

# The Implication of the Practice of *Afiye* (Caste System) on Human Development Among the *Yala* Communities of Cross River State of Nigeria

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## Abstract

The practice of *Afiye* (Caste System) among the *Yala* communities of Cross River State of Nigeria, settled in *Yala Ogoja*,

*Yala Obubra*, and *Yala Ikom*, is an age long practice, which no one today can precisely point to its exact origin. The practice of *Afiye* and the *Ayiwoole* (slaves and freeborn), without considering the grave consequences, here analysed as implication of the system. The implication involves the political implication which tends to hinder the political rights of members of this caste, through its social structure. There is also the implication on Human Right, whereby members of this caste are denied freedom of association and movement. There is also social discrimination, which has equally affected their social standing in their different communities, such that they cannot be *Ochuole* (Traditional Rulers) or be allowed to participate in traditional burial rites of the traditional ruler that is regarded as the father of all. The economic factor is not left out as dispute bothering on land matters are usually and often settled in the palace and since they are the unwelcome species of human beings in the palace, there are left with no other opportunity than to be disempowered. Of course, there is the strained relationship and conflicts between the *Ayiwoole* and the *Afiye*, what Ralph Darendorf called the dialectical conflict theory. This has led to under development, Anger, bitterness and uncooperative attitude and indeed suspicion and all manners of negative tendencies among the *Yala* communities. It is the submission of this paper therefore, that the practice of this caste with its antecedent implications be put to a stop in order to bring about a meaningful development to *Yala* land.

## Introduction

In any heterogeneous society of the world, there is every possibility of such society to be sub-divided into layers. This sub-division is known as stratification. This stratification brings about social classification. It is pertinent then with such societies, especially the *Yala* society with its *Afiye* culture under our review, that there is the tendency to reduce some of their citizens into a sub-human status. This kind of situation also easily gives room to ethnocentrism, which is the ill of thinking of some one race to be superior to the other. This ultimately leads to a caste system in the society.

Humphrey N. D (1941:159), thus opined that, ‘

*Caste is an endogamous status group, which places culturally defined limits upon the individual member in terms of mobility and on his nature as a person.*

This limited societal interaction is coloured by prejudice. Allport, Gordon W, (1979:70 has thus defined prejudice as;

*An aversive or hostile attitude towards a person who belongs to a group, simply because he belongs to that group, and is therefore, presumed to have the objectionable qualities ascribed to the group.*

Ordinarily, prejudice manifests itself in dealing with individual members of rejected groups; this is the case among the **Yala** people, with regard to the interaction between the **ayiiwoole** and the **Afiye**. This action and reactions have been regarded, accepted and internalized as a norm among the **Yala** communities, hence, becoming part of their culture. Offiong O. Asuquo (2011:77), has pointed out that, culture and Religion are twins, essential, inseparable and interdependent aspect of human beings. He further posit that in reality, it is impossible to have a culture without religion or a religion without culture, religion illuminates culture, culture gives flesh and substance to religion, so it is that the practice of **Afiye** has indeed become the culture and religion of the **Yala** people. Culture, whether as a product of hereditary or change, influences members of the society. The social group which a child belongs determines to a large extent his future behaviour and character. A child will obviously be brought up to follow the behaviour to which the adults assigned the highest value (P. Ade Dopamu 1993:16). Speaking about its implication therefore, the socio-political, economic life and the practice of human rights are readily considered. The implications as we shall see are enormous. George Wills (1999:64) strongly emphasized the importance and implications of culture when he affirms that;

*The culture of a people-custom, mores, traditions, values, institutionalized ideas-rather than just legal institutions and economic policies, which are agents of progress in a society.*

Quoting Christopher Demuth, George Wills above, argued that, the economic prosperity of Western Europe and North America could be linked to a single word **Culture**. He went on to say that the spread of democracy, free market technology and information is not enough to rescue many nations from consequences of their cultural defects. He added that, such defects although not incurable, are intractable.

In the light of the above arguments, we would like to examine here the political, human rights, social, and economic implications of the practice of **Afiye** caste among the **Yala** communities and the conflicts so far caused among the **Yala** people, taking note that a nation or tribe is made up of what Laski calls necessary pluralism (quoted in E. B. Idowu 1970:90). The methodology employed here is the use of oral interview and secondary data, which includes books and journals. The work in its theoretical framework is anchored on conflict theory, especially the dialectical conflict theory of Ralph Darendorf.

