

The Ritual of Azazel in the Jewish Tradition and Osu Caste System in Igbo Tradition: Any Nexus?

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Abstract

In today's African society, there is a sudden surge in interest in Indigenous African Spiritualities (IAS). This interest is mainly among the youth. This surge seems to come face to face with the Judeo-Christian tradition which has taken strong root in Africa. In some cases, the return to IAS seems to challenge the long-age accepted teachings and dogmas of the Judeo-Christian faith. This return to IAS is because of the feeling of the youth that the Judeo-Christian faith does not address some of their pressing needs like issues of insecurity, the question of theodicy, financial issues, etc. When they read through the scriptures of the Judeo-Christian tradition, they fail to see much connection between what these scriptures teach and the accepted beliefs of IAS. The paper argues for a connection between the teachings of the Jewish scriptures and IAS in one core aspect. It adopts a historical and cross-cultural methodology to come to the conclusion that the Azazel ritual of the Jewish Testament has a counterpart in the Osu caste system of the traditional Igbo religion. This is especially so in the propitiatory function of the two rituals.

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Keywords: Atonement, Azazel, Igbo, Jewish, Osu, Propitiation.

Abstrak

Dalam masyarakat Afrika saat ini, terdapat lonjakan minat yang secara tiba-tiba terhadap Spiritualitas Pribumi Afrika *Indigenous African Spiritualities* (IAS). Minat ini terutama ada di kalangan pemuda. Gelombang ini tampaknya bertentangan langsung dengan tradisi Yudaisme-Kristen yang telah berakar kuat di Afrika. Dalam beberapa kasus, kembalinya ke IAS tampaknya menantang ajaran dan dogma yang telah lama diterima dari iman Judeo-Kristen. Kembalinya ke IAS ini disebabkan oleh perasaan para pemuda bahwa iman Yahudi-Kristen tidak memenuhi beberapa kebutuhan mendesak mereka seperti masalah ketidakamanan, pertanyaan tentang teodisi, masalah keuangan, dll. Ketika mereka membaca kitab suci tradisi Yudeo-Kristen, mereka gagal melihat banyak hubungan antara apa yang diajarkan oleh kitab-kitab suci ini dan keyakinan yang diterima di IAS. Artikel ini membahas tentang adanya hubungan antara ajaran kitab suci Yahudi dan IAS dalam satu aspek inti. Ia mengadopsi metodologi historis dan lintas budaya untuk sampai pada kesimpulan bahwa ritual Azazel dalam Perjanjian Yahudi memiliki padanan dalam sistem kasta Osu dalam agama tradisional Igbo. Ini terutama terlihat dalam fungsi propitiatori dari kedua ritual tersebut.

Kata Kunci: Penebusan, Azazel, Igbo, Yahudi, Osu, pendamaian.

Introduction

Recent surveys show that Africa is recording a growing number of people who identify themselves as religious. This is most evident in the Christian religion which has experienced a tremendous resurgence in the global south, especially in Africa.¹ The prognoses show that by 2050 a significant percentage of Christians in the entire world will live in Africa.² However, despite the growing number of those who identify themselves as

¹ Raimundo C. Barreto, *Decoloniality and Interculturality in World Christianity: A Latin American Perspective*. (ResearchGate, 2020), 65.

² Jenkins, as cited in Louise Müller, "African Christianity," in *The Bloomsbury Handbook to studying Christians*, George D. Chrystides and Stephen E. Gregg (eds.). (ResearchGate, 2019), 151.

Christians in Africa, there appears to be a growing rejection of the Judeo-Christian faith by some young Africans. This is strongly felt among the young generation of Igbo people. At the moment, many young Igbos are discontented with the Judeo-Christian faith and are fast returning to the traditional belief system of their forebears. The reason for the discontent with the Judeo-Christian tradition is the seeming disconnect between this tradition and the traditional faith and culture of the ancient Igbo people. The general feeling of those abandoning the Judeo-Christian faith is that the Jewish or Christian religion does not address their current situation.

Although some scholars have investigated the striking similarities between some aspects of Igbo culture and tradition with some aspects of the Jewish religion,³ there still seems to be a lack of understanding of the correlation between these two religions in many areas. The apparent lack of connection between the two religions stems principally from the difficulty of the Igbos to comprehend some of the narratives of the sacred text of the Jewish and Christian religions and apply them to their present circumstances. In the same way, the age-old rejection of some of the cultural values, as well as the rites and rituals of Igbo traditional religion is because of the inability of Western scholars and early missionaries to understand the connections that exist between this religion and the Judeo-Christian tradition.

