

## Abolition, Law, and the Osu Marriage Novel

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*This paper examines the representation of Osu slavery in Chinua Achebe's No Longer at Ease. Whereas critics read the references to Osu as a minor subplot in the novel, this author suggests the dissipation of the Osu marriage plot illustrates the crisis of abolition within the context of anticolonial struggles. By situating Achebe's novel alongside midcentury discourses on abolition, freedom, and marriage rights, the author argues that the novel's form responds to the impasses between the abolitionist agendas of international law, the administrative mandate of colonial law, and indigenous Igbo agitations for and against the eradication of the Osu system. Key to this reading is the novel's cursory reference to the 1956 bride price laws of eastern Nigeria. By narrativizing the failure of the 1956 legislation, Achebe reflects upon African implication in slavery as well as on the divergences between midcentury anticolonial internationalism and on-ground interpretations and improvisations of freedom.*

**Keywords:** Chinua Achebe, abolition, law, marriage reform, freedom

### Abolition, International Law, and the Osu Marriage Novel<sup>1</sup>

Why does the recognition of peoples' worth, of their human and civil rights, always seem to be hanging on the more or less fragile branches of a family tree?

—Povinelli, 215<sup>2</sup>

Abolition—the declaration by the government that slavery was no longer legal—was not an indigenous African concept.

—Roberts and Miers, 8<sup>3</sup>

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2 Elizabeth Povinelli, "Notes on Gridlock: Genealogy, Intimacy, Sexuality," *Public Culture* 14.1 (2002): 215–38, 215.

3 Richard Roberts and Suzanne Miers, "The End of Slavery in Africa," *The End of Slavery in Africa*, eds. Suzanne Miers and Richard Roberts (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 3–68, 8.

### Chinua Achebe and the Osu Marriage Novel

This paper examines the representation of Osu slavery in Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*. Whereas critics have read the references to Osu as a minor subplot in the novel, I suggest that the dissipation of the Osu marriage plot mimics the crisis of abolition within the context of midcentury anticolonial struggles.<sup>4</sup> By reading Achebe's novel alongside its contemporaneous discourses on abolition, freedom, and human rights, I argue that the novel's fragmentary form responds to the historical impasses between the abolitionist agendas of international law, the administrative bias of colonial law, and indigenous Igbo agitations for and against the eradication of the Osu system. Among African forms of bondage, Osu belongs within so-called systems of cult, ritual, or shrine slavery. Cult slaves have no human masters, and they cannot be harmed or sold. Although Osu appears closer to caste discrimination than to slavery, Igbo communities consider the Osu slaves of the gods and human beings with liminal existence in the community. Unlike the chattel slave, called Ohu, who could gain manumission, the Osu were deemed forever enslaved and, consequently, lower than the Ohu.<sup>5</sup> Osu slavery was thus a limit case for all forms of abolition: because the Osu could never be emancipated, the introduction of abolition by the British colonizing forces automatically set up a contradiction between the legal decree of abolition and the actual practice of freedom by the Osu.

The disparity between a surface reality of apparent freedom and a deeper social perception of enslavement that characterizes Osu slavery contributes to the misapprehension of its portrayal in novels, such as Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* (1960), Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price* (1976), and Elechi Amadi's *The Slave* (1978).<sup>6</sup> Such misunderstandings surface in Kwadwo Opoku-Agyemang's critique of Elechi Amadi's *The Slave* as a novel that examines slavery only in a "restricted sense."<sup>7</sup>

4 For criticism on the novel, see William Lawson, *The Western Scar: The Theme of the Been-to in West African Fiction* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1982), 19–43; Simon Gikandi, *Reading Chinua Achebe: Language and Ideology in Fiction* (London: J. Currey; Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1991), 78–100; and Ode Ogede, *Achebe and the Politics of Representation: Form Against Itself, From Colonial Conquest and Occupation to Post-Independence Disillusionment* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2001), 59–68.

5 For discussions of slavery in Igboland, see Victor C. Uchendu, "Slaves and Slavery in Igboland, Nigeria," *Slavery in Africa: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives*, eds. Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1977), 121–32; A. E. Afigbo, *The Abolition of the Slave Trade in Southeastern Nigeria, 1885–1950* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2006); G. Ugo Nwokeji, *The Slave Trade and Culture in the Bight of Biafra: An African Society in the Atlantic World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Victor E. Dike, *The Osu Caste System in Igboland: A Challenge for Nigerian Democracy* (Sacramento, CA: Morris Publishing, 2002); and Igwebuiké Romeo Okeke, *The "Osu" Concept in Igboland: A Study of the Types of Slavery in Igbo-Speaking Areas of Nigeria* (Enugu, Nigeria: Access Publishing, 1986). For a discussion of Osu in the global context of similar cult or ritual slaveries, see Suzanne Miers, *Slavery in the Twentieth Century: The Evolution of a Global Problem* (Walnut Creek, CA: Oxford: AltaMira Press, 2003), 436.

6 Chinua Achebe, *No Longer at Ease* (1960; New York: Anchor, 1994); Elechi Amadi, *The Slave* (London: Heinemann, 1978); Buchi Emecheta, *The Bride Price: A Novel* (New York: G. Braziller, 1976).

7 Kwadwo Opoku-Agyemang, "A Crisis of Balance: The (Mis)representation of Colonial History and the Slave Experience as Themes in Modern African Literature," *Nationalism vs. Internationalism: (Inter) National Dimensions of Literatures in English*, eds. Wolfgang Zach and Ken Goodwin (Tübingen: Stauffenburg, 1996), 119–228, 226. Since the publication of Opoku's essay, scholars have suggested that African representations of slavery respond to the heterogeneity of African slaveries as well as the effects of European colonization on African history. Representations of Osu slavery nevertheless remain

This dismissal overlooks how the heterogeneity of African slaveries affects historical retrieval and modes of representation.<sup>8</sup> By examining Achebe's treatment of Osu, I suggest critics shift emphasis from how African writers should write to the modalities of enunciation with which they write about slavery. Invariably, critics must heed the heterogeneous meanings of slavery, abolition, and freedom within African and colonial archives. Not only does such a pluralization jettison prescriptive norms on proper and improper retrievals of African slavery, it also recognizes the heterogeneity of African voices on slavery and the slave trade. Reading Achebe's novel within the historical discourses of Osu slavery, for example, shows that the novel proffers a reading experience that elucidates the world of the Osu within a wider system of subordinations.

