

### RELIGIOSITY AMONG IGBO PEOPLE

Luzia Garcia do Nascimento \*

**ABSTRACT:** The religiosity among Igbo people is presented across the analysis of the Chinua Achebe's novel *No longer at Ease*. This novel relates a contemporary story lived in Lagos, capital of Nigeria. Sometimes the action is developed in an Igbo Village in Eastern Nigeria, Umuafia the homeland of the protagonist of the novel, Obi OKONKWO. This novel presents the dramatic love story between Obi, an Igbo born free, belonging to the social stratum Diala, and a Women, Clara, nom Dialan with slave ancestors; an Osu. Among Igbo people the marriage between an Osu cult slave and a Dialan born free is considered a taboo. This story shows the troubles the protagonist has to face when he falls in love with a woman from a different religion related to a social stratum stigmatized.

Chinua Achebe, in his novel *No Longer at Ease*<sup>1</sup>, presents a contemporary story lived in Lagos, capital of Nigeria. Few times the action is developed in an Igbo village in Eastern Nigeria, Umuofia, the place where the protagonist of the novel, Obi Okonkwo, is from.

Obi Okonkwo since childhood was very well succeeded in all the schools he had attended in Eastern Nigeria, always getting the first places. Upon his receiving the Cambridge School Certificate, the Umuofia Progressive Union decided to finance his studies in England. Four years later he returned to Lagos and applied for some jobs to get an 'European post' in the civil service with the aim to pay back his grant, according to the agreement.

He started dating a woman called Clara and they fell in love with each other. While he was waiting for answers about the jobs, he returned to his village to see his family. He was received with great joy by everybody there.

\* Indiana University - USA

(1) First publication in United States of America in New York: Publisher Fawcett World Library, Oct. 1969. All the quotations from this book will appear in parenthesis along this paper.

Returning to Lagos, he got a job with the Secretary of Scholarship Board and asked Clara to marry him. At first she did not mention that she was an "osu"<sup>2</sup>. She knew his family would not accept it. Later, however, he told her that for him it did not matter and he gave her an engagement ring. He did not believe in punishing one person because his ancestors were people not well accepted by the society, and he was sure his mother would understand him. Also he had problems with the Umuofian Progressive Union, Lagos Branch, which did not want to accept his marriage; therefore, he broke which the party.

After some time, he received a letter from his father urging his presence there in Umuofia. When he arrived there he met his mother very sick (even more ill than the first time he visited his people). They were aware of Obi's intention to marry an "osu" woman, and they could not accept this. His mother told him she would kill herself if such a thing came to happen. When he returned to Lagos, his life had changed totally. He told Clara that his family would not accept the marriage and so she broke with him.

By that time Obi was not in a good financial condition, because in spite he had a good job, he had to pay for the rent of the apartment, exorbitant utilities and income tax, as well as his luxurious car and good style of life. Moreover, he had a contract for two years to pay back the scholarship. The final blow came when he discovered Clara was pregnant and she wanted an abortion. At first he rejected this idea, but finally they went to a doctor for the miscarriage of that birth. As a result, Clara had serious problems with her health and had to stay in the hospital for five weeks; when she was discharged from the hospital, she left Lagos.

Obi became totally depressed and this was aggravated by the news of his mother's death. He was inconsolable. Without the two most important people he loved, he did not care about anything more.

One point has to be considered: for many times some people tried to bribe Obi Okonkwo. For instance, once in his job, Obi received a visit of an Igbo who tried to bribe him and requested Obi to interfere for his sister's scholarships. Obi did not accept and sent him away; some time later the same lady came to offer herself to Obi. Once more he refused, because bribery was totally against his principles. Later on people who wanted to take in scholarship continued trying to

(2) Later on there will be more explanations about the Igbo people. The taboo around peoples from Africa is well explained by some scholars; among them there is Victor Uchendu in *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), especially in the Chapter X: "Status placement among Igbos" pp. 84-93.

bribe him until he accepted bribes and was involved with the law. This happened during the time Obi was heartbroken with the loss of his mother and Clara.

At this point it is necessary to recall some background on the Igbo people in order to reinforce how much Obi's behaviour was honorable in loving an "osu" woman and had the intention to marry to her.

The Igbo people live in a territory with an area of some 15,800 square miles in Southeastern Nigeria, through which the Niger River passes dividing the Igbo country into two parts. There are about five and a half million Igbo inhabitants in this tropical region that averages 27° Celcius. The seasons are well marked and consist of a rainy season from April to October and a dry season from November to April.

The Igbo people are composed of a large population of more than two hundred groups that live in a large area<sup>3</sup>. They speak the same language and share the same customs since the Portuguese conquest.

