

***Ime Nnu Ji* in Awgu Culture Area of Enugu State.**

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Abstract

It has been observed that Awgu people living in Diaspora do not know anything about *ime nnu jirite*. Various titles are being taken today in Awgu Igbo culture area. Some titles are bestowed on indigenes based on their achievements while other titles are bought by individuals who want to show that they have great repute. Thus, this paper wishes to contribute original information about Awgu Igbo aspect of culture which would have died without being noticed by the younger and modern generation. The paper therefore, was to investigate the meaning of *ime nnu ji* rite, its stages and significance. The study is a descriptive survey design and it was carried in Awgu. The research population consists of selected Awgu indigenes who earned the titular sobriquet of “*Omenyirioha*”, arising from *ime nnu* rite. The instrument for data collection was tape recorder which was used for oral interview and personal observation. The data collected were analyzed using theory of diffusion. The research found out that *omenyirioha* has his own *Nnu ji* deity-*Njoku ji* instituted in his barn during the ceremony. Unlike other titles taken in Awgu, it is only *Nnu ji* that shows the holder’s prowess. After the harvesting of yams each year, he is expected to share yams

to widows and destitute. During planting season, he will have many young men coming to him for seed yam. The conclusion shows that *Ime nnu ji* title taking should be encouraged by Awgu community and the Igbo nation at large because it sets a man out as hardworking, trustworthy and morally sound.

Introduction/Background

Awgu, a town in Igbo land which is in Awgu Local Government Area in Enugu State Nigeria cherishes yam highly. Mish (2004), defines yam as “the edible starchy tuberous root of various plants (genus *Dioscorea* of family Discrepancies) used as a staple food in tropical areas. These are perennial herbaceous vines cultivated for the consumption of their starchy tubers”. Yam is very important to the Igbo people as it is one of their staple crops. Nwafor-Ejelinma (2012:88) says that yam was the principal economic crop and yardstick of wealth and currency in Igbo land before the Europeans introduced money and currency. In other words, it was a yam economy and the power and status of a man was determined by the size of his barn. There are celebrations such as the New Yam Festival (*Iri ji*) which are held before harvesting of the new yam every year. During the festival, yam is eaten throughout the community as celebration. Yam tubers are shown off in the barns and on heaps by individuals as a sign of success and wealth.

In Awgu Igbo, if one is successful in planting and harvesting, one is expected to perform yam title taking *Nnu Ji*, otherwise, no one will regard the person as *Diji* or

Ezeji. This is because the villagers have not been entertained to sharing or tasting of the person's yam. That is why a worthy adult Awgu Igbo man cannot boast of his yam wealth and success, if he has not performed the *nnu ji* ceremony. By not performing this rite, he would not raise his head up at any new yam festival to show his yams. He will be considered irresponsible and stupid for neglecting or being ignorant of his custom. *Ime nnu ji* is a very old culture in Awgu Igbo, it marks a yam farmer out as successful and wealthy farmer. It has a good omen following it because it is unheard of that a celebrant ever lacked yams in his barn after the *nnu ji* ceremony. The year following his initiation is always a year of storytelling about his bountiful harvest. These days, the younger generation is no longer interested in farming. Many of our youth walk about the streets of urban areas in search of 'white-collar job'. Nobody wants to soil his or her hand in the name of farm work. Absence of their expectation constrains some to take up armed robbery, cyber fraud, kidnapping, prostitution, money ritual and other vices.

This study is to bring to the knowledge of both the students, teachers and scholars, the existence of Awgu culture that is about to die. This culture is therefore written so that future generations can lay hands on the research work and know their background. This paper will be discussed under the following headings.

Title Taking

Any fully grown man in Awgu Igbo is either a titled man or a non-titled man. He either belongs to *ndi ichie* -titled man or *ndi okoro*- non- titled man. There is a great

difference between the two. Titled men are the ruling class while the non- titled men are the subjects. Title taking in Awgu is open to any free male. The only barrier placed on the way to titled taking is such arising from inability of the would-be title taker to satisfy the requirements of this arm of the society he intends to join. Title taking is expensive, it is only the financially stable that go for titles. The quest for title could lure a title seeker to sell his landed property or other valuables or mortgage them to money lenders to enable him to obtain money for the desired title.

Mish, (2003:1312), defines title as an appellation of dignity, honor, distinction or preeminence attached to a person or family by virtue of rank, office, precedent, privilege, attainment, or lands or a person holding a title especially of nobility. Nwosu (2002:274), agrees with this and goes further to add that “the titled man exercised the most political and administrative influence in Igbo society. As an open society, most titled men in Igbo culture areas achieved their status. The achieved titles varied from one community to another. The above view shows that in Igbo land, titled men are the governing class. This compels every worthy male of any community in Igbo land to work very hard towards obtaining one or two titles in order to be among the decision makers; as benefit accruable to this class are enviable. Politicians pay heavy amount of money just to get one of their town’s chieftaincy title because of the prestige accorded to them by the voters during campaign.