## **Political Implications**

There is no way political affairs can be vividly discussed with justice and fairness without democracy. As we look at the political implications of **Afiye** caste system among the **Yala** people, it reminds one of the basic landmarks of democracy. John Locke, the great English philosopher, provided the basic landmark of democracy in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. His later writings provided such four landmarks, namely; equality, individual freedom, government based upon the governed and limitation upon the state (Macridis 1983:20). The portions of this cardinal concept of democracy that concern the political implication are equality and individual freedom.

During the political era of Alhaji Shehu Shagari especially that of 1983, there arose a political giant from the **Yala-Ogoja** area. He was very rich and influential; his humanitarian gesture knows no bound. The community youth looks up to him as the only person that can influence the federal and state presence to **Yalaland**. Infact, he was before the electioneering campaign seen as a consensus candidate. The only factor that distorted every good record and his aspiration to that political position was the fact that his ancestry was traced to the **Afiye** caste system. The fact that '*ene Omega gmo olipu*

*amama nii*; is a signal therefore that, no freeborn commonly referred to as *ayiiwoole*, would want to be ruled by an *Ofiye* either politically or traditionally, because, they can not vouch for safety, by entrusting their political destiny into the hands of an *Ofiye* (Simon Oko, interv. 7-1-2006).

In one word, the *Afiye* among the *Yala* communities are regarded as “bond-stranger” among the *Yala* people, they can never be truly accepted into the fabric of the *Yala* social strata as equals to the *ayiiwoole*, more so, they know nor have any other place to be called their own- it is indeed an eternal dilemma.

Pita Nwana (1976:1) truly captures the attitude of the *Yala* to this “bond-strangers” concept when he opines that, in Africa, there is an unwritten law that an African, wherever he finds himself outside his ancestral home, always remembers that he is a stranger no matter the amount of acceptability, wealth acquired, or his social status. The thought of his ancestral home permeates him. In one way or the other, situations or circumstances prevail on him that he is a stranger, and that in life or death, he must one day return home.

This discriminatory treatment of the *Afiye* caste invariably prevents them from contributing, as they would ordinarily want to do, to the socio-political development of their community. It is worth mentioning though never a written law, that when one is rejected from his community, he is likely to be careless and carefree in the affairs of his community that so rejected him, more so, a rejection that will transcend his generations. The frustration, is so much that even, those who venture to speak against it, even from the government circle were thrown out of government. Victor Dike (<http://www.nigerdeltacongress.com>), in narrating one incidence among the Igbo in relation to the political implication of *Osu* caste has stated that many examples abound, but the one that caught the attention of the researcher is the case of Mr. Morris Ede, a former commissioner for special duties in Enugu state, who is an indigene of *Umuode*. He protested against the manner in which Governor Nnamani of Enugu state and his associates were handling the *OSU* crisis in *Oruku* community. The people of *Umuode* were driven out of their community, because they are said to be *OSU*. Apparently, because of his protest, Mr. Ede lost his job as a Commissioner for Special Duties when governor Nnamdi reshuffled his cabinet.

Matthew Wogor in an oral interview has noted that, despite a rare admission of some members of *Afiye* caste into the *Yala* age-grade system, their contributions are often regarded as good as nothing (9-2-2008). For instance, since they are denied full membership into the age grade, and denied aspiring into the traditional Chieftaincy stools, which forms the political leadership of the traditional *Yala* society; their political rights are thereby hindered. Even in social organizations in which membership is open to indigenes and non-indigenes of *Yala* community, they are treated with disdain, because of the concept that they are properties, and as such, their view and positions are not regarded. They have no privileges or roles in the king’s palace. (Declan Joseph Ogar 2007:9). What has been said so far is true of the *Yala-ogoja*. Among the *Nkum Okpambe*, and *Yala-Nkum*.

There seems to be some respite. Among the *Nkum-Okpambe (Yala-Obubra) and Nkum-Yala (Yala Ikom)*, the *Afiyes* are allowed to associate freely in all social organizations including age-grade. However, it must be pointed out that in regard to Chieftaincy, it is very difficult to allow at least, the first, second and third generations of the *Afiye* to become *Ochuole* except in satellites communities among the *Nkum-Yala*. This type of Chiefs are regarded as *ochuole okara* (oyibo-government chief), because according to them, some of the *Afiye* descendants can manage to become Chiefs of that satellite community if they are the first settlers (Oral interv. Chief G. N. Ojiji 26-4-2011).

### Implication On Human Right

Human race in every age has fundamental aims and objectives. One of such basic aims is the desire to enjoy certain fundamental Human rights. These rights include freedom from inhuman treatment, freedom from slavery, freedom of assembly, freedom from discriminations, freedom of thought, freedom of association as well as other rights, which are reasonably justifiable in a democratic society (Azikiwe, Nnamdi 1965:455). It is therefore necessary that we look at the implication of *Afiye* caste

system on the human rights of *Yala* people, since it is part of their cultural life. Any culture that hinders freedom of association directly or indirectly is a violation of the rights of the people.