In discussing Osu slavery in *No Longer at Ease*, I want to show, first, that the dominant anticolonial discourse of national freedom calibrates the remembrance of the abolished Atlantic slave trade as well as the recognition of existing Osu slavery.<sup>9</sup> Second, I argue that Achebe problematizes precisely the manners in which discussions of slavery and bondage are displaced by debates on freedom. *No Longer at Ease* contextualizes the historical circumstances of freedom and the constraints in which multiple parties declare or demonstrate their appropriations of freedom. Achebe thus examines not the experience of being Osu per se but the paradoxical relationship of characters insisting upon the Osu distinction even as they fight for their own autonomy. Although the British conquered the Igbos to facilitate the economic exploitation of the colony, they also opened up new spaces for marginalized and disenfranchised groups. For all groups, colonial violence redistributes enabling and disabling social conventions. This radical redistribution reshapes social hierarchies in such a way that, on the cusp of national independence, freedom and slavery become

understudied. For recent studies of slavery in West African fiction, see Taiwo Adetunji Osinubi, "China Achebe and the Uptakes of African Slaveries," *Research in African Literatures* 40.4 (Winter 2009): 25–46 and Taiwo Adetunji Osinubi, "Provincializing Slavery: Atlantic Economies in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*," *Research in African Literatures* 45.3 (2014): 1–26; and Matthew Christensen, *Rebellious Histories: The Amistad Slave Revolt and the Cultures of Late Twentieth-Century Black Transnationalism* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2012).

8 For the differences between African slaveries and Atlantic slave systems, see Frederick Cooper, "Conditions Analogous to Slavery: Imperialism and Free Labor Ideology in Africa," *Beyond Slavery: Explorations of Race, Labor, and Citizenship in Postemancipation Societies* (Chapel Hill: University of Carolina Press, 2000), 107–49; Joel Quirk and Darshan Vigneswaran, "Human Bondage in Africa: Historical Legacies and Recent Innovations," *Slavery, Migration and Contemporary Bondage in Africa*, eds. Joel Quirk and Darshan Vigneswaran (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2011), 1–35; Steven Feierman, "Africa in History: The End of Universal Narratives," *After Colonialism: Imperial Histories and Postcolonial Displacements*, ed. Gyan Prakash (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995), 40–65; and Benedetta Rossi, "Introduction: Rethinking Slavery in West Africa," *Reconfiguring Slavery: West African Trajectories*, ed. Benedetta Rossi (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2009), 1–25.

9 Joel Quirk and Darshan Vigneswaran distinguish between *human bondage* and *slavery* because slavery always evokes nuances of practices that have been legally abolished and deemed nonexistent. Legal abolitions, they point out, often create a difference between surface and depth realities by leaving the "ideological and sociological foundations of slavery largely intact, while disrupting the prevailing social and political order enough to allow most slaves to take advantage of qualified opportunities" (16). Consequently, they insist "there are occasions when the current status quo can only be understood in terms of cumulative legacies and trajectories" (17). This distinction, which is crucial for African trajectories of slavery, is vital to understanding how and why Osu is termed *slavery*.

heterogeneous concepts. Freedom, in fact, is broken down into the forms of sociability extended to individuals by groups *and* the colonial nation-state.

These paradoxical relationships cannot be untangled without recourse to the historical circumstances of Osu slavery and its relationship to the freedom discourse of the 1950s.<sup>10</sup> Achebe contextualizes these relationships through a reference to the 1956 eastern Nigerian bride price laws during a conversation between Obi and his friend Joseph. When Obi inquires about Joseph's newfound frugality, the latter attributes his depleted resources to the exorbitant bride price he paid his in-laws.<sup>11</sup> The conversation refers to the 1956 legislation passed to curb practices analogous to slavery in marriage. This 1956 legislation, implemented in response to an international antislavery convention, stands in a chain of conventions and declarations that go back to the Berlin Act of 1885 and the Brussels Act of 1890.<sup>12</sup> Although these acts were seen as gestures toward the abolition of slavery in Africa, they actually paved the way for colonization and monopolistic, commercial exploitation. The citation of the 1956 law identifies the Gordian entanglement of slavery, colonization, abolition, and freedom. Reading and deciphering these disputations about slavery, colonization, abolition, and freedom offers an appreciation of the historical schisms among these discourses in the midcentury context of Achebe's novels.

In the following paragraphs, I extricate the entangled histories of Osu slavery, abolition, and the 1956 marriage laws. These histories illustrate the amorphous narrative form that has often baffled Achebe's critics.<sup>13</sup> The novel's unsettledness responds to the complex realities of its historical moment. This paper is structured into four parts. It begins with an abbreviated history of Osu slavery and its place in midcentury debates on national freedom. Thereafter, I place these debates in a genealogy of European colonization and abolition. In the third section, I analyze how Achebe's use of chiasmus responds to the contradictory archives and enunciations of freedom in the midcentury. The chiasmic narrative structure of Achebe's writing works through the conflicts around Osu slavery on the level of contradictory textual significations. Finally, I explore how Achebe's characters circumvent their constraints by establishing alternative networks of solidarity and care. In the British colonial framework, there is no complete freedom, but there are interstitial existences in which characters deploy the different forms of sociability they enjoy.

### **Osu Slavery and the Midcentury Freedom Debates**

Achebe conveys the elusiveness of freedom by subsuming the Osu plot within a narrative of anticolonial politics. The novel begins and ends with Obi Okonkwo's trial for accepting a bribe. No character in the novel understands Obi's diametrical transformation from a promising civil servant to a criminal. The novel retrospectively

10 On the expectations of abolition and freedom, see Suzanne Miers, "Slavery to Freedom in Sub-Saharan Africa: Expectations and Reality," *After Slavery: Emancipation and Its Discontents*, ed. Howard Temperley (London: Frank Cass, 2000), 237–64.

11 *No Longer at Ease*, 47–48.

12 The abolition of slavery in Africa differs from the abolitions in the Atlantic world, India, and the Indian Ocean basin. Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Context of African Abolition," *The End of Slavery in Africa*, eds. Suzanne Miers and Richard Roberts (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 485–506.

13 Killam, 49, and Gikandi, 80.

narrates Obi's metamorphosis. As a precocious first son, Obi benefits from both Igbo patriarchal culture and the benevolence of the colonial, missionary education system. In recognition of Obi's promise, the village welfare association, The Umuofia Progressive Union, hereafter the UPU, sponsor Obi to study law in England. But as an unruly and defiant young man, Obi constantly refuses paths chosen for him. Once in England, he decides to study English. Upon his return to Nigeria, Obi cannot practice law for his clan; however, he receives a civil service position formerly restricted to Europeans. Achebe's depiction of Obi makes him at once a highly individualized character and a trickster figure whose failures illustrate deep-seated social conflicts.

