OPEN ACCESS



ISAR Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Studies

Volume 4, Issue 11, 2026 | pp: 12-18

Abbriviate Title- ISAR J Mul Res Stud

ISSN *(Online)*- 2583-9705

https://isarpublisher.com/journal/isarjmrs

Caste in Flora Nwapa's Fiction: Case of *Efuru*

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Article History
Received: 03.09.2026
Revised: 27.09.2026
Accepted: 17.10.2026
Published: 04.11.2026

Abstract: Through this research, the main purpose has been to pinpoint the depiction of caste in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*. To carry out the study, the work has been divided in two main parts: The interview by a native Igbo and Spheres of caste in Igbo's society. When it comes to the Interview by a native Igbo, the latter has stated that there is the caste system in the Igboland. As for the second part which is about discovering fields through which there is the manifestation of caste system in Igboland, there have been three fields namely: Family background, Fertility, and Religion. In family background, Igbos discriminate against those who come from caste groups such as Osu, Olu, and those who do not behave decently. In other words, people who have committed crimes or those who have done shameful things such as being irresponsible towards their relatives or have neglected their households. In the field of fertility, any woman who cannot conceive is considered the outcast. As for religion, any woman who is said to be a woman of the lake's disciple is discriminated against.

Keywords: Caste, Osu, Olu, Igbo, Uhamiri.

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1-Introduction

In human society, although people are supposed to live in harmony with one another, this reality does not reflect people's daily life. As a matter of fact, they tend to discriminate against each other on bases of various facts such as races, sexes, walks of life, social status to name just a few. Likewise, in Flora Nwapa's first novel entitled *Efuru*, characters are said to look down on others because they do not belong to the same social classes through a phenomenon known by caste. In taking into account this reality which is said to be depicted in Flora Nwapa's opus mentioned above, the purpose of this research is to scrutinize Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* to discover whether there is caste in the Flora Nwapa's novel and how it plays out in Igbo society precisely in Ugwuta, Flora Nwapa's hometown. Before getting to the gist of the investigation, it is germane to provide a literature review related to caste in order to display what other scholars have argued about the issue and then demonstrate the contribution of this study in the scientific field.

In this article entitled : 'Osu-Caste System in Igbo Land and Its Contemporary Implications: Uratta Community' *(Onyedikachukwu and Ubonu, 2024,p.227-229)*, its authors : Omeni-Pius, Raymond Onyedikachukwu and Ubonu Uchenna Stephen argue that to eradicate Caste in Igbo land, the Osu and freeborn people should collaborate because the Caste system has made more harm than good in the society. As a result, they will implement education, legal intervention, public advocacy, dialogue, and reconciliation. The implementation of these policies will make Igbos practice inclusivity, unity, and equality.

Like the scholars above, this work: 'Caste Conflict in Nigeria : The Osu/Diala Experience In Igboland, 1900-2017' (Amalu, Abdullah, and Demson, 2021, p.78-84), its authors: Nneka Sophie Amalu, Yusuf Abdullahi, and Ekong Demson elaborate on Osu conflict among the Igbos and its

Cite this article:

Akongo, L. M. M., (2026). Caste in Flora Nwapa's Fiction: Case of *Efuru*. *ISAR Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Studies*, *4*(11), 12-18.

drawbacks in their society. The scholars posit that the Osu conflict has caused a lot of harm in the Igbo society. As a matter of fact, it has caused human deaths, destruction of properties to name a few. Consequently, the caste system should be eradicated.

Researching on caste in India, Chakrapani Ghanta, in his opus : 'Caste, Culture, Continuity, and Change: a study of Dalit Priests of Telangana(Ghanta, 2022, p.44-52)',argues that Globalization has contributed to the weakening of the Caste practiced by Pambala, a Dalit priestly community representing the local tradition of Hinduism in Talangana State of South. In fact, as Globalization fights discrimination and lobbies for egalitarianism, the Pambala community has lost their cultural superiority toward other groups.

Through this article *:* 'Caste and Social change in India'*(Merkejee*,2011, p.377-390), its author Madakhamal Merkejee posits that far from entailing exclusion among indians, rural community, and joint family, caste has enabled the creation of social and cultural community in India. Consequently with the existence of big cities, there has been the weakening of the caste system which has led to the foundation of a trade union in the new system of industry.

