniku** which is broken and smeared upon them, with the aim of making them to be Sober, timid and submissive. He further asserted that the effect of this singular act is from generation to generations of those victims.

The inscriptive nature of this caste system like their *OSU* counterparts is one such factor that bewilders many about this practice. That is, Offspring and descendents of the **Afiye** caste remain members of that caste as long as they live, except, on one condition, and that condition is that if a man who is of the **Afiye** caste is married to a lady who is of the **Ayiiwoole** (freeborn), children begotten from such union are now regarded as freeborn. However according to Otuji Wonah acceptance of such group of persons often comes with mixed feelings and reluctance from the *ayiiwoole* (oral interv. 3-1-2007). This is particularly true of the *Yala Ogoja*.

Among the *Yala Obubra* and the *Yala Ikom* respectively, though the practice is inscriptive however Dr. Mathew Achigbe and chief G.N. Ojiji has posited that after three generations the discriminations is no longer overtly pronounced, and that such person could be assimilated into the family that bought them. However, the point must be made that members of the **Afiye** caste and their descendents no matter how large they are, still remain the property or properties of the descendants of the family that bought them, (Oral interv. 24-5-2011 and April 26th 2011). In order words, the **Afiye** among the two *Yala* communities don't exist as a family (as an entity), they are absorbed into the family of the one that bought them.

Frank Ogodo (2005:35) has succinctly captured this when he affirmed thus;

The Yala people were not accustomed to enslaving the whole populations. They only retained a number of slaves as personal properties used only to demonstrate how wealthy the individual was in the community. Afiye were regarded and referred to as property of so and so person. They were named after the owners. For instance, Odey Ogar Ofie Ochu, meaning that, the owner automatically assumed the status of a foster father, and of a feminine ancestry.

To put clearer the point expresses by Frank Ogodo above, the name of **Ofie**, which is feminine, in the midst of *Odey Ogar* which is masculine, indicates that, the bearer of this name is of the **Afiye** caste. The above quotations confirms the point raised by Dr, Mathew Achigbe of **Yala Obubra** and chief, Ojiji of **Yala Ikom** to the fact that, **Afiye** can lose their original identities. Scholars have pointed the gender problems in Africa, for an example, O.O. Familusi (2010:125), in his work entitled **An Ethicist Perspective Of The Problem Of Gender, Violence, And Stigmatization** has noted that African culture seems to be hostile to women and that in many African societies women are not entitled to inheritance and a male child is usually preferred to the female counterpart. In the same vein, women in Africa, has played second fiddle, hence their exclusion from various socio- cultural, socio- political, economic activities, including decision making in the family. Anthropological studies have revealed that women low status had made their developmental roles unrecognized, resulting in low esteem and feeling of inferiority

unworthiness. (John Bosco Ekanem 2007:37, Eldred Ibibiem, 2002:27, K. Eghafona and Abiodun J. Oluwamide 2003:255,). That means, any child or children, given birth to by such **Ofiye** would bears the names of their parents, who will in turn would bear the names of their foster father. By implication even if the **Afiye** owner is a woman in a patriarchal society like **Yala**, the **Ofiye** would still answer her names. For example, **Okwori Ogeyi** is a ridiculous way of identifying someone, especially in **Yala** communities. Iyaji Ogar Ocho in an oral interview (16-6-2011) has pointed out the fact that in pre-modial times, the **Afiye** were not allow to marry, even within, their ranks, rather they pair them and whichever child or children that is the product of such co-habitation, belongs to the **Afiye** owner.

DISCRIMINATION AGAINST MEMBER OF AFIYE CASTE

Is the practice of **Afiye** among the **Yala** communities actually a caste? The Wikipedia, free encyclopedia has stated thus; caste is an elaborate and complex social system that combines element of endogamy, occupation, culture, social class, tribal affiliation and political power. The encyclopedia further stress that this should not be confuse with race or social class e.g members of different caste in one society may belong to the same race (en Wikipedia

Discriminatory practices, as wells as oppression and denial's of right all over the world is often associated with the practices of caste be it social, industrial, religious, cultural, political e.t.c. These attitudes often result in public outcry for a change.