Obi's romance with Clara is largely responsible for his transformation. After an initial meeting in London, they meet again on board a cargo ship as they return to Nigeria. No sooner do they fall in love than Obi is informed that he cannot marry Clara. As an Osu, a descendant of slaves dedicated to gods, Clara cannot marry a freeborn person. Doing so would taint the freeborn family with a social stigma and jeopardize the family's ability to contract suitable marriages. Initially set on the marriage, Obi discovers, much to his surprise, that his mother, the only person to whom he is truly attached, emerges as the most vociferous opponent to the marriage. Her vehemence compels Obi to give up the marriage quest, which in turn provokes an emotional detachment from his family: after her death, he refuses to attend his mother's funeral. Obi's passage from the attachment to his family to the quiet rejection of the family reshapes his spirit so radically that he sees himself as one freed from all stabilizers and obligations of social relations such as family, morality, and culture, thus enabling him to begin a new life in which he exploits his government position and collects bribes. Shortly thereafter his supervisors set a trap and he is put on trial. Although the subsequent trial ostensibly serves as a collective inquiry into Obi's failure, it mostly illustrates the irreconcilable political interests in the colony. The courtroom frames the divided parties: Obi, the British, and the Igbo audience. Whereas most characters do not care about Clara, they do care for their freedom from the British. Obi, on the other hand, remains completely detached from the ideals of the British or his Igbo compatriots. The novel, in sum, delineates the transformations of freedom and its intercalations with colonizing violence. The narrative frame demonstrates the pervasive power of colonial law and its inability to eradicate the Osu system.

Although historians are uncertain about the origins of the Osu system, they agree it preceded the Atlantic slave trade; however, transformations in the latter later reshaped the former.<sup>14</sup> Historically, a person became Osu in four ways: she was purchased and dedicated to the god to atone for a crime the purchaser had committed or to seek sacred help in a time of personal difficulty; she became Osu through

14 There are some regional variations in the names for and articulations of Osu. For detailed accounts, see S. N. Ezeanya, "The Osu (Cult-Slave) System in Igbo Land," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 1.1 (1967): 35–45; Jerome Njikwulim Chuckwu Okafor, *The Challenge of Osu Caste System to the Igbo Christians* (Onitsha: Veritas Publishing, 1993); Geoffrey. I. Nwaka, "The Civil Rights Movement in Colonial Igboland," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 18.3 (1985): 473–85, 121, and Paul E. Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 183–84.

contamination—that is, she committed a taboo act or associated with an Osu; she willingly became Osu to secure asylum; or she is born to an Osu. Such persons could not be harmed or sold. In fact, the community was responsible for their upkeep. Initiations into Osu show that the institution was deeply connected to a sacerdotal, judicial conception of community. The Osu embodied a reprieve from the wrath of the gods for a crime; that body also testified to a claim of asylum from potential harm. In other words, the safety of the Osu body was an inversion of the spiritual and physical vulnerabilities that the freeborn endured in their freedom. Paul Lovejoy clarifies the status of the Osu by distinguishing between productive and nonproductive—that is, noncommercial—slaves. Whereas productive slaves constituted property or were used to generate commercial wealth, nonproductive slaves fulfilled symbolic or political functions. Osu and funeral sacrificial slaves belonged in that second category.<sup>15</sup> Some historians and anthropologists suggest that prior to the degradation of the Osu institution, the Osu, although marginalized, were revered and feared because they supposedly possessed supernatural powers. Hence, they fulfilled mediatory roles in legal disputes and enjoyed a degree of social respect.

The rise of the Atlantic slave trade transformed the Osu institution.<sup>16</sup> The demand for slaves led to intensified slave raiding, exacerbated the reasons for the sale of persons, and contributed to an increased sense of insecurity and the harsh treatment of human beings. According to Jerome Okafor, Igbo communities modified the treatment of the Osu in response to the Atlantic slave trade.<sup>17</sup> At the height of the Atlantic slave trade, people evaded enslavement by fleeing into the Osu institution; the status disabilities imposed by Osu status paled in comparison to the possibility of being sold off into the Atlantic slave trade. In response, communities sharpened the life conditions of the Osu to make Osu asylum less appealing. Okafor writes: “most of the discriminatory and humiliating practices against the Osu were instituted” as deterrents against voluntary flight into the Osu institution.<sup>18</sup> These altered conditions of the Osu outlasted the Atlantic slave trade. The Osu institution, in other words, symbolically preserves memories of the dangers associated with the Atlantic slave trade.

By the twentieth century, Osu slavery had become a relic disarticulated from the abolished Atlantic metasystem. Prior to colonization, Osu slaves were segregated from the main community; they lived and worked in shrines or on separate farmlands. Their bodies were marked by unique cuts. Colonization and evangelization provided outlets for the Osu, allowing them new spaces of self-fashioning in churches, schools, and colonial administration. Consequently, the force of the Osu distinction arose mainly during courtship when families rejected potential brides or grooms upon discovering their Osu ancestry. The reduction of the Osu system to intermarriage

15 Lovejoy, *Transformations*, 121.

16 For the articulation of Osu slavery with the Atlantic slave trade see Ichie P. A. Ezikeojiaku. “Osu Social Outcasts and the Atlantic Slave Trade,” *Repercussions of the Atlantic Slave Trade: The Interior of the Bight of Biafra and the African Diaspora*, eds. C. Brown and P. Lovejoy (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2011), 79–86, and Jerome Njkwulimchuckwu Okafor, *The Challenge of Osu Caste System to the Igbo Christians* (Onitsha: Veritas Publishing, 1993).

17 These include the prohibition of physical injury, rape, and maltreatment. These specifications make sense only in the context of deteriorating treatment of other slaves and people.

18 Okafor, 31.



prohibitions occludes its historical force in communities in which the distinction between slaves and the freeborn was vital to the definitions of *freedom* and *political recognition*. If the Osu discrimination consolidated the identity of freeborn persons as free people, then the 1956 legislation sought to eradicate that very distinction. It is precisely through the efforts to eradicate the Osu system—that is, its abolition—that the Osu system enters the global narratives of abolition.

Although I focus on *No Longer at Ease* as Achebe's Osu marriage novel, his exploration of Osu begins in *Things Fall Apart*. In that novel, the admission of the Osu into the new church provokes a confrontation. What is at stake in that discussion is the distribution of the new freedoms and rights conferred by Christian identities:

The whole church raised a protest and was about to drive [the Osu] out, when Mr. Kiaga stopped them and began to explain.

"Before God," he said, "there is no slave or free. We are all children of God and we must receive these our brothers."