Only religion has suffered slight change in some places due to two factors: first, the Bishop Crowther established a Church Missionary Society Missions in Onitsha in 1857, and in 1885 the Roman Catholic Mission created for them a 'bush school', introducing them to the art of reading; second, Islam spread among a few Igbo people<sup>4</sup>.

Onitsha is an important point of reference because it was the center of these two religions, and it is an obligatory stopping point on the way to Umuofia, the homeland of Obi Okonkwo.

Before the time of the Missionaries, the Igbo had the custom of fighting among their own groups in order to capture slaves for trade. After the abolition of the slave-trade they started to develop a new ethnic consciousness, thinking about Igbo as one identity. Nevertheless, even today each group maintains its own uniformity and continues with the traditional customs. For instance, they continue to distinguish between an Igbo born free, and one with slave ancestors. This is the famous and drastic segregation *Diala* and non-*Diala*. That is relevant for the understanding of the novel *No Longer at Ease*, because it was the reason of Obi's loneliness resulting from the abandonment of his beloved woman. Even though

(3) To abroad knowledge about Igbo people see: Victor Uchendu, op. cit.; Phoebe Ottenberg "The Afikpo Ibo of Eastern Nigeria", in James L. Gibbs, Jr. (ed.) *Peoples of Africa* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975, pp. 1-40); and Simon Ottenberg "Ibo receptivity to change" in William R. Bascon & Melville J. Herskovits (ed.) *Continuity and change in African cultures* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970, pp. 130-143).

(4) Gibbs, op. cit., pp. 33-35.

being an educated man, he could not disobey his sick mother's prejudice against the "osu".

Victor Uchendu in *IGBO of Southeast Nigeria* explains this phenomenon:

Marriage between *osu* - cult slave - and the *diala* - freeborn - is taboo... *Osu* must marry among their own social group. In their respective communities, both *osu* and *diala* obey the rulers of exogamy by marrying outside their local groups. (p. 49)

Uchendu says that one of the first things a stranger learns in an Igbo community is the importance of the distinction between *Diala* and non-*Diala* (p. 87). He continues his information by saying that "It divides Igbo society into two clearly definite social strata: the non-*Diala* being subordinate to the *Diala*"<sup>5</sup> (p. 89).

If the *Diala* is a freeborn, full-fledged citizen, his status is symbolized by the burial of his navel cord at the foot of an oil palm tree. This fact means that he will have all doors of the titled societies and institutions open to him.

At the beginning the Igbo used to fight in order to acquire more slaves, to improve their status. The non-*Diala* were the "ohu" and the "osu".

The "ohu" were subordinate to the *Diala* like slaves and a slave could never be sacrificed to 'ala'. The class of "ohu" consisted of two kinds of people: slaves and pawns. The pawns were low-status slaves; equal to animals, and they were exchanged as such. (The title for this group was "nvuvu ako"). Furthermore, since they were exchanged for cows, horses, or expensive ivory ornaments they could pledged themselves in order to raise the bride wealth payment for a wife.

To the lowest class belonged the "osu": a cult-slave who has been offered to the service of the dedicator's deity.

*Diala*, ohu, and pawns were not "osu". If someone called them in such a way it was considered the most grave of all insults. The "osu" even being special priests, they were "hated and feared, treated as if mean and discussed with the tone of horror and contempt", according to Leith-Ross<sup>6</sup>.

And more than an insult, it would be a marriage between an "osu" person and another different one. Marriage among the Igbo was a much-honored status

(5) Uchendu, op. cit., pp. 49, 87 and 89.

(6) Leith-Ross, apud Victor Uchendu, op. cit.

and unmarried people were not well-looked upon by society. The custom of polygamy allowed every woman to be married. A single woman was looked upon suspicious eyes which explains when Obi told his friend Joseph about Clara's ancestors, he received the following commentary:

The very thing I was thinking to ask you. I was thinking how such a good and beautiful girl could remain unmarried until now (...) Anyhow, you are lucky to know at the beginning. No harm is done yet. The eye is not harmed by sleep (p. 72).

One may understand better the meaning of these words if one reads what Victor Uchendu writes about "osu":

The various traditions of *osu* origin point to its religious basis. Although the *osu* tradition claims that their ancestors were pro-Aro priests who were highly respected until they were supplanted, the *diala* tradition is a scapegoat theory. In that view, a village, a lineage, a family, or an individual dogged by illness, bad luck, or calamities and misfortunes would consult a diviner to find out what was wrong. Is such a case, the diviner would recommend the dedication of a slave who would then become the deity's servitor and carry the sins of the dedicator. Such a dedicator became an *osu*. He is feared because the *diala* do not know to interact with him without offending the deity. He is hated because the *osu* remind the *diala* of their guilt<sup>7</sup>.