Among the **Yala** communities of Cross Rivers State, in primordial and some in the present there are noticeable discriminatory practices all around. In primordial times amongst the three communities an **Ofiye** is killed with its owner at burial. It must be explained here that the **Yala** do not view this as a crime, but an act of the **Ofiye** going to help his owner on his journey to the land of the forebears. This practice today is completely phased out; except in rare cases, even at that it must be done in outmost secrecy. The **Afiye** up till now, on their own, are very careful on such burial days especially in the remote part of the communities. This is true mostly of the **Yala-Ogoja** area (Pastor Mathew Wogor: Oral Interv. 13-6-2011).

Another discriminatory practice is the ridiculous way of identifying the **Afiye** in terms of their family. For instance, by naming an **Ofiye** after a woman is abnormal in **Yala** society, because, the society is patriarchal and not matriarchal.

In an oral interview attended by five women during the Yala Women Nationality meeting held on Tuesday 10th January 2012, the women unanimously described the Afiye as an epidemic that will hardly go away. During that interview, the women agreed that even though the practice was obnoxious, but that none of them will allow their children to be placed under such eternal curse

of timidity and foolishness. To them, allowing one's child to be married into or get married to any member of the caste system is like sentencing one to an eternal doom with eternal consequence. The women further narrated with instances how misfortunes had befallen so many families that have attempted to despise the order, beginning from untimely death, to madness, barrenness and several other ailments that cannot be diagnose and cured. Asked further, if there is any hope for manumission, they all retorted that, they wish they wish there could be, but unfortunately, there seems never to be any hope.

On the possibility of a conscious determination to abrogate the system, they responded by asking the researcher a question, how can you end what you did not know about? The '*Gbaniiku*' used on their forebear remains from generation to generation. The attitude, timidity, foolishness, etc, still abides with them, except you can trace the '*Igbaniiku*' today, and perform the same rites, there and then we can talk about abrogation. (oral interview with Akpobi Eje, Iyaji Ojowu, Hellen Omleha, Ikpachanya Ibu and Onyaluohi Ijegu at Okuku Yala, Tuesday 10th January, 2012).

Also among the *Yala* communities the member of *Afiye* caste are never allowed into the traditional ruler's palace, especially when issues of utmost important is being discussed. Such action is regarded as a taboo. (Interv, Otuji Wonah 3-1-2007) Declan Ogar (2007:5) in affirming this stated thus;

*Slaves are for all practical purposes, also barred from the palace. They are euphemistically regarded as **Ukpopi** (he-goat) whose body odour is obnoxious to the king. This concept explains why any actual he-goat that trespasses into the palace is killed immediately, leaving the owner with no option of redress.*

This is almost similar to the practice in **Onne Eleme** Area of Rivers State, whereby their son's who marry' strangers (non-Elemes) are often segregated when crucial issues concerning the community are being discussed. No wonder then that Iyaji Ogar Oche had pointed out that in primordial times, the **Afiye** were never allowed to settle together with the **ayiiwoole** in the village settlement, but were rather kept in the farm or at the outskirts of the community, hence the **Okpoma** people settled their **Afiye** at **Okpochoro** (oral interv. 16-6-2011).