The requirement of democracy in a given place demands that human personality in its existence should be allowed to move on without any man-made hindrance and obstacles, as long as it does not violate the safety and reasonable rights of others, and as pointed out by Cyril Umoh (2001:27), the essence of democracy and human rights in society today is aim at solving the problems of discriminations and inequality. Even though this wind of change is blowing, Friday Okon (2002:18) has lamented that the grip of all kinds of Human Right abuses and vilations that belie even the current change in most cultures. No wonder then that the 18<sup>th</sup> century French philosopher Rousseau had opined in his social contract that man was born free, but that everywhere he was in chain. Victor Dike (2005:6) has succinctly affirmed that;

*The social development of a nation or a community must include, among other things, justice, fairness and equal treatment for its citizenry; in this way, the nation will achieve at least for a long time to come a desirable unity in diversity.*

Among the *Yala Afiye* caste system, families of the deceased are never allowed to bury their loved ones on the day of their choice, but according to the dictates and norms of the people. Ekpo Lega, in an oral interview narrated an incidence in the *Utukpo* community of a notable figure who was aspiring to the chieftaincy stool, only to be asked a simple question bothering on the day his father was buried. The source above noted that, the father to the notable man above, was a great man and a great orator, a warrior of repute who had helped the community in various communal clashes, but at his death, the families were reminded of the fact that he was of the *Afiye* caste, but as a mark of respect and appreciation for all his contributions to the community, his corpse was lowered on the day meant for the burial of the *ayiiwoole*, but the grave was never covered until the following day, which was an odd day meant for the burial of the members of the caste. It is also crucial to point out the fact that, their free social interaction is greatly hindered, every one in this caste is automatically a pariah (social cast), from the denial of participation in a particular cultural dance (*Atimambe* dance) among the *Yala* of *Nkum Okpambe* or to the dancing with one or both hands tied behind among the *Nkum Yala* is a clear testimony of the denial of this rights.

Frank Ogodo (2002:35) has touched this briefly when he asserted that, among the *Yala* society, if the slaves were well behaved, they could and were often absorbed into the social structures such as age grade system and could be allowed to contribute or take part in decision making in the society. From Frank's analysis above, one would think that once they are allowed into such social structures, they are fully integrated into the society and can take part in decision-making. This is far from the truth. This is because, some well behaved slaves among the *Yala* are absorbed into the social structure of the society but are never allowed to hold a leadership position, nor are they allowed into the inner caucus, neither are they even allowed to speak out boldly during discussions. Again, no member of this caste system is ever allowed to ascend the Chieftaincy stool or to even join the members of the Chief in Council, even the putting on of the red cap, because red-cap is a symbol of royalty among the *Yala* people, especially of the *Yala ogoja*.

In 1946, the United Nations set up the Rights Commission. It was this Commission that wrote the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which all the members of the general Assembly approved in 1948. The main focus of this declaration is on the hope that men would learn to respect the rights and dignity of other men (the Encyclopedia Volume 9, 1981; 384). The world Book Encyclopedia (1981:39. volume 20), on Human Rights, racial problems have received more attention than any other issue brought before the UN. According to Friday Okon (2002:181) in his work entitled *Human Rights Violations And The Rest Of Us; The Concern Of Akpadu's* has quoted the U.N Charter on Human Rights when it states that Human Rights are those Rights that belongs to the people simply by virtue of the fact that they are born human beings...rights that belong to the people for no other reason that they are born human or existing humans, using the word of kierkegard. One can, therefore, assert that

the *Afiye* caste system as Practiced before and now among the *Yala* communities of Cross River State has much negative implication on human right.

### Social Implications

Human beings are social beings and appreciate greatly living a social life in terms of association, interaction and in security. Such socialization brings about satisfaction and social development. In every social organization and interaction, self-worth as well as appreciation by other members is very crucial.