In this research entitled*:* 'Sociocultural Factors influencing perception of Osu Caste, System Among Rural Households In Imo State, Nigeria *(Onu and Ugboaja, 2018, p.215-222)',* its authors : Onu, S.E and Ugboaja C. I. state that despite the effort made by civilization, education and religion, Osu caste system is still part of people's culture and norm in most communities in Igboland. Consequently, these authors have provided some recommendations for the eradication of the Osu system : equal chances should be given to both Osus and Bialas, local leaders in Igboland should be chosen on bases of merit and qualifications not Osu stratification ; there should be the execution of the offenders of Osu abolition law as well as what prevents the reduction of inequality and discrimination ; the oppressed should be empowered to enhance their ability to challenge ancient Osu tradition.

Bringing their contribution to the issue of Osu in Igbo land Nigeria, O. T. Abia, Nneka Sophie Amalu and, Chrisantus K. Ariche, through their article entitled: 'Osu Caste System and human rights in Igbo land 1900-2017'*(Abia, Amalu, Ariche,2021,p.69-76),* posit that Osu system is the violation of human rights. As a matter of fact, The Osu had no rights to: life, liberty, security, peaceful assembly and association, participate in cultural life of the community, political participation, own property, express freely his opinion, right to fair hearing in native courts amongst other rights. In a nutshell, Osu people were the oucast of their society. Because of the mistreatment they underwent from the Biala, in the period from 1900 to 2017, they fought for their rights so that they could also enjoy the normal life like all the humans.

As for the approach used for the completion of this investigation, the study will be carried out through the lenses of the reader-response approach. In this approach, 'the argument goes something like this:

a text does not even exist, in a sense, until it is read by some reader. Indeed, the reader has a part in creating or actually does create the text. It is somewhat like the old question posed in philosophy classes , if a tree falls in the forest and no one hears it, does not it make sound ? Reader-response critics are saying that in effect, if a text does not have a reader, it does not exist… (Guerin, Labor, Morgan, Reesman & Willingham, 2011)'.

As for its plan, the work has been divided into two main parts namely : an interview by a native Igbo in Brazzaville, and Spheres of Caste in Igbo Society which has been divided into three subsections: Family background, Fertility in Igbo society, and The Religious Field.

2-An interview by a native Igbo in Brazzaville

In carrying out this research, although the work is based on a novel by Flora Nwapa entitled *Efuru*, it has been worth hearing from a person from Igbo tribe in Nigeria for the sake of worthiness and originality of the study. Consequently, a man from Enugu Ngwo called Chine du was interviewed on April 3rd 2026 around 4 p.m. The interviewee, he is a Nigerian man of about fifty years old who lives in Brazzaville selling shoes. During the interview, the latter was asked several questions included the following :

Question 1 : Interviewer : As you are from Igbo tribe, does caste exist in Igboland ?

Interviewee : Yes, in our part of Igbo land we call it Olu. It means someone, who has been bought from somewhere and, has been brought to our place as a slave. However, in other parts of Igbo land, people call it Osu. It means someone, who comes from somewhere running for their life to escape danger, and such person does not have any rights for inheritance of things such as land. People who are called either Osu or Olu undergo several disadvantages in Igbo land. As they are not indigenous, they are not allowed to get married to the indigenous ; they do not have the right to run for chieftaincy and are not entitled to perform sacrifices in shrines.

Interviewer: In what social spheres does caste occur in Igbo land ?

Interviewee: It occurs in several fields namely: family background, leadership, marriage, religion.

After stating what is above, the interviewee posited that even himself is a victim of caste when it comes to marriage.

In fact he used to date a beautiful girl when he was in his twenties that he intended to marry. But unfortunately for him, the marriage never happened because his father told him that he would not allow their union because the girl belonged to a low caste family. Besides that he argued that although he was stubborn trying to keep on dating the girl, the latter never accepted his invitation after the caste issue.

After the interview with the informant, where he has provided the difference between Osu and Olu, and has shed light on the different fields where there is the manifestation of caste in Nigeria, in the following part of the study, the purpose is to elaborate on the manifestations of caste in Igbo land.

3-Spheres of Caste in Igbo Society

Sphere is an area or a field in which something takes place. As far as this research is concerned, the term sphere stands for the social field in which caste takes place.