An apparent discrimination which runs across the **Yala** communities is the fact that the **Afiye** and their descendants are never allowed to rise to the throne of **Ogamode** or **Ochuole** (traditional chieftaincy). As George Tasié and Esther Obe (2007:41) in their work entitled '**Tradition And Change In The Socio-Religious Function Of Obiri Ikwerre**' has pointed out the fact that among the Ikwerre, the custody of obiri is given to the eldest surviving son in the family or the lineage who must trace his ancestry in an unbroken manner.. No matter how highly placed an **Ofiye** is in terms of Education, wealth or influence in society – none is allowed into

such position. In **Yala**, it is completely ruled out, whether **Ogamode** in the main settlement or in the satellite villages, it is never permitted. Chief G.N Ojiji speaking of the **Yala Ikom** admitted that no **Ofiye** is allowed to become 'Ochuole' but according to him, in most of the satellite villages today some descendants of Afiye are Chiefs of such communities. This is what is called 'Oyibo' Chief (i.e. government chieftaincy). This often refers to honorary chieftaincy, that members of the Afiye caste may be permitted to be given (Oral interv. 26-4-2011) Dr. Mathew Achigbe, though admitting that **Afiye** are not allowed to become chiefs, however, pointed out that a fourth generation **Afiye**, who have been assimilated into the foster family, may be made an **agamode**, if the foster family so desire. He put it thus;

In chieftaincy issues, the 1st, 2nd and 3rd generations of Afiye cannot climb to the Ogamode position, the fourth generation may, if the regent selection is of the family, and if you are not selected by the family no one can chose you. Even if you are chosen by the family and the community discovers that you are of the 1st, 2nd or 3rd Generation of afiye, the community can query and sanction it (oral interview. 24-5-2011).

Cases abound among the **Yala** people whereby influential and respected men in the society were ordered to cease from putting on any red-cap, which among the **Yala** symbolizes royalty. No wonder then that Declan Joseph Ogar emphasized that, the **Afiye** are at the bottom of the **Yala** social hierarchy and that their status is equated with that of a dog. (2007:9).

Another open discriminatory practices on the **Afiye** caste is the burial of the **Afiye** on the 'odd days', of the week. The **Yala** traditionally have five market days that makes up a week. Within **Yala** communities, the odd days are virtually the same, except for **Yahe** community where a great man's burial is celebrated on **Ogidi** which is an odd day among the other **Yala** villages of **Yala Ogoja**. In all **Yala –Ogoja** villages the odd days are **Ikor**, **Ogbada** and **Ogidi**, while the acceptable and honour days are **Ina** and **Akpakpa**. Within the 'odd days' no **ayiiwoole** (freeborn) must be buried, and no member of **Afiye** caste can be buried on **Ina** or **Akpakpa**, this is solely the burial rights of the **ayiiwoole**. Such consecrated days are not peculiar to the **Yala** people alone. Wellington O. Wotogbe-weneka (1988:52), in his work entitled **Earth Goddess** has affirmed that among the ikwerre of Rivers State certain days of the week and certain periods of the day are designated and consecrated holy days. On such holy days there are things to do and not do on such days. He pointed out that on such holy days people are not even suppose to die.

Using the **Okpoma** examples above, the 'odd days' are the days people engage more in their farm work or market, burying a member of a community on that the day is more or less a show

of a care free attitude towards the **Afiye** and their family. Indeed, it is an act that does not allow such a person to be given a befitting burial attended by many people. In one simple language, members of this caste system are not seen as important members of the society; rather, they are seen as a kind of a less human class of people. As noted this will protect the **Afiye** from migrating to the **ayiiwoole**, because, the **Yala** believe strongly in reincarnation first among the Elders and abiku children. Unlike the igbo concept of reincarnation, that an adult can reincarnate several times (B.C. Nworie 1982:), the **Yala** concept follows the Yoruba concept that a child reincarnates once, and that is why they cannot be given Babatunde or Yetunde to more than one child after death (J. Omosade Awolalu 1979:67).

The other two **Yala** communities, unlike the **Yala-Ogoja** above, have no discrimination whatsoever in terms of the burial days, all members of the community are buried on the day most suited for the family of the deceased either **Afiye** or **ayiiwoole**. In fact, among the **Yala Okpambe** and **Yala Nkum** most burial are conducted on weekends most especially between Friday's and Saturdays.