It is, therefore, the desire of this study to bring these two traditions into dialogue for mutual enrichment. Thus, making a comparative study of the Jewish concept of Azazel with the rites or rituals of Igbo understanding of the *Osu* caste system is a way of bringing the two religious traditions into more dialogue. Hence, this study tries to see a point of dialogue between the Igbo practice of the *Osu* caste system and the ritual of Azazel in the Jewish tradition. To our knowledge, no available study has undertaken this. The relevance of this study to the Judeo-Christian system is because many adherents of the Judeo-Christian religion still struggle to shrug off their strong ties with belief in the caste system or marry this belief with their new faith in the message of

³ See Peter C. Uzor, *The Traditional African Concept of God and the Christian Concept of God: Chukwu bu Ndu, God is Life: The Igbo Perspective*. (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2004), 175.

the preaching of the equality of all humans. Hence, our attempt is to seek for points of contact between these two traditions.

The methodological approaches in this paper are historical and cross-cultural. The paper adopts a historical approach because the two subjects under consideration involve the culture of peoples which have developed in the course of time. According to Berg & Lure, historical research “attempts to systematically recapture the complex nuances, the people, meanings, events, and even ideas of the past that have influenced and shaped the present.”⁴ It is a way of systematically examining events that occurred in the past. It involves the use and correlation of primary and secondary sources in order to communicate and understand past events.⁵ The aim of this sort of research is to communicate events in the past with a view of making them understandable for the present time. The historical approach is important since the paper seeks to understand the two phenomena the same way the people who own them understand them. In the case of Azazel, recourse would be made to the Hebrew Scriptures and the studies of those scholars who have grappled with the phenomenon. The antique nature of this ritual is reflected in the number of ancient literatures reviewed in its study. The study of the *Osu* caste system would hinge mainly on Igbo scholars who have a good knowledge of the system.

Cross-cultural method, on the other hand, “is a scientific method of comparative research which focuses on systematic comparisons that compares culture to culture and explicitly aims to answer questions about the incidence, distributions, and causes of cultural variation and complex problems across a wide domain, usually worldwide.”⁶ The cross-cultural method in this research involves the comparison between the identity and ritual of Azazel with the identity and ritual of the *Osu* caste system. These would serve as necessary steps to bring the ritual of *Osu* into close

⁴ B. L. Berg and H. Lune, *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences* 8th Edition, (Pearson, Upper Saddle River, NJ, 2012), 305.

⁵ Torou Elena, Akrivi Katifori, Costas Vassilakis, George Lepouras, Constantin Halatsis, “Historical Research in Archives: User Methodology and Supporting Tools,” *International Journal on Digital Libraries* vol. 11 (2010), 25-36.

⁶ Ilesanmi Oluwatoyin Olatundun, “What Is Cross-cultural Research” *International Journal of Psychological Studies*, vol. 1, no 2 (2009), 82.

dialogue with the Jewish understanding of Azazel and open up another body of knowledge to those already acquainted with the Jewish idea of Azazel but may not know much about the Igbo concept of *Osu*. However, it has to be stated, from the onset, that the study is not an attempt to glorify the stratification of the Igbo society into *Osu* and freeborn. Rather, it continues a dialogue that might lead to the final extinction of this affront to the Igbo egalitarian society.

Who are the Igbos?

The Igbo tribe is one of the three largest tribes in Nigeria, located in the South-eastern part of the country. The states in Nigeria that make up the Southeast are Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo states. There are also many Igbos that belong to other neighbouring states in the southern part of Nigeria such as Delta, Rivers and Benue States. There is a significant number of Igbo speaking people in countries like Equatorial Guinea, Cameroon and Jamaica. Their language is also called the Igbo language. According to Uzor “the Igbo of the South East of Nigeria occupy continuous geographical delimitations of areas that have in common the same dominant and significant cultural traits, complexes or elements that developed around socio-cultural, political, economic, ritual and other cultural themes...Because of these factors, we speak of them as a single people and the territory they occupy as Igboland.”⁷ Despite some minor differences in dialect or cultural observances, Okorie has listed some common cultural features that enable one to speak of Igbo community or Igbo culture. These cultural features include the language, ritual elements, oracles, attitude towards the dead, and four market days of *Eke*, *Orie*, *Afor*, and *Nkwo* which have their religious significances.⁸

⁷ Uzor, *Concept of God*, 171.

⁸ Cletus P. A. Okorie, *Priesthood in Igbo Traditional Religion*. (Bonn: St. Ottilien EOS-Verlag, 1998), 95; Aloysius A. Ndiukwu, *Authenticity of Belief in African (Igbo) Traditional Religion: A Critical Appraisal of Christian Faith*. (Frankfurt am Maim: Peter Lang, 2014), 156.

On the religious proclivity of the Igbo tribe, Ogbaa⁹ notes that they are a “very religious people”. They are also traditionalists, in the sense that they tend to preserve their traditional values, despite the incursions of Western religion and civilization. The *Osu* caste system is one of a relic of the cultural values of the Igbos which has resisted every effort towards its total extinction. The ritual which makes one an *Osu* quite resembles the ritual of Azazel in Lev. 16. Hence, the need to make a comparative study of the two rituals.