3.1-Family background

As the family background encompasses factors like family structure, parental occupation, values, and traditions that shape a person's identity, behavior, and opportunities. Does a person's family background shape the way they are viewed in their society? In other words, does a human being's value in Igbo society depend on their family background?

When Efuru, that is the main character of the eponymous by Flora Nwapal, fell in love with Adizua, the former did not take long to share the same house with her love. As a matter of fact, Efuru eloped to live with Adizua.Because of Adizua's social class, the society reacted as follows*: " Efuru was her name. She was a remarkable woman. It was not only that she came from a distinguished family. She was distinguished herself. Her husband was not known and people wondered why she married him* (1966:7). Through this extract, following Efuru's elopement, when people realize Efuru's appearance and posture, the society wondered why such as a woman could elope to marry a man whose family did not have any name. The society's reaction after Efuru's elopement shows the existence of caste in Igbo land. In fact, according to the Igbo society, as Adizua's family does not have any value in society, he does not deserve to marry a woman who belongs to prestigious family. Thus, he should marry a woman who is part of a class like his.The disagreement related to Efuru and Adizua's marriage did not limit at the society's disapprovement, as matter a fact, Efuru's father reacted likewise while talking to his brother in the following terms :

> *" Ah, is that you, my brother? Did you see Efuru?'*
>
> *Efuru has run away to a young man. It is a shame. Our enemies will glory in this. This young man is nobody. His family is not known. Efuru has brought shame on us. Something must be done immediately to get her back."*
>
> *"What are we going to do, my brother?"*
>
> *"We shall send our young men to go to the man's house. Efuru will be asked to come home with them. That's all."(1966:9)*

The reaction of Efuru's father through the extract above features the existence of caste in Igbo society as well. According to Efuru's father, the man, to whom his daughter has run, does not deserve her. Taking into account the man's walk of life, he should not get married to Efuru. Thus, letting her daughter getting married to such a man would bring shame to their family. Consequently, he should send for his daughter. This passage shows that in Igbo society, getting married does not depend only on love that partners have for each other but also on family's background in the society. Although the decision of Efuru's father was to bring his daughter back home, things did not work according to his will. As a result, failing to bring his daughter back home, Efuru's father became a laughing stock in their society as follows :

> *"So that's man whose daughter that imbecile married?"*
>
> *"Yes.The amazing thing is that the father has done nothing about it.*
>
> *He has sent some young men to fetch his daughter, but she did not go with them. And since then he had done nothing about it. If it were in his youthful days, Nwashike would have taught that fool a lesson… (1966:11)"*

This passage paints the fact that belonging to a family that does not have a prestigious name is tantamount to being an outcast in Igbo society. Thus, Efuru's act does not only worry her father but also the entire society. In fact, knowing the value of Efuru's family, the society neither agree with Efuru's elopement nor her marriage with Adizua. For the society, it was a must that Efuru's father can bring her back home and prevent their marriage from taking place because Adizua is a second class citizen. He cannot marry a woman belonging to a class higher than his. Always researching the existence of caste in marital field in Igbo land, as it is worth hearing straight from a horse's mouth, a Nigerian citizen called Chinedu from Enugu Ngwo in Igbo land, who lives in Brazzaville in Congo, was interviewed about the issue. As a matter of fact, when the latter was asked to tell the social fields in which there is recurrent manifestation of caste in Igbo land, he said that it occurs in several fields included in the marital one. Besides that, the interviewee argued that in Nigeria, precisely in Igbo land, before getting married to someone's daughter, the prospective father- in- law has to

investigate about the prospective son- in –law's family background and as well as his moral. In case, the latter is said to belong to a family of people who were considered slaves also known as Olu in Igbo language, the man would be denied the wife. In addition to what has been mentioned above, a man would also be denied a wife if he were found out to be either irresponsible or his family was known for having committed atrocities or anything negative.

In addition to the interviewee, the issue related to existence of caste when it comes to family background has also been mentioned in several passages in the novel under scrutiny. In fact, when Gilbert, one of the character of the novel, intended to marry a woman before marrying Efuru, Omirima, another character in the same novel reacted as follows when talking Gilbert's mother :

> '*What happened to her ? Gilbert's mother asked.*
>
> *For an answer Omirima hissed and shook her head again. 'It is not what one can relate, my sister. It is sad. Children of these days think they know better than their parents, let it be. I don't want to say anything more.'*
>
> *'Tell me. I know the mother very well. What happened ?' Gilbert's mother asked, getting more and more interested. That's what we have been saying. You advise these children not to marry a particular woman, they refuse saying that they will die if they don't marry her(1966 : 160)* .