"You do not understand," said one of the converts. "What will the heathen say of us when they hear that we receive *osu* in our midst? They will laugh."<sup>19</sup>

At the end of this conversation with Mr. Kiaga, the convert rejects a congregation with the Osu and returns to the clan. This dispute over the status of the Osu in the new church crystallizes the catachresis that attends the translation of Osu into English. Mr. Kiaga, an interpreter and a Christian in charge of the young church, captures the difficulty of translating Osu into terms comprehensible for non-Igbo speakers. Yet the rejection of a new Christian community that includes the Osu conveys not only the affective charge of the Osu within Achebe's portrayed communities, but also the disjuncture between the non-Igbo and Igbo definition of *slavery*. In the ensuing paragraphs, the interpreter-missionary commands the Osu to jettison the physical markers of their status in order to become members of the church. *Freedom*, as he defines it, is simply a counterpart to *enslavement*. The convert's rejection of this order of freedom identifies the limitations on conceptualizations of freedom as the opposite of slavery. The Osu may be free under the British dispensation, but they remain enslaved in the perception of local communities that shun them. The colonial or postcolonial state cannot compel social change through legislation.

*No Longer at Ease* explores this catachrestic translation of freedom during anticolonial agitation for independence in the midcentury:

It was scandalous that in the middle of the twentieth century a man could be barred from marrying a girl simply because her great-great-great-great-grandfather had been dedicated to serve a god, thereby setting himself apart and turning his descendants into a forbidden caste to the end of Time.<sup>20</sup>

Obi's explicit invocation of the midcentury has profound implications for the themes and form of the novel. As much as he invokes a global midcentury, Obi imposes a

19 Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (1958; New York: Anchor, 1994).

20 *No Longer at Ease*, 82.

disputed geopolitical map on local politics. The midcentury was a transitional period in which global politics were drastically redrawn following World War II. Obi's references to the mid-twentieth century, which range from the anticolonial internationalism, World War II solidarities, and a discreet acknowledgement of Holocaust antihumanism, register his crisis of historical referentiality. Midcentury politics occur at levels of the global, national, and subnational communities. Obi, however, misses the distinct adaptations of midcentury discourses into local structures of feeling.

These contradictory feelings within the midcentury gain clarity when they cross-illuminate one another. One such illumination occurs when Obi cross-hatches a possible rebellion against his father with an imagined anticolonial rebellion. In a moment of fancy, Obi wonders, *What would happen if I stood up and said to him: 'Father, I no longer believe in your God?'*<sup>21</sup> He discards the notion immediately, but readers are informed that Obi is given to such thought experiments. In fact, the encounter with the father resonates with an earlier anticolonial speculation in London when "he had wondered what would have happened if he had stood up and shouted to the smooth MP [member of parliament] lecturing to African students on the Central African Federation: "Go away, you are all bloody hypocrites!"<sup>22</sup> The rebellion remains pure speculation, but after comparing the possible rebellions against racialized domination, incarnated in the MP, to the kinship discrimination, incarnated in his father, Obi decides that the MP lecturing African students on the advantages of racialized dominance of the white minority in the short-lived Central African Federation (CAF) is a hypocrite, but shies away from acknowledging his father's implication in the Osu kinship discrimination. This moment of speculative thought characterizes Obi's function. His speculations and ill-advised actions disclose unpalatable cultural secrets.

The allusions to racialized or kinship-based discriminatory policies in the CAF and Nigeria identify one fault line of the midcentury. The midcentury in Nigeria was marked by anticolonial nationalism, constitutional debates, and efforts to define the form of the coming national polity.<sup>23</sup> As Bonny Ibhawoh writes, the Nigerian midcentury was characterized by both the national anticolonial struggle and localized struggles for social inclusion—such as those led by descendants of the Osu and Ohu. World War II, the Atlantic Charter of 1941, and the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights greatly influenced anticolonial agitators. Nigerian nationalists used their participation in the war to present themselves as citizens of the world and drew upon the Atlantic Charter to legitimate claims for political reform and independence.<sup>24</sup> Defined within the parameters of anticolonial politics, freedom meant emancipation from colonization.

21 Ibid., 65.

22 Ibid., 65.

23 For historical overviews of these contexts, see two essays by Ehiedu E. G. Iweriebor. Ehiedu E. G. Iweriebor, "Nationalism and the Struggle for Freedom, 1880–1960," *The Foundations of Nigeria: Essays in Honour of Toyin Falola*, ed. Adebayo Oyeade, (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 2003), 79–105, and E. G. Iweriebor, "Radicalism and the National Liberation Struggles, 1930–1950), *The Foundations of Nigeria: Essays in Honour of Toyin Falola*, ed. Adebayo Oyeade (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 2003), 107–25.

24 For an account of the paradoxical rights discourses within British colonies, see chapters 2, 5, and 6 of Bonny Ibhawoh, *Imperialism and Human Rights: Colonial Discourses of Rights and Liberties in African History* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007).



For the descendants of slaves, the political fractures of the midcentury exceeded binary divides between the colonizers and the colonized. Freedom was not simply *national* freedom; rather, it emerged at multiple scales from the national to face-to-face encounters and kin-based interactions. Freedom discourse percolated all social strata and was redefined at all scales of social life.<sup>25</sup> Whereas the nation-state promised freedom as citizenship and equal rights before the law, groups suffering forms of slavery demanded a transformation of the subnational sociability based upon rules of descent. This difference in freedom prevailed under colonial rule. Thus, the Osu increasingly framed their problem as a human and civil rights issue within the colony and appealed to colonial masters for redress.<sup>26</sup> The descendants of the Ohu slaves even took up armed rebellion against former slave-owning families who insisted on certain rights and privileges. In the 1920s, the Osu formed welfare associations, such as the Madubuotu Welfare Association, and framed their cause as civil rights claims.<sup>27</sup> These groups sponsored individual lawsuits in cases of discrimination as well as petitions to colonial administrators who were reluctant to interfere with the powers of the local chiefs or in what they considered local customs. The divide between the descendants of the enslaved and Nigerian politicians emerges strikingly in the 1955 petition launched by the Madubuotu Welfare Association in which members, bucking the trend toward national independence, demanded a separate state for the Osu under British protection. The nationalist freedom discourse of the midcentury is decidedly rescaled when the Osu demanded that an autonomous region be granted the Osu or that the freeborn free the descendants of slaves before they are granted freedom from the British colonial yoke.<sup>28</sup> The midcentury, in other words, was characterized by an impasse between the multiple interpretations of freedom. These freedom discourses recalibrate international articulations of abolition. Persons for whom national freedom alone did not guarantee freedom invariably invented modes of habitation for the in-between spaces through which freedom becomes a practice.

### **Inhabiting Entanglements: Abolition, Colonization, Freedom**

These contradictory midcentury discourses of freedom are intimately linked to the conjoined histories of abolition and colonization in Africa. Although declarations from the Berlin and Brussels conferences of 1884–1885 and 1890 gestured toward abolition, they did not comprehensively address the status of enslaved Africans within colonial subordination. Instead, they created a set of entangled relationships in which African political hierarchies were reconstituted under colonial hegemony. The impending decolonization opened debates on the recalibration of African hierarchies.