The Ritual of Azazel in Leviticus 16

Azazel is introduced in the Jewish scriptures in connection with the Day of Atonement (*Yôm Kippūr*). It is an annual Jewish celebration which falls on the tenth day of the seventh month (Tishrei) of the Jewish calendar (September/October in the Gregorian calendar). It is a day dedicated by the whole Jewish nation to prayer, fasting, self-denial, and repentance.¹⁰ Fasting and self-denial enabled the people to put aside their physical desires and concentrate on their spiritual needs. The word, *kippur* is a derivative of the word “kipper” which is translated as “atone”, “remove” or “purify”. In biblical times, the Day of Atonement was a national day of cleansing.¹¹ It was the only day that the High Priest could enter the Holy of Holies in the Temple. On this day, the High Priest would take a censer full of coals of fire from the altar and go behind the curtain that shut off the Holy of Holies and incense the mercy-seat¹² (*kappōret*). The primary purpose of the

⁹ Kalu Ogbaa, *Understanding Things Fall Apart: A Student Casebook to Issues and Historical Documents*. (Wesport: Greenwood Press, 1999), 78.

¹⁰ S. Noveck (Ed). *Contemporary Jewish Thought*. (New Jersey: B'nai B'rith Books, 1955), 235; P. Igbo. *Basic Themes in Old Testament Studies*. (Owerri: Claretian Publications, 2021), 180; J. E. Hartley. *Leviticus. Word Biblical Commentary*. B. M. Metzger (ed). (Dallas: Word Books, 1992), 244.

¹¹ N. A. Andreasen. *Atonement/Expiation in the Old Testament. Lutterworth Dictionary of the Bible*. W. E. Mills (ed). (Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 1994), 76.

¹² The mercy-seat (*kappōret*) is a slab of gold on top of the Ark of the Covenant. H. L. Carrigan, “Mercy-seat,” in *The Lutterworth Dictionary of the Bible*. Edited by W. E. Mills. (Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 1990),

observance was to atone for the sins that had remained uncleansed in the course of the year. On this day, sacrifices were offered to make expiation for the sanctuary, the priests and the people.¹³

Two main rituals are carried out on the Day of Atonement. The first part of the ritual is the Levitical ritual. The High Priest would offer a bull “as a sin offering,” to make atonement (*kipper*) for himself and his household, i.e., the entire Aaronic priesthood (Lev 16:11). He would take some of the blood of the bull into the Holy of Holies, and sprinkle it with his finger seven times on the front of the mercy seat (Lev 16:11-14) in order to make expiation for his own sins and that of his household.

The second part of the ritual involves the sacrifice of two goats, one as sin offering (*ḥaṭṭā'î*), the other, also known as “the goat to Azazel” is meant to expel sin and evil from the community. The two goats were provided by the people. The goat chosen by lot “for the Lord” was offered in the holy precinct as sin offering for the whole community. Its blood was sprinkled on and before the mercy-seat. The purpose of this ritual was to atone for the sins of the people, just as the offering of the bull (Lev 16:15).¹⁴ The fact that the goat bearing the sins of the people is driven to the wilderness, symbolizes the expulsion of sin from the community. It is also a symbol of God’s forgiveness of the people’s sins.¹⁵ The scapegoat ceremony, as P. Heinisch suggests, “was a forceful way of teaching the Israelites to remove themselves as far as possible from sin and its implications.”¹⁶

For some scholars, this ritual carries some antiquity behind it. Loehr is of the view that the ritual seems to “point back to the period before the settling in Canaan.” He also points out that “the sending of a goat to Asasel [sic] is a pre-Mosaic ritual of

568; G. H. Davies, “Mercy-seat.” *IDB* 3. G. A. Buttrick (ed.). (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), 354.

¹³ R. De Vaux. *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*. (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1998), 507.

¹⁴ Cf. J. R. Porter. *Leviticus. The Cambridge Bible Commentary*. P. R. Ackroyd (ed). (Cambridge: Cambridge university Press, 1976), 131.

¹⁵ J. Hastings (ed). “Azazel” in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*. vol 2. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1974), 282-283.

¹⁶ P. Heinisch. *Theology of the Old Testament*. (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1955), 235.

atonement of one of the Leah tribes, which for some unknown reasons was adopted into the cult of Yahweh when Yahwism arose.”¹⁷ In the same line of thought, G. Driver is sure that “the ritual is a survival from another stage of popular belief, engrafted on and accommodated to the sacrificial system of the Hebrews.”¹⁸ In addition, M. Bergmann concludes that “the custom must have been a very old one going back to the time when YHWH did not yet have full dominion over the Hebrews.”¹⁹ With regard to the importance of this ritual, S. Kellogg argues that “In it the sacrificial law of Moses attains its supreme expression; the holiness and the grace alike of Israel’s God, their fullest revelation.”²⁰

The Goat to Azazel

When the High Priest has finished performing the rituals of expiation for the community, he would bring forward the second goat, also called the goat for Azazel. The High Priest would lay both of his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess (*hitwaddā^h*) over it the sins of the people. In Lev. 16:16 and 21, three terms are used for the people’s sins: *’āwōnōt* (iniquities), *pišā’im* (rebellions), and *ḥaṭṭō’t* (sins). These terms together encompass all the dimensions of human breaking of the Law of God. These terms are in the plural, thus indicating the frequency and totality of humans’ sinning.