This passage shows that in Igbo land, getting married far from being an issue of two lovers, it also has to do with the prospective in-laws' family background. As a result, to marry in an Igbo tribe, the prospective husband's parents have to investigate about their future daughter-in-law's family background. The investigation is to know if marrying the woman will not cause any troubles to their son as well as the whole family. Thus, in case, the family has a bad reputation for having done any wrongdoings in the past such as : crimes, theft, lies to name just a few, the marriage will not be possible. Consequently, anybody who comes from a family that is known for having a bad reputation is subject to be a victim of caste system because no family will allow their child to marry into their lineage.The issue of the caste based on family background existed in Flora Nwapa's family as well. As a matter of fact, according to Flora Nwapa's biography by Marie Umeh, when the authoress started dating her first husband called Gogo Chu Nzeribe, because of his negative family background, Flora's mother reacted as follows :

> *When our daughter fell in love with Gogo Nzeribe we warned her to discontinue the friendship. It was not long before we discovered that both of them had decided to marry each other. Eventually Flora became pregnant. Our reason for the objection to their marriage was because Gogo never remembered his parents when he lived in Lagos. Flora was our first child and our darling. We did not want her to suffer in her marriage life. Our second reason for the objection was that the Nzeribe daughters never stood firm in their marriages, and their sons disregarded their wives.(F.N : APAAP : 49)*

Through this part of the novel, one can tell one more time that the family background has a crucial role to play in a human's marital life in Igbo land. As a result, as Flora's parents were aware of the fact that Gogo Nzeribe's family was known for being irresponsible toward their parents and himself never treated his wives fairly, for sake of not seeing their daughter in bad hands where she would suffer, Flora Nwapa's parents opposed her relationship with her first love. Flora Nwapa's parents did not object their relationship because of the wrongdoings of Flora's boyfriend only, but they also oppose their relationship by taking into account Gogo Nzeribe's family background. Flora Nwapa's parents knew that as the saying goes 'Birds of a feather flock together,' they did not want their daughter to be corrupted by the irresponsibility of Gogo's family. They wanted their daughter to be responsible and take care of her family.

After the scrutiny whose purpose has been to discover if the family background could impact one's posture in society, it has been revealed that in Igbo land, coming from a caste group entails disrespect or bad luck within the society. This disrespect or bad luck occurs mainly in the marital field. That is a person who comes from a caste group cannot be allowed to marry either in family that has a name or indigenous one . In Addition, a person who is known for being irresponsible towards their own family or partners is denied partners as well.

3-2-Fertility

Fertility is the natural capacity to conceive or reproduce children. As mentioned above, through this section, the purpose is to discover whether the woman's incapacity to reproduce entails caste. Other words, can a woman's barrenness push the society to discriminate against her ? This is the question that will be answered through the following lines.

Although Efuru eloped to Adizua, conceiving did not come easily. Thus, Efuru witnessed barrenness when married to Adizua. As giving birth is the first thing the Igbo society expects from a married woman, people did not hesitate to criticize Efuru as folllows because of her lack of fertility.

> *When Efuru was sad, she consoled, told her that a child would come when God willed it. Neighbours talked as they were bound to talk. They did not see a reason why Adizua should not marry another woman*

since, according to them ; two women do not live together. To them Efuru was another man since she could not reproduce(E :24)

Through this passage, one can realize that lacking fertility is a source of caste in Igbo land. Thus, to be accepted and well respected by the society, it is a compulsory that one has children. Consequently, although, Efuru, the main character of the novel under scrutiny is a married to a man called Adizua who loves her, people dispprove of their marriage because of her incapacity to give birth . As a result, the society call her names, people argue that Efuru does not deserve marriage because she cannot fulfil the married woman's first household duty which is to reproduce. Moreover they call Efuru a man because according to them, if Efuru were a woman as she lives with a man, she would give birth. As she cannot reproduce although married to a man, Efuru is a man because when two men live together, they cannot reproduce. Adizua should divorce Efuru and marry another woman because staying with Efuru is the waste of time. Wishing that Adizua could marry another woman was not the only solution, people went further in the following terms :

Seeing them togetehr is not the important thing, another said. The important thing is that nothing has happened since the happy marriage. Of what use is it if it is not fruitful. Of what use is it if your husband licks your body, worships you and buys you everything in the market yet you are not productive(E : 137) ?