According to Orji (1999:41), “Title taking was not so wide spread as it is today in Igbo land. Title taking was introduced by wealthy class for the purpose of stratification of the community into rich and poor segments”. This shows that no poor person will engage in title taking because virtually all the titles in Igbo land are known to be very costly and for one to take it, one has to ensure that his pocket is fat. The rich one’s would want to show the poor ones that the usual statement of the Igbo “*I na-enye m nri*” is untrue. This caused the commencement of title taking so that they can cook and feed the poor freely during the ceremony of title taking. Partaking in the feast, especially the food and drinks, the poor were constrained and were bound to accord the man the sobriquet earned by virtue of his title to respect him.

Ogbalu (2006:33) avers that “title taking is approached with some awe and steps are taken both by the candidates and the initiators to see that the orders are meticulously observed to avoid divine anger and punishment”.

Prior to the introduction of Christianity in Awgu Igbo, a man’s wealth was determined by the number of wives, his number of children, his number of slaves, the quantity of yam in his barn and his number of domestic animals in his compounds. These were the only yard-stick for measuring wealth and riches. This corroborates what Nwafor-Ejemila (2012:88) says, *Ozo* is highest but not the only title of achievement status among the Igbo. Before the invasion of Igbo land by the Europeans, and before the Western currency systems were

introduced in Igbo land, the people were mainly agrarian. Yam was the main cash crop and the capital economy yardstick. It was basically a yam economy and a man's wealth was measured by the size of his yam barns and achievement. Titles were taken according to a man's yam power or the yam status of a man. Nevertheless, these riches could not give any remarkable edge or esteem over any other member of the community. During that time, a proud man of wealth who would want to show off his superiority of lording over others would receive this remark of unconcerned according to Orji (1999:46), "*O buru na I nwere ego, I nwere ya n'ulo be gi, o bu gi na-enye m na ndi be m nri? ka anyi a biala gi mbibi ego? Gwakene m ihe I megoro n'ala gosiri na I kpataara ego?* If you have you have money, you have it in your own house. Are you the person feeding my family and me? Or have we come to borrow money from you? Tell me what you have done in this town to show that you are rich."

In spite of this disdainful remark by some people, title bestows social status to its holders. There are many titles that could be taken in Igbo land some of them are ozo title, *igbu ichi*, *lolo/iyom*, *ima mmanwu* but the most widely spread are ozo title and *iyom/lolo*.

All titles have a common feature both in content, scope, and performance. They consist of payments of stipulated sums of money, a number of entertainments in food and drinks, dancing and merry-making according to the degree of importance of the title. *Ime nnu ji* is also an important title taking in Awgu Igbo with its fan-fare and grand ceremony.

Ime Nnu Ji Explained

Nnu is the highest title in Awgu culture area.. It is a tradition of paying homage to the god of yam *Njoku* in thanksgiving for a bountiful harvest of yams. *Nnu* derives its name from the number of yams that are shared during the period of the title taking. Uchendu, (1995:32) avers, "The *ezeji* (yam title) tradition is widely shared in Igbo land. It is highly elaborate within what might be described as the nuclear Igbo land from which the title system diffused to other parts of Igbo culture areas." During the olden days when counting was difficult the elders believed that the title aspirant must have to share about four hundred tubers of yams before the end of his title taking. It is a custom marking the celebrant out as an *ezeji* who wants others to have a taste of his yam wealth. A wealthy farmer who earned the nickname *diji* but failed to perform *nnu ji* will invite such scathing remark of disregard from villagers as *oko ji edu eri* - one who plants yam but eats miniature type of yellow yam. (An innuendo suggestive of miserliness). Nwafor-Ejelinma (2012:88) states that were four traditional yam titles in those days in Nnewi, they are *Ogbu ji*, *Di ji*, *Di mkpa* and *Duru ji* or *Eze ji* which was the highest title in Igbo land.

Nnu ji therefore, is announcement to the people that one is successful in one's farm work., especially as it concerns yam planting. *Nnu* title is noble, unlike other titles in Awgu such as *igbu evi* or *igbu inyinya* where a person may sell his land or may make use his daughter's bride price to purchase a title. *Nnu* title taking is dependent on a farmer's capacity of

producing bumper harvest of yams. In *Nnu ji* title taking the person taking *nnu ji* title will buy yams from the market to perform the title or will not in any day during the yam title taking buy yams from the market to augment the ones he has in his barn. Supporting this, Uchendu, (1995:18), posits, I am not describing our modern Igbo society where “suitcase” farmers without farms, wives or extended family support could depend on the market to provide yams for their yam titles”. Therefore, in pursuance of this title taking, all the yams eaten for the ten consecutive days of the title taking should come from the celebrants’ barn.