By confessing the sins of the people over the head of the goat, the High Priest symbolically transferred the sins of the people to the goat²¹ (Lev 16:21). The goat, designated by lot “for Azazel”, became the bearer of the people’s guilt (Lev 16:8). And,

¹⁷ M. Loehr, “*Das Ritual von Lev. 16: Untersuchungen zum Hexateuchproblem III.*” *Schriften der Königsberger Gelehrten Gesellschaft* (1925), 11.

¹⁸ G. R. Driver, “Azazel,” in: *Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. I, (ed. Davis, J. D.). (Philadelphia: The Westminster press, 1923), 207–8.

¹⁹ M. S. Bergmann, *In the Shadow of Moloch: The Sacrifice of Children and its Impact on Western Religions* (New York: Columbia University Press), 38. For arguments to this ritual as a late entrance into Jewish tradition, see T. K. Cheyne, “The Date and Origin of the Ritual of the ‘Scapegoat,’” *ZAW* 15 (1895), 155.

²⁰ S. H. Kellogg, *The Book of Leviticus*, 272

²¹ J. E. Hartley. *Leviticus. Word Biblical Commentary*. B. M. Metzger (ed). (Dallas: Word Books, 1992), 241.

bearing its evil burden, i.e., the guilt of the people, the goat, commonly called the scapegoat, was led off to the desert (*midbār*) by someone designated for the task who ensured that the goat does not wander back to the camp. This goat sent to the desert is the scapegoat whose duty is to carry the sins of the people away.²² Being laden with the sins of the people, the goat was believed to now possess a polluting force (Lev 16:21). By driving it to the desert, evil is symbolically removed from the community.

The driving of the goat to the wilderness symbolized the taking away of the sins of the people. The goat became a “substitute” or “ransom” to which the guilt of the people was transferred and, which thereupon was eliminated or cut off from the community. Among the ancients, the wilderness was regarded as a solitary land, the abode of demons or evil spirits.²³ The person who led the goat to the desert became unclean in the process. On returning to the camp, he was required to wash his clothes and bathe himself with water in order to become ritually clean before he would be reintegrated to the community.

Who or what is Azazel?

The term, “Azazel” (*‘āzā’zēl*), occurs only four times in the OT, all in Lev 16 (vv.8, 10 [2 times], 26). The form *‘Azaz’el* seems to be a combination of the Semitic root ‘zz meaning to be “enraged,” “fierce,” or “strong,” with the term *’el*, which is either the proper name of the god *El*, or perhaps the generic term for “god” in Hebrew. Thus, Azazel could mean, “El/the god is fierce/strong” or perhaps “the rage of El/the enraged god.” With regard to the identity of Azazel, biblical commentators have adduced four major interpretations.

First, Azazel is identified with the scapegoat used in the ritual of expiation on the *Yôm Kippūr*. For *T. H. Gaster*²⁴ and *L. C. Myers*²⁵, *Azazel is the name of the scapegoat, which, bearing the sins of the people of Israel, was sent into the desert on the Day of Atonement*

²² Josephus, *Ant.*, Bk 3:10.3

²³ Hartley. *Leviticus*, 241; N. H. Snaith (ed). *Leviticus and numbers. The Century Bible. New Edition.* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1967), 116.

²⁴ T. H. Gaster. “Azazel” in *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible.* vol. 1. G. A. Buttrick (ed). (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), 325 (Pp. 325-326.).

²⁵ A. L. Myers (ed). “Azazel” in *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary.* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 110.

(Lev16:8, 10, 26). The Vulgate, following the LXX, refers to it as “the goat sent out” (*capro emissario*). Gaster argues that the word, ‘Azaz’el, is connected with the Arabic ‘azala, meaning, “banish, remove”.²⁶ D. P. Wright seems to harp on this. Wright regards ‘Azaz’el as an abstract noun meaning “destruction” or “entire removal”. Thus, Wright interprets ‘Azaz’el as the “goat that goes (away)” (‘ēz ’ōzēl) or the “goat that is dispatched.”²⁷ Gaster, Myers and Wright’s view that Azazel refers to the scapegoat presents a major difficulty. If Azazel refers to the scapegoat, how can the goat be sent “to” or “for” Azazel (la’āzā’zēl) (Lev 16:8, 10, 26). It is difficult to understand how the goat is sent “for” or “to” itself. Consequently, W. A. Turner argues that Azazel could be a wordplay on the subduing of a foreign god (demon).²⁸

Second, Another view regards Azazel as a geographical designation, namely the desert, to which the goat is dispatched (Lev 16:21).