In this extract, one realizes that fertility is the prerequisite of marriage in Igbo land. Consequently, whenever a lady albeit married cannot conceive, the issue becomes the concern of her in-laws in particular and society in general. As a result, the society harbours hatred against the woman who cannot reproduce. The society argues that the barren woman is worthless in their society regardless how much her husband loves her. As the society cannot bear barrenness, the person who cannot conceive should be ostracized. Thus, the society wishes the divorce between Adizua and Efuru. To make their wish come true, people went to Adizua's mother and state what follows :

What is he doing ? Foolish man. He sits down there refuses to do anything. He doesn't see young girls to take one as a wife. It is their business not mine. Hasn't the young man a mother ? One of the women asked.' I went to the mother the other day. I said to her. Did Efuru give you medicine that you have lost your senses ? You see your only son, married to a woman who is barren, this is the fourth year of the marriage and sit down and hope(E : 175).

As the Igbo society cannot bear barrenness, anybody who cannot reproduce is an outcast. Since people were fed up with talking behind Adizua's back, they change their strategy. Knowing the role parents play in their children's love life, people went to contact Adizua's mother to remind her of what her only son was going through in the couple life. In talking to Adizua's mother harshly, asking her whether Efuru either gave her medicine or she lost senses, people wanted Adizua's mother to take the barrenness issue seriously. They wanted Adizua's mother to ask her only son to divorce Efuru because the fact she could not reproduce made her useless. Through what Efuru is experiencing, one can tell that lack of fertility caused caste to the detriment of the woman.

After it has been brought to light that caste exists in the field of fertility since the woman's incapacity to reproduce makes her an outcast in her society, in the next section the investigation is to find out if there is caste in the religious field in Igbo land as well.

3-3-The Religious Field

Religion is a system of beliefs, practices, and rituals focusing on sacred, divine, or supernatural powers, often providing a framework for morality, worldviews, and community according to google. Although the term religion is generic, as far as this study is concerned, it will focus on the Igbo traditional religion whose deity is known as the woman of the lake also called Uhammiri in Igbo language. Thus, does being a disciple of the igbo deity entail caste or discrimination in one's life?

As it was well known in Efuru's society that Uhammiri or the woman of the Lake denied children to her worshippers, as soon as the sister of Efuru's mother –in-law heard that Efuru already had a shrine of the woman of lake in her bedroom, the former reacted as follows to her sister:

"Do I hear that she now has Uhammiri in her bedroom?" Omirima sneered.

"That's what I hear. She and her husband plunged into it. I was not consulted."

"She has spoilt everything. This is bad. How many women in this town who worship Uhammiri have children? Answer me Amede, how many? All right let's count them: Ogini Azogu," she counted off one finger, "she had a son before she became a worshipper of Uhammiri. Since then she has not got another child. Two, Nwanyafor Ojimba, she has no child at all. Three, Uzoechi Negenege, no child. They are all over the place. Why do we bother ourselves counting them. Your daughter-in-law must be a foolish woman to go into that. Amede, you are to blame. Didn't you point this to her? You are the mother, why didn't you point out this to her?...(1966:162)"

This passage sheds light on the way that being the woman of the lake's disciple entails caste or discrimination in one's

life. In fact, in the Igbo land mostly in Ugwuta whenever a woman is said to be the woman of the lake's worshipper, she becomes an outcast in their society. This is because according to Igbo people, the woman of the lake is a source of evil. She prevents people from having children. Consequently, when Efuru, the main character of Flora Nwapa's novel under scrutiny was said to be Uhammiri's worshipper, her mother-in-law was blamed for not preventing her from becoming the woman of the lake's disciple. This passage also depicts the hatred Igbos have for the woman of the lake as well as her worshippers. Consequently, anybody who is known to be the woman of the lake's worshipper has not to be married because they will never have children. Besides Flora Nwapa's first novel entitled *Efuru* which is under crutiny, this hatred Igbo people have for the woman of the lake as well as her disciples has also been painted in another novel by the same authoress entitled *One is Enough*. Through this second novel, when Amaka, the main character of *One is Enough* had difficulties to conceive, she went to consult a witch doctor commonly called a dibia in Igboland. The dibia is an oracle, he has supernatural power. As a result, he is capable of seeing what humans cannot see with their eyes. Thus, when the dibia started the divination for Amaka to tell the cause of her barrenness, the witch doctor stated what follows :