25 These complex articulations of freedom are best understood within a larger climate of general change and adaptation under colonial rule. For an introduction, see chapter 2 of Rapahel Chijioko Njoku, *African Cultural Values: Igbo Political Leadership in Colonial Nigeria, 1900–1966* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006).

26 For an account of the freedom agitations and rebellions of the so-called Ohu slaves, see Carolyn A. Brown, “Contestation and Identity Transformation under Colonialism: Emancipation Struggles in South Nkanu, 1920–1935.” *Repercussions of the Atlantic Slave Trade: The Interior of the Bight of Biafra and the African Diaspora*, eds. C. Brown and P. Lovejoy, (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2011), 259–73.

27 See Nwaka and chapter 5 of Ibhawoh.

28 See Nwaka.

The Osu debates of 1956 are enmeshed within that colonial project and a series of international conventions and developments in international law that stretch back to the denunciations of slavery in the 1815 Treaty of Paris.<sup>29</sup> Certainly, these condemnations paid lip service to abolition, but, as stages for later developments in international law, they elucidate the divergences and convergences among antislavery, international law, colonization, and anticolonial struggles that impact the development of localized African responses to slavery.

Following the abolition of slavery in the Caribbean, British antislavery activities turned to the abolition of slavery in Africa.<sup>30</sup> Though the Berlin Act contained no explicit provisions for direct action in suppressing the trade, it elaborated procedures between European nations as they partitioned the continent. However, the European powers would only agree to an indirect phrasing affirming that “the export slave trade was forbidden by international law” and that the activities feeding the trade “ought to be forbidden.”<sup>31</sup> The Brussels Act of 1890, which did result from an ostensible concern with slavery and the slave trade, paradoxically reveals how the antislavery campaign served the interests of European colonial powers. Under so-called initiatives to protect African welfare, colonial powers created provisions that facilitated their commercial monopolies. They failed, however, to provide concrete plans for abolition in Africa.<sup>32</sup> In Igboland, abolition began in 1900 with a series of proclamations and a brutal program of pacification that also used abolition to legitimate its force. This abolition was followed by colonial regimes of forced labor, which itself was regarded by the colonized as a new form of slavery. This colonial abolition could only address overt practices such as the chattel slavery and the use of slaves as human sacrifice. Osu slavery, debt-bondage, and other forms of slavery remained in force.<sup>33</sup>

In the twentieth century, the face of antislavery and abolition in Africa changed again as activists and politicians critiqued the omissions of nineteenth-century conventions. Abolitionists especially targeted forms of slavery that had hitherto been ignored. After the League of Nations was formed in 1919, it established the Temporary Slavery Commission in 1922. The activities of that commission led to the 1926 Slavery

29 For the development of abolition in treaties and conventions from 1814 to 1966, see Richard Burchill, “The Tangled Role of International Law in Africa and Its Contribution to the Eradication of Slavery,” *Slavery, Migration and Contemporary Bondage in Africa*, eds. Joel Quirk and Darshan Vigneswaran (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2011), 251–75. For an overview of international slavery conventions starting in 1815, see Kevin Bales and Peter Robbins, “No One Shall Be Held in Slavery or Servitude: A Critical Analysis of International Slavery Conventions,” *Human Rights Review* 2 2 (2001): 18–45 and Claude E. Welch, Jr., “Defining Contemporary Forms of Slavery: Updating a Venerable NGO,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 31 (2009): 70–128.

30 For an overview of abolition in Africa, see Kopytoff’s “The Cultural Context of African Abolition” and Richard Roberts and Suzanne Miers’s “The End of Slavery in Africa.”

31 Miers, 2003, 20.

32 The Brussels conference was triggered by events in Central and East Africa. Organized at the instigation of British government, but hosted by King Leopold in Brussels, it was to debate the eradication of the African export trade in slaves, but ended up providing European powers with monopolies on arms and liquor traffic. See Miers’s *Slavery in Twentieth Century*, 20–23. For an abbreviated account of British antislavery and European colonialism, see chapters 1 through 3 of Joel Quirk’s *The Anti-Slavery Project: From the Slave Trade to Human Trafficking* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

33 For an overview, see Don Ohadike, “The Decline of Slavery Among Igbo People,” *The End of Slavery in Africa*, ed. Suzanne Miers and Richard Roberts (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 437–61.

Convention, formally called the “Slavery, Servitude, Forced Labor and Similar Institutions and Practices Convention of 1926.” The 1926 convention prohibited slavery and obliged signatory states to eradicate slavery. It also offered a definition of *slavery* that was to become influential for abolitionists: “the status or condition of a person over whom any or all the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised.”<sup>34</sup> The foundation of the United Nations and the creation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights further transformed the grounds of twentieth-century antislavery. In 1949, the UN General Assembly created an ad hoc committee on slavery to evaluate the state of global abolition. Its report led to the 1956 Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery (1956 Supplementary Convention). Following that report, the Slavery Commission made a series of proposals to end forms of slavery related to the status of individuals within marriage.

The Nigerian Osu debates entered the realm of international law through the translation of the 1956 convention into local legislation. The government of the eastern region of Nigeria passed its legislation in 1956. Commonly referred to as the bride price laws, they were to regulate practices analogous to slavery that especially affected women. Specifically, they were the Abolition of the Osu System Law, the Age of Marriage Law, and the Limitation of Dowry Law. The abolition of the Osu System Law nullified the prohibition of intermarriage between the Osu and freeborn persons; the Age of Marriage Law stipulated a minimum age of sixteen for women; and the Dowry Law dictated a maximum bride price payable at £60. Although each law regulates a specific aspect of marriage, their combination in a set of co-implicated laws points to an interpenetrating set of subordinations that converge within marriage. The translation of the 1956 international conventions into Nigerian laws could not be effective because Igbo individuals and communities, and not the nation-state, controlled marriage. The 1926 convention definition of *slavery*, as “the status or condition of a person over whom any or all the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised,” does not address the status of the Osu. Osu slavery thus functions as a limit case of abolition by legislative fiat. What is at stake is the difference between African and internationally sponsored forms of emancipation. As Igor Kopytoff explains, in African contexts there was no radical divide between slavery and emancipation but a renegotiation of forms of dependency:

The existential predicament in which an African “slave” is caught arises from the tension between his being simultaneously a “slave”—a nonperson—through his nonbelongingness and a non-“slave” through his belongingness to the host group. Emancipation therefore