Third, position is that Azazel is an abstract term meaning “entire removal.” A possibility is that “to/for Azazel” (la’āzā’zēl) suggests that Azazel is a type of being rather than a place as the previous position holds.

Fourth, view is that Azazel is a supernatural being. For G. F. Brandon, Azazel is a “desert demon”²⁹ to which the goat laden with the people’s sins is consigned. On his part, D. P. Wright argues that Azazel is “an epithet for a demonic personality”³⁰ Wright bases his view on the command in Lev 16:8 which required Aaron to place a lot on the two goats provided by the Israelites. The goat chosen by lot “to/for” Yahweh (la-yhwh) was to be offered in the holy precinct as sin offering for the whole community. The goat designated by lot “to/for” Azazel (la’āzā’zēl) was to be taken to the wilderness (v.22). According to R. J. Faley, the parallelism “to/for Yahweh” and “to/for Azazel” seems to suggest that just as Yahweh, Azaael is a supernatural

²⁶ Gaster. “Azazel”, 325.

²⁷ D. P. Wright, “Azazel,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*. Vol 1. D. N. Freedman (ed). (New York: Doubleday. 1992), 536. (536-537).

²⁸ W. A. Turner, *Leviticus. Colledgeville Bible Commentary*. (Bandra, Mumbai: St Pauls, 2001), 51.

²⁹ G. F. Brandon (ed). “Azazel,” in *A Dictionary of Comparative Religion*. (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1970), 122

³⁰ Wright, “Azazel,” 536.

being of some sort.³¹ *J. Milgrom corroborates the views of Faley and Wright. According to Milgrom, the parallelism of “for Azazel” (la’āzā’zēl) with “for the Lord” (la-yhwh) in v.8 seems to favour the view “that Azazel is the name of a demon” that inhabits the desert.*³² *The view that Azazel is a demonic personality finds support from the Pseudepigraphic Book of Enoch. For the author of 1 Enoch, Azazel is the prince of the Watchers or the rebellious or fallen angels. According to the author of 1 Enoch, it was Azazel who taught humans “all unrighteousness on earth”, the art of making weapons of war and all ornaments and cosmetics (1 Enoch 8:1; 9:6; 10: 4-8).*³³

The identification of Azazel with a demonic personage presents a lot of difficulties. It is problematic to accept that the Hebrew Bible, which condemns idolatry, would recommend sending (in sacrifice) a goat to a demon. For that would go contrary to the single-minded devotion to God that the Decalogue prescribes (Deut 6:4f). J. E. Hartley objects to the identification of Azazel with a demon.³⁴ We may interpret “the goat to/for Azazel” as an apotropaic ritual, which symbolizes the removal of sin and guilt from the community of Israel.³⁵

Hence, Azazel is a symbolic figure for the removal of the sins of the people and “the two he-goats were one sin-offering, but split for two different destinations.”³⁶ This explains why the two goats had to be alike in every aspect. Our starting point for the argument is that since the ritual of Azazel specifies that “the first goat set forth the means of reconciliation with God, whereas the

³¹ R. J. Faley. *Leviticus. The Jerome Biblical Commentary*. R. E. Brown (ed). (New Jersey: Prentice Hill, 1968), 78.

³² *J. Milgrom. The Book of Leviticus. The Interpreter’s One-Volume Commentary on the Bible. C. M. Laymon (ed). (Nashville: Abingdon, 1971), 78.*

³³ G. E. W. Nickelsburg. “Enoch, First Book of,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*. vol. 2. D. N. Freedman (ed). (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 510; P. M. Igbo, *Introduction to the Old Testament Books and Pseudepigrapha*. (Enugu: San Press, 2020), 547; Snaith, *Leviticus*, 112.

³⁴ Hartley, *Leviticus*, 238.

³⁵ N. Mocklem. *The Book of Leviticus. The Interpreter’s Bible*. vol. 2. G. A. Buttrick (ed). (New York: Abingdon Press, 1953), 80.