> *I am glad that you have left your husband, she began. He would not have given you a child. It is not your fault, it is not his fault either. You are just not compatible, that's all. Your case is a difficult one, nevertheless, because you haven't had children before this new wealth of yours. Again it is not your ….(O.E,87)*

By arguing that Amaka's case is a difficult… because she hasn't had children before this new wealth, the dibia was linking Amaka's barrenness with her relationship with the woman of the lake. In other words, the dibia states that the woman of the lake is the cause of Amaka's lack of fertility. That is, as Amaka is the lake's worshipper, the former denies Amaka fertility and in return she provides her with wealth. Consequently, as soon as the dibia mentioned new wealth, Amaka's mother retorted in the following terms :

> *'Whose fault is it then ?' Amaka's mother asked impatiently. If I had known you were going to talk in this way, I would not have brought my daughter. I have heard of your reputation , and I thought you would help, so no nonsense please(O.E, 87).*

The Amaka's mother's reaction is not in vain, it depicts her worries related to her daughter's fate in Igbo society. As a matter of fact, as the woman of the lake is viewed as a source of evil because she denies children, anybody, who is her disciple, is doomed to be discriminated against. In other words, as the woman of the lake is a source of evil, if Amaka is said to be her worshipper, she has to be an outcast. In being impatient, Amaka's mother shows her disagreement with the dibia's divination which can entail her daughter's ostracization in Igbo society. In addition to Flora Nwapa's novels namely : *Efuru* and *One is Enough* where the hatred the Igbos have for both woman of the lake and her disciples is depicted, the dislike Igbo people have for the woman of the lake and her worshippers has also been mentioned by several religious singers among whom Obassey who has warned people about the danger of being the woman of the lake's disciple through her religious as follows :

> Mamaiwota bu mmuo ozi a churu n'igwe
>
> O gaa n'osimiri gaa wuo ala eze ya
>
> Kpaba nkata choba onye o ga-elo
>
> I bu ngwa olu mamaiwota?
>
> Gaa m n'azu nwamamaiwota!
>
> Mammy water was an angel banished from heaven
>
> She went to the sea and built her kingdom
>
> And started scheming for whom to swallow
>
> Are you mammy water's instrument?
>
> Get behind me mammy water's child ! (Eko, Ogu, Oko:176-78)!

Through Obassey's song, one can realize the way Igbo people in particular and Nigerians in general hate Uhammiri. This hatred is due to the fact that according to the Igbos, the woman of the lake is evil that every human should avoid associating with. Consequently, as the saying goes : 'Birds of a feather flock together', anybody who is the woman of the lake's worshipper is viewed or considered evil as well. As a result, as Igbos harbour hatred against Uhammiri, anybody who is the woman of the lake's disciple is a victim of caste.

In conclusion related to this research whose the purpose has been to pinpoint facts related to the existence of caste in Igbo land depicted in Flora Nwapa's first novel entitled *Efuru*, it is worth arguing that there is the depiction of Caste in Igbo land in the novel. To carry out the research, the investigation has been divided in two main parts namely an interview by a native Igbo, and Spheres of Caste in Igbo Society which has been divided into three subsections : Family background, Fertility in Igbo society, and The Religious Field. During the interview by a native igbo, the latter has stated that in fact there is caste in Igbo land in Nigeria. When it came to the second main part of the study, there has been proofs of caste in each of the subsections namely: Family background, Fertility in Igbo society, and the religious field. When it comes to the family background,

it has been discovered that in Igbo land whenever someone is from a caste group known as Olu or Osu, they are denied several rights such as : getting married to the indigenous people, chieftancy and so on. Besides the family background, in Igbo land, women are discriminated against when they are barren ; as a matter of fact, according to Igbos, any woman who cannot conceive is an outcast. In addition to fertility, Igbos ostracize others on basis of traditional religion. In fact in Igbo land, anybody who is known as a Woman of the lake's worshipper is considered to be evil because they associated with the Woman of the lake who is said to be evil because she denies fertility to her disciples.

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