34 This definition has become something of a standard definition upon which the following definitions have been based. See Quirk and Vigneswaran, 7. For an overview of the definitions of slavery, see Jean Allain, “The Legal Definition of Slavery into the Twenty-First Century,” *The Legal Understanding of Slavery: From the Historical to the Contemporary*, ed. Jean Allain, 199–219 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). See also the Bellagio-Harvard Guidelines on the Legal Parameters of Slavery at: <http://www.law.qub.ac.uk/schools/SchoolofLaw/Research/HumanRightsCentre/Resources/Bellagio-HarvardGuidelinesontheLegalParametersofSlavery/>. For commentaries and critiques of this definition, see the essays in section 3 of Jean Allain’s edited volume, *The Legal Understandings of Slavery: From the Historical to the Contemporary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

touched upon some central issues of social identity; being a form of alienation, emancipation threatened to enhance precisely that which is characteristic of the “slave” identity.<sup>35</sup>

Whereas slaves were embedded within a slave to kinship continuum, radical kinlessness, which might appear to afford the utmost freedom, was actually better grasped as constituting the utmost vulnerability. Kin groups bestowed a social identity, rights, and privileges upon a person. To opt completely out of the kinship structures entailed a state of total vulnerability in which a subject received no form of social recognition. Thus, following declarations of emancipation, many slaves did not desert their masters en masse but used the colonial laws to negotiate better terms of dependency. Above all, colonial emancipation enacted a redistribution of the forms of dependencies in colonies.

These paradoxical features of Igbo emancipation appear in Osu marriage novels as the contradictory tensions unleashed by changing imperial formations and international law. Ultimately, Achebe illuminates disparities between 1) the normative notion of the human consolidated in legal norms and the forms of human recognition in Igbo marriage sociability and between 2) the normative ideals of British abolitionism and the realities of emancipation in Igboland. Because Osu could not be abolished through a colonial model, it subsides into the renegotiations of kinship within the marriage institution. In Achebe’s novel, marriage represents a gridlock between local and global discussions. Marriage, Elizabeth Povinelli explains, has always functioned as a way of constituting the human being and his or her social legibility within the community. In most premodern societies, marriage conferred a sociability upon a person by inserting him or her into a genealogical grid recognized within the community. The rise of capitalism and market economies transformed European models of marriage sociability. Instead of a recognition based upon a genealogical grid, Europeans shifted to “stranger-sociability” based upon a notion of the human who was a member in a human order based on market relations. This abstract human became the basis for rights and obligations. As Europeans acquired colonies, they exported forms of marriage predicated upon market stranger-sociability and not upon the elaborate kinship systems such as those prevalent in Achebe’s Igbo communities. Hence stranger-sociability can be juxtaposed to kin-sociability to elucidate, for example, the conspicuous deliberations on the transformation of marriage sociability in *No Longer at Ease*—and other Osu marriage novels.

The debates on marriage sociability resonate especially when secondary participants “deliver” messages to Obi Okonkwo through song. Just before Obi’s parents forbid his proposed transgressive marriage, a woman sings a song in which the refrain cautions against a transfer into market sociability:

*“This is what the letter has asked me to tell you:  
He that has a brother must hold him to his heart,  
For a kinsman cannot be bought in the market,  
Neither is a brother bought with money.”*

35 Kopytoff, 494–95.

Is everyone here?  
 (Hele ee he ee he)  
 Are you all here?  
 (Hele ee he ee he)  
 The letter said  
 That money cannot buy a kinsman,  
 (Hele ee he ee he)  
 That he who has brothers  
 Has more than riches can buy.  
 (Hele ee he ee he)<sup>36</sup>

This song recalls another song by male traders. Here, too, the transformation from kinship-sociability to a market based stranger-sociability is being discussed.

*“An in-law went to see his in-law  
 Oyiemu—o  
 His in-law seized him and killed him  
 Oyiemu—o  
 Bring a canoe, bring a paddle  
 Oyiemu—o  
 The paddle speaks English  
 Oyiemu—o”*<sup>37</sup>

These songs relay how the incomprehensible changes in kinship structures have seeped beyond domestic life into wider society. Taken together, both songs use the interrelationship of kinship and the worth of human life as conceptual planks for measuring the stability of social order. But because these songs are also pleas or protestations against the chaos, they bemoan the illegibility of the new order that destroys the logic of kinship and genealogical descent.

Read as social commentaries within the novel, the songs register the radical transformations of marriage sociability. Povinelli stresses that the “genealogical grid inherited by market society was only unevenly deracinated from social status and rearticulated to humanity, a term intended to suggest equivalence.”<sup>38</sup> As the market relations model spread across the globe, each location faced questions about the constitution of the remade family. Each society needed to reconsolidate subordinations that codified hierarchies between parent and child, women and men. Essentially, such subordinations determining the presuppositional grounds for new genealogies grew out of pre-existing social and religious beliefs of contracting members. Disputes over the admissibility of Osu into the new family and the response by Osu in forming their own clubs represent tussles over the local articulation of humanity between the stranger-sociability of the market economy and Igbo genealogical kinship models. Povinelli calls this ongoing process the dispersal of the genealogical grid. The rise of

36 *No Longer at Ease*, 146–47.

37 *Ibid.*, 53.

38 Povinelli, 218.

the modern nation-state and market economies did not obliterate the genealogical grid. Rather, as she explains, it was reimagined and adapted to new circumstances: “though the political relevance of family trees was narrowed and relocated, their social relevance was in fact democratized and dispersed into the life-world of ordinary people and the seams of homogenous national space-time.”<sup>39</sup> This dispersal of the genealogical grid also disrupts previous patterns of recognition of individuals. In the end, there is no complete transition from kinship sociability to a market friendly stranger-sociability, but an uneasy coexistence of both forms registered in the very title of *No Longer at Ease*.

This discussion of genealogical grids offers an excellent rubric for Osu novels. Neither the colonial legal system nor its successor postcolonial formation could ever completely abolish the system. They could only ameliorate it by providing new spaces of habitation in which the Osu could live in relative anonymity. That is, the project of colonial, and later national, administration was predicated upon the notion of market economy informed stranger-sociability. This colonial stranger-sociability has its roots in the notion of native welfare that European colonizers included in their colonial projects. In concrete terms, this meant, for example, that the provision of colonial infrastructure, such as schools, hospitals, courts, water systems, and even churches, bypassed genealogical distinctions that previously distinguished the Osu from the freeborn. Certainly, the colonial authorities became alternative instances of legal authority to which to turn, but this new order could never abrogate kinship-based sociability. As the legal order of colonial administration permitted new social relations, colonial and market relations generated new possibilities for social mobility. Consequently, beneficiaries of new mobilities consolidate themselves into new networks to advance their interests. In other words, the Osu, and other marginalized groups, could bypass Igbo kinship networks and live separate lives under the auspices of the colonial administration.