³⁶ A. Pinker, “A Goat to go to Azazel,” *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures*, vol. 7, (2007), 20.

second goat represented the effect of the sacrifice in removing the sins from the presence of the holy God, thus illustrating Psalm 103:12 and Micah 7:19 in a striking manner,”³⁷ it is highly improbable that the Torah would conceive of sharing the sacrificial animal for the sins of the people between God and a demonic spirit. Hence, we have to reject the argument that Azazel is an evil spirit, a demon or Satan on traditional grounds. In the words of Meyrick, “to take that which has been offered (and therefore half sacrificed) to God and give it to Satan, would be a daring impiety, which is inconceivable.”³⁸

Hence, what is at stake is not a ritual offering to two different gods. Neither is it a sharing of sacrificial offering between Yahweh and a demon. Rather it involves a sin-offering to Yahweh who dwells in the Tabernacle and also in the desert.³⁹ The history of Israel shows that the desert is a place of encounter with God (cf. Ex 3:18; 5:1–3; 8:23–24; 10:7–12, 24–26). There could have been an early tradition that sees God’s abode in the desert, precisely on Mount Sinai. It was only during the monarchic period that efforts were made to centralize the worship of Yahweh in the Jerusalem Temple (cf. 1 Kgs 8:13). If the God of Israel manifested himself to his people in theophanies in the desert, there is nothing wrong for his people to address their concerns to him in the desert through the Azazel ritual.⁴⁰

We have already mentioned the importance of this ritual to the Jews. With consideration of its importance, it appears surprising that this ritual of great significance is not mentioned anywhere again in the Old Testament.⁴¹ It also seems to lack any parallels in the cultures of the people of the Ancient Near East. However, it appears to have a parallel in the *Osu* caste system among the Igbos of Nigeria.

³⁷ S. H. Kellogg, *The Book of Leviticus*, 266.

³⁸ E. Meyrick, *Pulpit Commentary*, 239–240

³⁹ See A. Pinker, “A Goat to go to Azazel,” 23.

⁴⁰ R. Onyenali, *Demonic Possession and Exorcism: A Religio-Historical Study*. (Enugu: Clacom, 2019), 208.

⁴¹ Cf. E. Langton, *Essentials of Demonology: A Study of Jewish and Christian Doctrine, Its Origin and Development*. (Michigan: Epworth Press, 1949), 44.

The Osu Caste System

Originally, the name Osu meant someone who has some relationship with a particular deity. For instance, a child born after the parents had performed some rituals before *Chukwu*, the god of the people of Arochukwu, is given the name Osuchukwu. This connotes the special relationship between the child and the deity.⁴² In the course of time, however, *Osu* began to acquire a different connotation, as a caste. The origin of the *Osu* caste system in Igboland is vague. For Amadife, the origin of the *Osu* caste system is traceable to the era when the gods were believed to demand for human sacrifice during festivals, so as to cleanse the land of abomination. When this need arises, the people would contribute to the general purse for a purchase of a slave or for kidnapping one.⁴³ With the passage of time, such purchased or kidnapped people came to be regarded as *Osu*. Despite the vague origin of this system, it seems to have become a fundamental aspect of the life of Many Igbo communities before the advent of Christian missionaries. And even after several years of contact with Christianity, this aspect of Igbo life has failed to cease. According to Mgbada, “it is fundamental because it is almost aboriginally attached to the traditional system of people making the necessary distinction between those “free” and “properly” born with legitimacy into the society and those regarded as “illegitimate” by virtue and circumstance of their birth or arrival in the society or, indeed, ultimately by circumstance of their being dedicated to one god or the other.”⁴⁴ This stratification into the *Osu* (outcast) and *Diala* (freeborn) seems to be as old as Igboland.⁴⁵ For Amalu, Abdullahi and Demson, “the Osu caste system is a tradition that has been handed over from one generation to the other and has not

⁴² Oliver A Onwubiko, *Facing the Osu Issue in the African Synod (A Personal Response)*. (Enugu: Snaap Press, 1993), 24f.

⁴³ C. Amadife, “The Culture That Must Die” *Sunday Times*, 23 March, 1988. See also Onwubiko, *Osu Issue*, 25.

⁴⁴ Cited in Nneka Sophie Amalu, Yusuf Abdullahi and Ekong Demson “Caste Conflict in Nigeria: The Osu/Diala Experience in Igboland, 1900-2017,” *Global Journal of Social Sciences* vol. 20 (2021): 77.

⁴⁵ F. Onwubuariri, “Appraising the Osu caste system in Igboland within the context of complementary reflection” *Igwebuiké: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities*, 2 no. 4 (2016): 54-93.

been influenced to a great extent by westernization, Christianity, civilization, advancement in science, globalization or even democracy and the human rights culture; the people continue to give strict observance or face dire consequences.”⁴⁶

Mgbada argues that “of all the customs of Igboland and perhaps Africa at large that Europeans considered repugnant to natural justice, equity and good conscience such as twin killing and extra judicial killing of thieves, the *Osu* caste system has been the most obstinate in resisting extermination.”⁴⁷ From as early as 1956, successive Nigerian governments have tried to ban it⁴⁸ while numerous religious bodies have tried to exterminate it through several means. In fact, in 1956, the government of the Eastern Region of Nigeria, which includes the present-day Igboland, banned the use of the word *Osu* to describe any member of this class.⁴⁹ In 1994, the issue was a front burner in the Synod of bishops’ special assembly for Africa. All these efforts have failed to bear the required fruit in the psyche of so many Igbo people.