One overt discriminations again, is the exclusion of the **Afiye** from the royal dance, among the **Ogoja**, it is called 'eje' **ochuole**; while among the **Nkum Okpambe** and **Yala ikom**, it is referred to as **Atimambe**. In **Yala** of **Ogoja** area, no **Afiye**, is permitted whatsoever to come nearer when the "eje **ochuole**" is being performed. Equally among the **Nkum Okpambe** and **Yala Nkum**, they are not allow to participate, but, if they so desire, they either dance with one or two of their hands behind their back depending on the degree of slavery. If both parents are **Afiye**, they must dance the **Atimambe** dance with two hands at their back, if only one of your parents is an **Ofiye**, you dance with just one hand behind your back. Now if one is an **ofiye** by his mother, such a person will dance the royal dance with left hand tied behind, and if one is an **Ofiye** by his father, he will dance with the right hand tied behind. It must be mention here that the royal dance is often performed during the Death/ burial and, or the enthronement of a new **ogamode / ochuole**.

Principally, the burial of a traditional ruler in any **Yala** community is seen as a community burial since he is regarded and accepted as the father of all. However, members of **Afiye** caste are never allowed to participate or come close to the burial procession or burial activities, because in truth they are not regarded as children of that community. The unpleasant consequence of attempting such is well known to the members of the **Afiye** group. Consequently, no such attempt has even been made especially among the **Yala Ogoja**, because as members of this caste, they are never allowed to see the corpse of the traditional ruler (Afuoh Ogbeche oral interview 10-5-2008).

Just like the case of the **OSU**, among the **Igbo**, among the **Yala** community, marriage is never allowed between the **ayiiwoole** and an **Ofiye**. It is believed that such marriage contaminates the royal blood. The preservation of the purity of royal blood is so cherished that until recently, among the **Nkum Okpambe**, incest was practice among the royal family. (**Yala Obubra**). Dr Matthew Ojong stressing this fact, affirmed thus;

Most of the royal families marry within their kindred groups. They do not want to dilute their royalties by marrying external blood. Secondly, they believe, that they are very wise People and carefully selected by God to rule, and shared freely with others. They also believe they are wealthy and so have to concentrate their wealth. Within the last 5years; this act of incest is being faced out. (Oral interview. 24-5-2011).

Among the **Yala- Ogoja** where such a union had taken place, the marriage never lasts; such family is equally never recognized by the nobles of the land. This is the very point stressed by Frank Ogodo (2002:36) when he says;

They could not, however, be allowed to marry the freeborn, no matter the level of acceptability... wealth, and prestige in the society. Therefore, they have nothing to do with marriage as such; a union between a freeborn and an 'Ofiye; could jeopardize the Freeborn families' reputation later in life among the equals. It was a societal Stigma that no right thinking family of the firstborn was ready to accept in his lineage.

Among the **Nkum Okpambe** and **Yala Nkum**, no restrictions abound, but Dr Mathew, pointed out that, the male '**Ofiye**' has the greater problem of being accepted by a female who is of the **Ayiiwoole** (freeborn), but he pointed out that male **Ayiiwoole**, may marry female **Afiye** (slave), knowing that in the 3rd generation, they may become freeborn.

Members of the Afiye caste system are often dehumanized by derogatory terminologies, especially in conflict situation such as land dispute, quarrel or any other struggle for position of authority like, Chieftaincy, Age grade and community positions; such derogatory terminologies as '**chii, chaa, Ebe, Ojola, Ebe, Ogbo wole, yanyi, ukpopi, taa**'. All these denotes the fact that they are inconsequential, a special kind of human beings with offensive odour etc. It must be noted that this terms do not out rightly call them '**Afiye**', but it connotes and vividly depicts them.