In assessing the implication of *Afiye* caste system on social standing and interaction among the *Yala* communities of Cross River State, it is pertinent to point out that, derogatory terminologies that are used on the *Afiye* portrayed them as less human, inconsequential and nonentity. This is the point stated by Frank Ogodu (2002:35) when he affirmed that a man (slave) has no father but a property of the foster father to his mother. By simple implication, a member of the *Afiye* caste can only be seen heard, and given honour and respect only through the family that owns him. That is why traditionally the *Yala* do not institute a case against an *Ofiye* at the Chief's palace, rather, those who are referred to as the slave owners are held responsible for every misdeeds of the *Ofiye*. This fact underlies the *Afiye* social standing in *Yala* community and the regards that is given them, no matter their wealth, education, personality and any other achievement in life. Frank Ogodu (2002:36) captured this vividly when he affirmed thus:

*They could not however be allowed to marry the freeborn no matter the level of acceptability. They could in any case marry among their likes in the community. Wealth and prestige in society therefore have nothing to do with marriage as such a union between a freeborn and a slave could jeopardize the freeborn family reputation later in life among their equals. It was a social stigma that no right thinking family of the freeborn was ready to accept in the family lineage.*

Despite the fact that some of these caste members who are well behaved are absorbed into the social structures, intimate social interactions, including marriage was forbidden. It must be pointed out that this rejection varies, among the *Yala Ogoja*, this marriage restriction is very strict, among the *Nkum Okpambe (Yala Obubra)*, there seems to be no restriction anymore. This attitude of social ostracism has much negative implications for the *Yala* communities in terms of development as well as cohesive social interactions.

Onah otiala in an oral interview (4-7-2008) has posited that majority of the caste members feel rejected, alienated and insulted, As such, their interest in developing the community are minimal and the mere reflections on their rejection by the community. He further queried why despite all their children in position of authority, military, politics, academia, captains of industry, the *Yala* communities still look wretched, and under developed. Though, he repeatedly refused to be specific on the names of such caste members who are hindering the community development, because of his security and that of his family. To Paul Odah, the practice of the caste among the *Yala* people is not just on issues of discrimination but more of denial and rejection (interv. 8-7-2008).

From the foregoing, one must clearly point out that among the *Yala* communities of Cross Rivers State; the practice of *Afiye* caste is well known and persistent. Despite this general knowledge, no one would want to be identified as the one who spotted a particular person as belonging to the caste. Even among the *Okpoma* people, where in crucial issues, they will begin to tell you to your face (Iyaji Ogar Oche 16-6-2011), it is ordinarily equally difficult. This is one great set back in a research like this, where members of *Afiye* caste cannot be identified by their names, or to have a photograph of some of the activities in a research such as this.

## **Economic Implication**

J. O. Akao (2000:43) in his work entitled *The Biblical Theology In Africa And The Issue Of Poverty Alleviation* has pointed out the fact that, poverty among biblical Israel, includes amongst others, the state and conditions of the people and persons who are the needy, the oppressed, afflicted, humiliated and the dispossessed one, who is socially weak. The *Yala Afiye* caste system has much economic implication for the people. As pointed out earlier, the members of the caste among the *Yala* people have no rights to land, because, as far as the *Yala* communities are concern, they have no existence apart from the families that bought them. In communities like *Yala*, where farming is the only major source of survival and living, the *Yala Afiye* members are completely disempowered. Even among those who are educated and are privileged to secure government jobs, the economic situations are not better off, because, they are seen as properties and not accorded the right to human dignity. They can hardly contend for lands or property at the Chief's palace, as they are regarded as "*Ukpopi*" (a kind of goat that has an offensive odour) at the palace and as such are not expected to be seen or heard at the palace of *Ogamode*.

This outright oppression and discrimination has led to many members of this caste relocating to other parts of the world, while some left for good, others who are left behind with their wealth and fortunes have no interest to neither develop their communities nor give a helping hand to members of the community. This ultimately has economic implications on the *Yala* communities and its people (Interv. Matthew Onah Eba 21-7-2008). Though often disputed in public discussions, but it is a known fact that, one of the major reasons accruing to the under-development of the *Yala* Communities, especially the *Yala Ogoja* is the fact that the derogatory terminologies, denials, insult and mockery in private and often in public glare have resulted in a negative reaction from members of the Caste system. This negative reactions manifest itself not only in migration, but also in being indifferent to the welfare of the Community and its people, no matter the opportunity that maybe at their disposals, either in form of NGO's or government subsidy. This has also accounted in greater percentage, while most of them fail to even seek for employment opportunities for the teeming school leavers and graduates from *Yala* extraction even when they are in positions of rendering such help and services. Some prominent *Yala* indigenes were denied access to land when they sought permission to build an industry in *Yala* in 1988, simply because such land were the exclusive right of the freeborn (*ayiiwoole*) (Mathew Wogor oral interview. 9-2-2008).