Who is an *Osu*?

Simply put, an *Osu* is a slave dedicated or offered in sacrifice to a god in Igboland. This dedication makes an *Osu* untouchable or someone whom people could not easily mingle with as we shall come to see. An *Osu* is distinguished from a *Diala* or freeborn, with the *Osu* regarded as ritually inferior to the *Diala*. In his work *Among the Igbos of Southern Nigeria*, Basden notes that, “an *Osu* is a slave, but one distinct from an ordinary slave (*ohu/oru*) who in fact is the property of the god and when devoted to a god, he has no prospect of regaining freedom and he restricts his movements to the precincts of the shrine to which he was attached.”⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Nneka Sophie Amalu, et al., “Caste Conflict in Nigeria,” 78.

⁴⁷ Cited in Nneka Sophie Amalu, et al., “Caste Conflict in Nigeria,” 78.

⁴⁸ See Peter Chukwuka Nnadi, “Unveiling the Shadows: A Critical Analysis of the *Osu* Caste System in Eastern Nigeria,” *Master’s Thesis* (Faculty of Social Studies: Masarykova Univerzita, 2024), 9.

⁴⁹ See Onwubiko, *Osu Issue*, 37.

⁵⁰ G. T. Basden, *Among the Igbos of Southern Nigeria*. (London: Frank and Cass, 1966), 109.

There are several ways one could become an *Osu*. While some of them were offered to the gods as sacrifice of atonement to appease the deities and bring about the purification of the land, others ran to the shrine to take refuge from being sold into slavery or being buried alongside a dead king. In addition, mischief makers could take refuge in a shrine of a deity when they perceive that the society is planning to get rid of them. By so doing, they become dedicated to the deity of that shrine.⁵¹ One could also become *Osu* if they were purchased and dedicated to the god to atone for a crime the purchaser had sought sacred help in difficult times, or to secure asylum (such as women who refused the killing of their twin babies).⁵² No matter the means one becomes an *Osu*, once this happens, “it is believed that the person or the person’s ancestry together with the person’s descendants is forever consecrated to the service of a particular pagan god.”⁵³ The implication is that “the *Osu* is not chosen by the deity but rather conditioned to stay with, or choose the deity as a last resort.”⁵⁴ Moreover, it is believed that “they belong to no common ancestral lineage, and have no symbols of common, real and known ancestors, namely, “*ndichie*”, and “*ofo*”, and as such, they are believed to have no morality and no after life.”⁵⁵ The terms “*ndichie*” and “*ofo*” refer to the ancestors and the symbol of justice, respectively.

Because of the special status of the *Osu* in the Igbo society, they live in a special part of the village, sometimes away from other people. The question of intermarriage between the *Osu* and the *Diala* is out of the question. The *Diala* even fear to eat with

⁵¹ Edwin A. Udoe, *Resolving the prevailing Conflicts between Christianity and African (Igbo) Traditional Religion through Inculturation*. (Wien/Berlin: Lit, 2011), 194.

⁵² Egbe Justin Arinze, “The *Osu* Caste System and the Problem of Alienation: A Philosophical Analysis,” *OWIJOPPA* vol. 6, no. 2 (2022): 3.

⁵³ E. D. Jinehu, *The Osu Caste in our Society*. (Enugu: Toronto Group, 1981), 57.

⁵⁴ Onwubiko, *Osu Issue*, 33.

⁵⁵ Onwubiko, *Osu Issue*, 32f.

them as this could cause the contracting of defective ritual status. And when they die, they are buried in the evil forest.⁵⁶

Ritual Implication of the *Osu*

One of the important cultic functions of the *Osu* is that they keep vigil in the village when the house slaves and their master have gone out. In this case, the *Osu* guard the compounds of their owners against invaders. Moreover, during times of inter-tribal wars, the *Osu* were given charm pots to carry as they approached the battle zone. This is so because an *Osu* is conceived as the living representative of the invisible spirit when he is carrying the emblem (of the spirit or a god). It is believed that the potency of the spirit runs in the blood of the *Osu*.⁵⁷

Moreover, as already mentioned, the person designated as *Osu* or outcast in the Igbo caste system is a person dedicated to a god for some special reason. The study of Baden, already quoted above, indicates that an *Osu* is the property of a particular god to whom he is dedicated. In the same train of thought, Igwebuiké views an *Osu* as “a living sacrifice, something or someone totally dedicated to divinity, only natural death can terminate its existence on this side of reality.”⁵⁸ Corroborating this view, Ilogu sees the *Osu* as a “slave of the deity dedicated to perform some menial functions which may include sacrificial functions.”⁵⁹ Onwubiko agrees that the *Osu* perform such functions like clearing the compound of the gods, to farm the lands allocated to the gods and eat the fruits therefrom.⁶⁰ In this sense, the *Osu* is like priest or servant of a priest of a particular cult and in some cases, subjects of the chief priests.