### **Chiasmus and the Been-To Narrative**

Achebe demonstrates the chasm between these midcentury discourses via chiasmus. The novel’s irresolutions have prompted critics to denounce the lack of courage, will, or agency on the part of Achebe’s characters. Case in point: Ode Ogede denounces Achebe for dwelling “exclusively on weaknesses” and presenting a baffling character with “an unwarranted absence of personal courage and vision.”<sup>40</sup> Obi exemplifies the in-between figure whose failures, transformation, and antagonistic encounters force his interlocutors to define their positions. William Lawson rightly identifies him as an example of the “been-to” protagonist in African fiction. From the 1960s to the 1980s, African novelists penned this subgenre that revolved around a character that undergoes a crisis of reintegration upon his (or her) return from studying in the West. A central appeal of been-to protagonists lies in their status as intimate strangers: they upset the distinctions between stranger- and kin-sociability. As members of kin groups, they are privy to cultural secrets, yet violate the rules of cultural secrecy because they have become strangers. Their objections to hegemonic

39 Ibid.

40 Ogede, 67–68.



practices threaten social cohesion and challenge accounts of community formation. Ultimately, the been-to precipitates cultural crisis.

Among other scholars, Rodolphe Gasché suggests that chiasmus holds a special significance for writers who suppress the cues that confer unity upon their texts but that explore the in-between meanings created through juxtaposed relations.<sup>41</sup> Once a text withholds a dominant ordering constellation, readers must establish the relations among the text's segments. At a basic level, two chiasmic sentences appear in the novel: the first, "What was Hitler to me or I to Hitler" is uttered by Obi, and the second, "Who will marry your daughters? Whose daughters will your sons marry?" comes from his father. Both chiasmic questions mark scenes of racial or kinship ideologies.<sup>42</sup> These indexical chiasmi account for the series of parallel scenes that never converge in the novel. In referencing Hitler and the Holocaust, the chiasmic exchange infers an analogy between racialization and kinship discrimination: both, it seems to suggest, rest upon notions of genealogical purity and contamination. That exchange also registers the difficulty of translating Osu discrimination beyond its circumscribed Igbo locations. Beyond the uttered phrases, the novel also draws upon chiasmus on the level of structure and character development. Obi's transformation from model pupil to criminal follows a chiasmic structure of inversion in which a character starts out at one pole of a spectrum and finishes at the other. Through Obi's metamorphosis, readers experience the distribution of new sociabilities attached to the subject positions of model pupils, debtors, criminals, and the Osu. This chiasmic structure externalizes deeply felt but incompatible desires. The resulting ambiguity illuminates the irresolution characterizing the novel.

Obi's propensity for antagonistic dialogues elicits the articulation of otherwise silenced discourses on slavery and freedom. The declarations of Obi's interlocutors affirm Osu slavery as well as testify to its effects on individuals. Whereas some critics expect denunciatory antislavery discourse in African writing, accounting for existing African proslavery discourse may also constitute a mode of retrieving memories of slavery outside of moral dictates. Through Obi's encounters, *No Longer at Ease* offers several affirmations of Osu practice. These declarations begin with Clara's performance of social affliction; she cannot but declare her status as an affliction:

"What's the matter, Clara? Tell me." He was no longer unruffled. There was a hint of tears in his voice.

"I am *osun*," she wept. Silence. She stopped weeping and quietly disengaged herself from him. Still he said nothing.

"So you see we cannot get married," she said, quite firmly, almost gaily—a terrible kind of gaiety. Only the tears showed she had wept.

"Nonsense!" said Obi. He shouted it almost, as if by shouting it now he could wipe away those seconds of silence, when everything had seemed to stop, waiting in vain for him to speak.<sup>43</sup>

41 Rodolphe Gasché, *Of Minimal Things: Studies on the Notion of Relation* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 263–70.

42 *No Longer at Ease*, 41 and 152.

43 *Ibid.*, 81.

More important than the requisite melodrama that accompanies Clara's transgressive declaration is Obi's shock. His silence, described as a break in time, signals Obi's awareness of the significance of Clara's revelation. The silence registers Obi's knowledge of the Osu discrimination, and his subsequent protestations constitute efforts to erase that silence. The declarations continue with Obi's friend, Joseph, his Umuofia compatriots, and Obi's parents. Following Obi's dramatic condemnation of Osu discrimination, his father begs him not to "bring the mark of shame and of leprosy into [his] family."<sup>44</sup> His mother voices the strongest protest when she threatens suicide if Obi marries Clara. In effect, Obi's function is to bear witness to the affirmations of Osu practice that cumulatively document the stigma attached to Osu slavery. Ultimately, Obi's exploration of the in-between ends once the romance fails and his mother dies. As he contemplates his mother's death, Obi emphatically declares: "The impatient idealist says: 'Give me a place to stand and I shall move the earth.' But such a place does not exist. We all have to stand on the earth itself and go with her at her pace."<sup>45</sup> This final transformation underscores his latent function as a character who eludes any single socialization into kin or stranger. His function, in the end, is to bear witness to the irreconcilable narratives of freedom and constraint.

### Slave and Stranger Vulnerabilities after Abolition

Ultimately, Achebe shies away from dramatic resolutions of the Osu dilemma to illuminate the forms of habitation with which all characters counterbalance their hierarchized constraints under colonial rule. Once Obi abandons his midcentury ideals, he evacuates his position as witness to become an actor in the games of self-advancement. Such advancement depends upon sponsorship through colonial or kinship networks.<sup>46</sup> Because Obi is utterly incapable of submitting to the conditions of sponsorship, however, he contravenes the rules of all networks. All characters borrow the language of the European civilizing mission, along with its coercive violence to advance their claims, even as they cultivate allegiances to indigenous welfare networks. The ongoing renegotiations of network affiliations are couched within the discourse of stranger-sociability that pervades *No Longer at Ease* as a series of innumerable references to *strangers*, *strange*, and *familiar*. To characterize a person as *strange* or *a stranger* indicates a transformation of social differentiation. Invariably, the allusions to strangers denote a renegotiation of political identity and ethical obligations toward the other.

Although the disappearance of the Osu narrative veils the trauma inflicted upon characters with slave descent, the trial subsumes the Osu narrative under the larger narrative of transformed sociabilities and unpredictable vulnerabilities through Obi's arrest. Osu characters offset everyday experiences of discrimination through alternative sociabilities available to them. They do not publicly divulge their Osu status because such knowledge belongs within the order of open secrets. Public disclosures of

44 Ibid., 152.

45 Ibid., 189.

46 On the functions of sponsorship in the fiction of Achebe, see Taiwo Adetunji Osinubi, "Cold War Sponsorships: Chinua Achebe and the Dialectics of Collaboration," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 50.4 (2014): 410–22.