Another great discrimination, especially among the **Yala Obubra** and **Yala Ikom** is the fact that the **Afiye** and their descendant up to the fourth generation are never allowed to join royal

activities. It is something strange that should never be imagined or entertains. In such event, the word ‘**taa**’ can be used, by implications, it means you are not qualify to participate in such activities, such as the enthronement of a new **Ochuole, ogamode or Osuole**, royal homage or being called by **ochuole** family name e.g. ‘**ayii agamode**’ etc. In fact, Iyaji Ogar Oche had pointed to the fact that in primordial times, the mere appearance of an Ofiye in the palace result in the family that owns them being fined. (oral interview. 16-6-2011)

Last but not the least to be mentioned as one of the discriminatory practices against the **Afiye** is the fact that true **Yala** man still holds in reservation a true acceptance of an **Ofiye**. Iyaji Ogar Oche had pointed out to a story of Odey Omega, according to him, Odey Omega, is a sorcerer, who uses concoction to vindicate someone wrongly accused or to convict someone who had committed a crime. This act or practice is called ‘**Ene**’. According to him, Odey Omega had slaves that assists him, in dispensing the concoction according to the prescription of Odey Omega, but it was discovered that majority of the people were dying after partaking of the concoction, bottom line was the fact that the **Afiye** of Odey Omega, knowing they had no relatives or friends among those coming for consultation decided to give the measures beyond the prescription by Odey Omega. This incidence has led to proverbial saying among the **Yala** of **Ogoja** area when they say that ‘**ENE yii odey omaga, ogmo olipu amana nii** “. Literally translated the ‘**ene**’ (the concoction) of Odey omaga does not kill one with an empty stomach.

What this entire story depicts in a nutshell is the fact that the **ayiiwoole** believes that the **Afiye** harbour’s a great resentment against them, and as such, there is great evil in bringing the **Afiye** closer in trust, in confidence and in sharing of full rights. Indeed, among the **Afiye**, the general rule is what Ademola Omobewaji DasyIva (1988:1), has pointed out, when he affirm that certain pre-life determiners are factorial to man’s essence and consequently define his station in life and even in death, especially among the **Yala**. Etim E. Okon (2011:47), has pointed out that Human slavery was actually recognized and legitimized in antiquity such that, it was legitimate to own another being as a legitimate property. He further assert thus:

The slave is not a human being, but a Sub-human, and the only mistake of a creature genius. Slaves had to fight; women could be raped by their slave Master or even killed with impunity.

Modern trends of afiye (caste system) in yala

Change, it is often said is irresistible, it may come gradually and unnoticed, or it may come like a revolution, change is indeed constant, all things in creation changes, except change itself and God who made all things. The practice of the **Afiye** caste system is no exception to these factors of change. Modernism, enlightenment, education, technology, has all become a contributing

factors to the change witnessed today. Change continue to affect virtually every aspect of life, especially when we recalled that the Atlantic slave trade has been abolished, in most **Igbo** communities today, the **Osu** and the **Diala** are not just buying and selling from one market, contrary to their earlier discriminations they are equally being accepted. Looking at the history of the Negro in America, one sees the dream and vision of Martin Luther come true. Despite all the discriminations, Barrack Obama, an American of African descent is today the President of the united state of America.

In the modern **Yala** communities of Cross Rivers State of Nigeria, certain modifications have been introduced to bring about change as far as the Practice of Afiye caste is concerned.