The Eastern Nigerian Government abolished the cult-slave status of the *osu* in 1956, but even so "the *osu* system is not dead". As Uchendu says, "in a descending order of described status, Igbo still distinguish: *diala*, ohu, and *osu*. The *osu* lineages are still a living social reality; their residential segregation has not been abolished by law"<sup>8</sup>. For this, one sees that it is not possible to intermarry *diala* and *osu* until nowadays.

Because of this, the reader may understand why Clara could not accept marrying Obi, and more than this, she could not bear a son of his. This was the

(7) Uchendu, op. cit., p. 89.

(8) Idem, Ibidem, p. 90.

biggest dilemma in this novel. Obi because of his western education did not worry about this taboo, yet he could not forget what such a thing would signify to his mother<sup>9</sup>.

In the religion among the Igbo people there is not a "supreme god or hierarchies of deities" in addition to the ground and the spirit of the Aro Chuku oracle (ibini Okpabi), there are two major types of spiritual forces: the ancestors, and a class of spirits called *Erosi*<sup>10</sup>.

Here appears one strange element. If Obi's father did not belong to the religion tradition of his people, because he was a Christian convert, why did he care so much if his son wanted to marry an "osu", who was a believer of their former religion? Mr. Isaac Okonkwo (Obi's father) was a catechist of the Church Missionary Society for 25 years, and then he retired receiving a small pension for his life's work dedicated to his religion. It is difficult for any person to separate himself from the religion traditions of the surrounding society. It means that Mr. Isaac had to maintain his link with his past religion and social environment as is illustrated the day before Obi's departure to England. Mr. Isaac gave a big party for everybody of his group; several 'priests' gave messages, the most important of which was that one given by himself.

The Igbo, even being so numerous and living in such a vast land, conserved some of their principles. Another point of importance is the case of Associations, common, due to the work groups farmers, credit associations, and Dibia association (ordaining priests in a village-group). It is relevant to understand the role of the Associations to see why the Umuofia Representative Union supported Obi in England with the hope that he became a lawyer to defend his people and land. They were frustrated, however, because once there, he studied English rather than law. Even so they tried to help him in his trial.

Nobody could understand Obi's behaviour: Mr. Green (his boss), the very same judge, the British Council man and even the Umuofians. Although Obi had once refused to obey the Umuofians when they requested him to leave Clara because she was an "osu", these same people were trying to find a way to protect him: "They had no illusions about Obi. He was, without doubt, a very foolish and self-willed young man. But this was not time to go into that". (p. 12)

(9) Victor Uchendu tells that the "osu" were, among the Igbo, who first accepted Western education, religious ideas, and other economic opportunities.

(10) Gibbs, op. cit., pp. 29-33.

The Umuofians, people from an Igbo village in Eastern Nigeria, were proud about their past because all their neighbours used to respect them. When the white man arrived, all the tribes were treated in the same way. There were no more privileges for anyone. The privilege belonged, then, only to the white. In spite of this the Umuofians were proud of their history and therefore tried to protect their own people. In that time they had to forgive and forget the individual in order to save the reputation of one social class represented by Obi.

Finally, it has to be pointed out that Obi acquired the European ideas about accepting a person for his real value instead of following the taboos he used to see in his tribe. So, he ignored the fact Clara was an "osu" because she was not responsible for one thing her ancestors had done. Obi Okonkwo was in a position of an assimilated man; he could not feel comfortable neither among the people with whom he acquired 'culture' (the white men), nor in his homeland among his people, because he became accustomed to a new style of life. This story shows the troubles the protagonist has to face when he falls in love with a woman from a different religion.

RESUMO: A religiosidade entre os Igbo é apresentada através da análise da novela *No Longer at Ease* de Chinua Achebe. Esta novela narra uma história contemporânea vivida em Lagos, capital da Nigéria. Em algumas ocasiões a ação desenvolve-se em uma Aldeia Igbo, na Nigéria Oriental, Umuofia, onde o protagonista da novela Obi OKONKWO, nasceu.

A novela apresenta a dramática história de amor entre Obi, um Igbo que nasceu livre, pertencente ao estrato social Dibia e uma mulher, Clara, não Dibia, Osu, cujos ancestrais eram escravos. Na população Igbo o casamento entre um Osu-culto escravo e um Dibia, nascido livre, é considerado tabu. A história revela os conflitos do protagonista ao se enamorar de uma mulher que pertence a uma religião diferente relacionada a um estrato social estigmatizado.

UNITERMOS: Igbo, Religiosidade, Estrato social, Dibia-Osu.