Osu status indicate struggles over the transformation of sociability. Thus, Josiah Okeke's Osu status is divulged due his daughter's pursuit of a transgressive marriage to Obi. Readers only glean Clara's narrative as filtered through Obi, but it is clear that she demonstrates a grasp of social expectations that elude Obi. Clara illuminates the manners in which the Osu inhabit the spaces between colonial administration and Igbo community life. Like Hannah Okonkwo, she sees marriage as an institution that can be adapted to new circumstances. Thus, she introduces Obi to the cabinet minister Sam Okoli as an alternative network to offset the potential loss of Umuofia patronage. Because he is engaged to Clara's best friend, readers may surmise that Okoli is Osu himself. When Clara introduces the two, Okoli becomes the only character to affirm the proposed Osu marriage: "We haven't met, Obi, but I know all about you. I'm happy you are getting married to Clara."<sup>47</sup> The visit offers Obi a glimpse into an alternative network facilitated by a position in government and access to public funds. Representing the prototypical political father of the impending postcolonial nation-state, Sam Okoli offers Obi an alternative to the UPU. Obi could follow the UPU and labor to fulfill gargantuan communal expectations with his disproportionate salary. Or he could marry Clara and disrupt his previous kinship ties to start a new lineage that, on the one hand, would be considered outcast by his former community, but on the other, would be regarded as legitimate heirs in the eyes of the nation-state. In this indirect proposition, Obi could gain ascendance through Clara's Osu connections, and both could lead a transfigured life in the European quarters of Lagos.

Obi's encounters with the UPU and Sam Okoli resemble flirtations with possible sponsors and their respective visions of progress. Whereas the Osu prosper through affiliation with government sponsorship, the UPU prospers through its collaborative self-help. We may surmise that the UPU would never offer an Osu a scholarship. When Obi appears at a UPU meeting, he does not realize he is attending an inquiry into his transgressive associations with the Osu.

*You are one of us, so we must bare our minds to you.*

[...]

*We are pioneers building up our families and our town. And those who build must deny ourselves many pleasures. We must not drink because we see our neighbors drink or run after women because our thing stands up. You may ask why I am saying all this, I have heard that you are moving around with a girl of doubtful ancestry, and even thinking of marrying her ... (my emphasis)<sup>48</sup>*

This public defamation of Clara establishes the role of the UPU as a mouthpiece for living customs according to which its members organize their lives. Equally important, when the president declares himself a pioneer, he continues previous declarations with which characters adopt and adapt the discourse of colonial pioneering activity. Colonial subjects, in other words, later adopt the violence of the colonizing moment.

These declarations of pioneering activities set up competing organizations of sociability. Thus, the Igbo regard the British as the ultimate strangers who can never

47 *No Longer at Ease*, 77.

48 *Ibid.*, 94.

be fully socialized. Whatever their differences in regard to the Osu institution, the Honorable Minister Sam Okoli and members of the UPU are united in their dislike of the colonial masters. Although their respective sponsorship networks draw upon the foundational violence of the colonial project, both are invested in maintaining and furthering kinship interests. The sociability they extend to Obi is based upon a recognition that conjoins social subject formation and sexual reproduction. Unlike all other characters in the novel, Obi attempts to live outside of these networks of care and mutual obligation. Following his transformation, he begins a lifestyle in which he contravenes the obligations of all networks. He disobeys British colonial law by accepting bribes, his sexual proclivities contravene the UPU's rules, and he loses the patronage of Sam Okoli when he does not marry Clara. Obi's most dramatic contravention occurs when he borrows money from Sam Okoli, very possibly an Osu, to abort the Osu baby he conceived with Clara. This all-round disloyalty renders Obi a virtual stranger to all networks, or a "beast"—as a member of the UPU renames him.<sup>49</sup>

Becoming a "beast" signals a particular stranger-status outside of the regulatory power of kinship recognition or the provisional affinities and obligations contracted through monetary transactions. The violence of stranger-sociability, that is, the violence of radical kinlessness that replaces the status previously attached to slaves, emerges starkly during Obi's arrest:

Two people entered—one was his recent visitor, the other a complete *stranger*.

"Are you Mr. Okonkwo?" asked the *stranger*. Obi said yes in a voice he could hardly have recognized. The room began to swim round and round. The *stranger* was saying something, but it sounded distant—as things sound to a man in a fever. He then searched Obi and found the marked notes. He began to say some more things, invoking the name of the Queen, like a District Officer in the bush reading the Riot Act to an uncomprehending and delirious mob. (my emphasis)<sup>50</sup>

Obi's arrest forcefully dramatizes the material effects of transformed sociability. By metaphorically relocating Obi into a space of conquest, or "the bush," the Riot Act dramatizes the cogent effects of stranger-sociability as vulnerability in everyday life. It also, indirectly, illuminates the violence imposed upon the Osu even as the author refuses to expose their pain to public scrutiny.

Ultimately, the courtroom frame narrative presents the dominant historical fracture of the novel. Although the trial ostensibly serves as an inquiry into Obi's failed education, it is actually a theatre of the divergent political interests that subsume Osu debates. The manner in which the Osu narrative is sidetracked by the legal proceedings delineates the chasm between a generalized, global narrative of abolition and equality and the localized ideals of freedom within which Osu debates circulate in the midcentury. The redirected plot in Achebe's novel does not so much move away from the Osu narrative as swerve into an exploration of the larger transformation of kinship sociabilities within European, Igbo, and nascent global cultures of international law. All parties in the novel incorporate these legal cultures into their respective projected

49 Ibid., 181.

50 Ibid., 193–94.

visions of the future. Obi's failed opposition illuminates not only what the Osu live with and through, but also the wider contextual landscapes in which legal dispensation against the Osu institution is embedded. The novel does not weld together the breaches between the multiple parties. Rather, it is crucial that the novel emphasizes the breach between the ideals of abolitionism and international law. The abolition of slavery in Africa cannot simply be considered a problem of international law. On the contrary, it is also a problem of the transposition of international law into communities removed from the sentiment enshrined within those laws.

In sum, the schism between international law and local *ressentiment*, between the surface reality of abolition and the sociological and ideological foundations sustaining Osu discrimination, animates Achebe's novel. The critical misrecognition of the modes through which West African writers retrieved and represented slavery results, in part, from a failure to recognize how the abolition of slavery was not an indigenous African concept but was imposed through colonial fiat. Writers, such as Achebe, respond to their historical situation by exploring how discourses of African slaveries are overtaken and overwritten by European discourses of abolition/colonization and African counter-narratives of freedom and anticolonialism. For writers emerging into the midcentury period of anticolonial nationalism, the excavation of African discourses of slavery had to occur in tandem with a resistance of colonial discourse of abolition as benevolence. Above all, by resettling the subjects of abolition, slavery, and freedom within marriage reform, writers of Osu marriage novels underscore the historically vital functions of marriage legislation as a constellation for establishing the presuppositional grounds for social belonging and personal autonomy.