As a group of people today, Afiye are not easily distinguished from the ‘**ayiiwoole**’ in terms of power or economic well being, this is because a diligent, dedicated and hard, working **Ofiye**, who has amassed wealth or is in position of authority could be respected among the **Yala** people presently, many are being absorbed and accepted into the social structures such as age-grade system, village committees, traditional dances etc. In modern **Yala** societies we can also state that slaves are no longer killed and buried with their master at death nor are they any longer used for human sacrifice Ogminyi Agu in an Oral interview stated thus;

*Before the coming of the European, we fully had a grasp and control of our Things (referring to **Afiye**). As much as we could, but they (the Europeans) came and changed everything and threatened us with death, imprisonment and many more unpleasant consequence ... how can a wealthy man die and travel alone without a helper. How does he carry his luggage's we find ourselves with modernization (interv. 11-5-2008).*

This painstaking change as stated above is for the fact that the **Afiye** are no longer used as human sacrifice at the burial of their master. We also notice that today, among the **Yala** the **Afiye** are no longer living at the outskirt of the communities as it was in the days of old, rather they live side by side with the **ayiiwoole**. Again, especially among the **Yala** of **Nkum Okpambe** an **Ofiye** can be regarded as a free born with all right and privileges, though not minding the hidden undertones. Also, in the two **Yala** communities, an **Ofiye** can be honour with an ‘Oyibo’ chieftaincy, unlike in former times, where such possibilities were not there at all.

We also notice that, today most **Afiye** enters the chief's palace freely and their masters are never called to question as it was in the days of old. It is also worthy of mention that in primordial times, the possibility of an **Ofiye** marrying or being married to **ayiiwoole** is unheard of, and unacceptable but today, especially among the **Yala Nkum** and **Nkum Okpambe**, the male

ayiiwoole can freely and easily get married to an **ofiye** lady, though easier for the Females among the **Nkum Okpambe**.

Another important change that has taken place is consequent on the event of 29th December 2003, In the **Yala** of **Ogoja**-area. In this epoch making ceremony, the Christians under the auspices of **Yala** Christian club, working in conjunction with some of the key traditional rulers, abolished the discriminatory burial days and the even days, and no more on the so-called odd days. Though, this change has come, there is still much left to be desire.

After, a careful research, it is discovered that despite the public proclamation and abolition of this very aspect of discrimination, the family members of the **Afiye** caste are made to meet up with certain requirements before full approvals could be given for such burial to take place on the even days. According to Ekpo Lega, Akpa John Inwuola in an oral interview, even though the decision has been taken at least, the even days which is their rights must be bought from them, and as such, the sixteen age grade, the Elders, the Youth and the Egamode (the traditional ruler) must all be settled before then. According to our sources above, items used in settling each of the group above includes money, goat, chickens, assorted drinks (palmwine is mandatory) peanut butter, yams and kolanut. Infact John Akpa Inwuola, wonders why they should accept in spending that much, instead of allowing the burial on odd days, which will save them of such huge expenditure. This practice of settling the groups above before burial days is called '**Gbidiiku**' (interv. 13-6-2011). This process must be followed because the **Yala** is a segmentary society. This is the point that, Robert Horton quoted by O. O. Wobasi 111 (1993:51), in his work entitled **Traditional System Of Government And Justice In Ikwerre** has pointed out when he stated thus;

It is difficult to point to any individual Or limited group of men as the ruler of Men or rulers of the society Among segmentary societies such as Tiv, Lodagaa, Liberia and Cross River groups And, most Igbo's.

Apart from the changes enumerated above the situation and condition of the **Afiye** caste in **Yala**, virtually remain the same. As pointed out, a status of a slave is equated with that of a dog or he goat whose appearance by tradition are not allowed in the palace. The society is still contemptuous of them. They still have limited privileges and roles in the palace and could not, even remotely participate in any aspect of decision naming (Declan Joseph Ogar 2007:9-10)

CONCLUSION

The suspicion and hatred engendered by the practice of Afiye caste system has brought untold hardship and underdevelopment to Yala communities. It is as therefore the submission of this

research article that such discriminatory practices should be discontinued forthwith. This will thereby engendered an egalitarian Yala society that will be built on trust, love, peace and an enabling environment that will bring about Human development to the people. The traditional institution, the Churches, the Youth, the age grades and all well meaning people in and around Yala communities must rise up to bring about a solution to this ill wind that blows no one, no good.

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