In the oral interviews carried out by Nnadi for his university thesis on the subject of *Osu* in Igboland, one of his

⁵⁶ J. N. Okafor, *The Challenge of the Osu Caste System to the Igbo Christians*. (Onitsha: Veritas, 1993), 23.

⁵⁷ Egbe, “The Osu Caste System,” 57.

⁵⁸ Romeo O. Igwebuiké, *The Osu Concept in Igboland: A Study of the Types of Slavery in Igbo-Speaking Areas of Nigeria*. (Enugu: Access Publishers, 1986), 11.

⁵⁹ E. Ilogu, *Christianity and Igbo Culture*. (Netherlands: Brill Archive, 1974), 123.

⁶⁰ Onwubiko, *Osu Issue*, 33f.

interviewees avers this of the *Osu*: "... history remembers them as offerings, burdens borne by a community to cleanse their sins. War, famine, and epidemics, all call for appeasement. The *Osu* people carry that weight, marked by their difference. In essence, to say they just help at shrines ignores the deeper story of atonement and societal sacrifice."⁶¹ It is this cultic function of appeasement that properly defines the status of the *Osu* as propitiatory agents in the religious consciousness of the Igbo. It is this function that brings them into close cultic proximity with the Azazel ritual.

Ritual Nexus Between Azazel and *Osu*

Our exposition of the Jewish ritual of Azazel and the Igbo *Osu* system has shown that the two systems are rituals of propitiation or atonement. They involve the bloodless immolation of a victim who carries the sins of the people as its personal burden. The two systems manifest the element of substitution, where the victim of sacrifice represents the people whose sins the victim bears. By virtue of this act of bloodless immolation, the victim is set apart from the rest of the community as a special agent for God/the gods. We have already shown how relevant the word "kipper" (atone) is in the Azazel ritual. It is spelt out in these words: "on this day shall atonement be made for you to cleanse you. You shall be clean before the Lord for all your sins" (Lev 16:30). It is equally important in the case of *Osu*. This is because he is seen as a sacrificed person, on whom lies the guilt of the entire village or clan.

As a victim of atonement, both the goat for Azazel and the person seen as *Osu* live outside the community. The dwelling place for the goat for Azazel is the desert. In his *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe sees the *Osu* in the same light, namely, as "a person dedicated to a god, a thing set apart-a taboo for ever, and his children after him... living in a special area of the village, close to the Great shrine..."⁶²

Because of its separation from the community and the fact of its bearing of the peoples' guilt, the goat for Azazel is given special treatment. We have already noted the desert as its abode

⁶¹ Nnadi, "Unveiling the Shadows," 50.

⁶² Cited in Onwubiko, *Osu Issue*, 32.

(cf. Lev 16:22). Even the person who delivered the goat to the desert had to purify himself before he could be incorporated into the community. This is to avoid him bringing impurity into the community through contact with the goat for Azazel. The stress here is the element of ritual impurity introduced with contact with the goat. In a similar fashion, the person designated as *Osu* carries with him the element of ritual contagion. The freeborn could not easily trade with them or intermarry with them. And when they died, they were thrown into the evil forest and no formal burial ceremony was organised for them.⁶³

Conclusion

Till this point, we have only mentioned the abhorrent nature of the discrimination against the *Osu* caste in passing. This could give the reader the impression that the paper tries to justify this discrimination tendency. This is not the case. The paper has merely tried to trace the areas of contact between the two ritual systems. It might, thus, become important to make a final remark on the issue. The Azazel ritual is mentioned only once in the Jewish Bible. As the paper has tried to argue, it belongs to a past of the Jewish tradition. In the same way, the *Osu* discrimination should also belong to a past history of the Igbo people. In fact, in some Igbo communities, there is no visible element of discrimination against those considered as *Osu* again. This explains why the paper adopted the past tense in explaining the situation of the *Osu*.

More importantly is the distinction to be made between the goat for Azazel and the *Osu* ritual. While the Azazel ritual employed an animal as the victim of sacrifice, the *Osu* caste involved a human being as a victim of atonement. This is highly regrettable. It is also unjustifiable from the Igbo religious and cultural consciousness. From the religious point of view, every Igbo community has got its totems, that is, animals that are regarded as sacred. To regard a fellow human being as a totem should be seen as a religious taboo. In the words of Achebe, “the *Osu* system of slavery constitutes the greatest contradiction to Igbo

⁶³ Onwubiko, *Osu Issue*, 32f.

egalitarian ideology.”⁶⁴ The paper, thus, calls on communities that still promote this obnoxious practice to put all hands on the deck to eradicate it.

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⁶⁴ Cited in Onwubiko, *Osu Issue*, 33.

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