This economic implication must be understood clearly from the fact that traditionally, most *Yala* parents prefer sending the slaves to school so that they could be beaten by the teachers and also remain in hunger while the *ayiiwoole*, are to follow their parents to the farm in order that they may feed fat ( oral interv. Simon Oko 7-1-2008). Today members of this caste are dictating the economic, political, educational as well as religious directions of the *Yala* Nation. This could as well account for the sociological explanation to the success recorded by the *Afiye* (slave) as compared to the *ayiiwoole* (freeborn).

Spinoza has affirmed in his popular saying that he who conceives himself hated by another and believes that he had given no cause for hatred will hate the other in return. Jerry Gana has pointed out when he states, "You cannot have peace where there is injustice and inequality" (AIT News 30-9-2010). Here lies the practice of *Afiye* Caste System and its Economic implications.

## **Strained Relationships and Conflicts Between the Ayiiwoole and the Afiye**

As we view the events in the world today, one discovers that one of the major reason and factor for conflicts in the world today is inequality, abuse of human and civil rights, absence of freedom as well as discriminations. These factors today can easily be said to be responsible for the conflicts today in Iraq to Afghanistan, Israel to Palestine, Lebanon, Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria, and Nigeria as demonstrated in the on-going strike sparked by the removal of oil subsidy. As Channels Television will analyse, the rally and protest is not just against oil subsidy, but as well as corruption, and the wide

margin between the rich and the poor especially the political class and the cabal (Channels Television News 13-1-2012 2.00 pm). Jerry Gana has pointed out when he states, “You cannot have peace where there is injustice and inequality (AIT News 30-9-2010).

Hatred and discriminations breeds frustration, which in turn breeds hatred and aggression. Chinua Achebe in his book entitled, *Things Fall Apart* (1959:19) states;

*We shall all live, we pray for life, children, a good harvest and happiness. You will have what is good for you and I will have what is good for me. Let the kite perch and the eagle too. If one says no, to the other, let his wings break.*

As we appraise Achebe’s comments, if one says no, to the other, let his wings breaks, leads us conclusively to the strained relationship and conflicts among the *ayiiwoole* and *Afiye* Caste members. Though these conflicts have not yet resulted to an open conflict like civil disturbance, this is perhaps due to the fact that members of this caste are still in minority. Though, the effects are worse than an open conflict. Members of the *Afiye* and *Ayiiwoole* look at each other with disdain, bitterness, suspicion, and anger. There is a common saying that an injustice unresolved bore a hole in the heart.

Looking at the practice of *Afiye* Caste among the *Yala* people, one discovers that the unpleasant social stigma which they carry along is a tremendous barrier to human relations and *Afiye* upward mobility in *Yala* communities.

The dilemma of this conflict is centered on the fact that the members of *Afiye* Caste have not taken any practical steps to see to the manumission of their positions and conditions, while the *Ayiiwoole* equally have not come up with any remedy to such perennial problems, which is indeed a time bomb among the *Yala Ogoja*. Among the *NKUM OKPAMBE*, it has been reduced to the 4th generation, while among the *NKUM Yala*; the barrier seems to be completely removed, except for rare cases.

In a confidential interview with one of this caste member who is the researcher parishioner (in this write up, he is referred to as Odey Ogbene) he stated how he feels concerning this practice as follows:

*I am answering this question because you are my priest and I know you have been preaching against this practice. I feel sad, I feel like killing myself or anyone who comes across me, especially when I make an advance to a girl and I see someone around whispering and laughing. I feel humiliated and rejected, I feel bitter, and how can I find myself in a situation where my posterity and I will ever be treated as second class human beings? (He started weeping and continued). Each time I see a fellow human being, being buried in a derogatory manner and ways, I feel like arresting everyone around to tell me the genesis or the sin that such individual has committed. Time shall come, when we shall be silent no more. (Dec, 28, 2007).*

Here lies the bitterness, time bomb and resentment by members of this Caste group.

## Conclusion

In conclusion it is necessary to point out that the marginalization of a certain members of the community, especially as it concerns the practice of *afiye* has brought unpleasant consequences to those in the dialectical conflicts, namely: the *ayiiwoole* and the *afiye*. This has invariable hampered the developmental capabilities and the great potentials imbued on the people and their natural love and affection that have existed among the people. Where there is discrimination, injustice, inhuman treatment and obnoxious practices targeted against a certain number of a given community, there is the tendency that the oppressed will invariable react which will naturally result in a conflict situation. No matter the assumed benefit or advantages of the practice of *afiye* in primordial times, it is evident today that those advantages which results in control and wellbeing of the society have been overtaken by factors of social change and thus has resulted more in producing conflict than the desired good. It is therefore the research position that the practice be discontinued in its entirety.

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