Stages of Ime Nnu Ji Awgu Igbo

There are seven stages of *ime Nnuji* in Awgu town.

The first stage is Inspection of the yam farm -*Mvete ubi ji*.

Initiation into the yam title requires an aspirant’s long period of indoctrination, socialization and motivation by the lineage elders. The aspirant works hard on the farm. He contracts a labor force of his large network of relatives as well as that of his extended family. These dedicate and devote themselves to the farm work of the aspirant. This help is necessary because he has already informed them of his intention to take *nnu ji* title after the next harvest. After planting and weeding of the farm for the second time, the aspirant would invite three or four people to come and inspect his farm to know whether it would be enough for the ceremony. The people to ‘inspect’ the yam farm would be people who had taken the *nnu ji* title. This

agrees with what Uchendu (1995:32) says, that “the first group of people to “inspect” the yams would be the elders of the aspirant’s extended family who have taken the first step in the initiation process”. If they are satisfied with what they have inspected , they will give their approval for informing people of his intention to take the title that year. At home he entertains the chosen inspectors lavishly. He cooks special sweet yam-*akpuru evo* with palm oil , pounded yam and soup. They will be given not less than eight large yams each afterwards.

The second stage is the counting of the yams at the barn -*igu ji*

The counting of the yams comes after the staking of the yams at the barn. The responsibility for counting yams is reserved for the people who had taken the *Nnu* title. Anybody who has not taken the title cannot count yams for the aspirant. It is a taboo. If a non-titled person attempts to count yams for *nnu ji, Njoku* will be strike him dead because he has not taken the yam title. These yam tubers tied to stakes would number about forty to forty-five in each stake but cannot be less than forty pieces of in one stake. They continue the procedure of counting until they get forty weaved group, this gives about six thousand, four hundred yams. These yams are not touched during the course of the title taking. It is solely reserved for planting at the next planting season. Uchendu (1995:32), states that “if those invited for counting of the staked yams are satisfied with the quantity and quality of the yams and are encouraged by the number of collateral yams which not in the

prescribed list, the elders would summon their worthy son to take the first step” After the counting a crowed cock will killed at the entrance door of the barn to thank the god of yam *Njoku* for his bountiful harvest.

Third Stage: *Igbu Ewu Nnu*- immolation goat for yam title

Igbu ewu nnu is the main beginning of *ime nnu*, when somebody slaughters a goat for yam title taking, the person has become irrevocably committed to the ceremony. This corroborates what Uchendu (1995:32) says, that the initiation into *ezejigu* was a purely religious affairs. It involved the slaughter of goat (*eghu ahiajioku*) the yam deity who would be prayed to make the aspirant's efforts on the farm more prosperous. This goat is slaughtered and used in cooking food for all those who has taken yam title in Awgu town. The meat is shared according to how the invitees were initiated. After feasting on the meat and are ready to leave for their homes, each will receive gifts of twelve tubers of yams. The goat must be a castrated black goat. The head of the goat will be given to the celebrant's best friend - *dia*

Stage four: *Ezioku umunna* (invitation of the kindred)

The members of the kindred are invited to be informed of the celebrant's intention to take yam title. This invitation is not just for mere verbal information, but one accompanied with mouthwatering entertainment of guest will be given the message of their invitation-his preparation to take *nnu ji* title. The

aspirant provides *agbaja mee*-(a calabash of palm wine). This wine is used for pouring libation by the eldest man in the kindred who must have taken the title equally. Everyone is entitled to a certain number of yams depending on the category of the person-titled men, twelve yams; non-titled men eight yams; young men , six yams ;children, two yams .the least number of yam giving during yam title taking is two yams. As they complete their purpose and are about to go, they will be given a well graceful cock -*oke okuku chalu acha*

Stage five: *Igba Nju* group's invitation

- 1. *Igba nju ndi Ada na umuada* -invitation of the celebrants married sisters and their children** *Igba nju* for these women and their children, honoring of this invitation is to enable them to find out whether the aspirant can feed them. When the sisters of the celebrant come with their children, they are entertained impressively on yams and oil bean sauce, special palm wine, pounded yam and soup. This group is later on given present of mature hen [as they are men], and a number of yams -six for women and four for children.
- 2. *Igba nju ndi nne* Invitation of the maternal people** The celebrant's maternal kindred is also invited to have a taste of his yam. They are also entertained on comestibles and handed over a hen. As they leave yams are distributed according to ages. All the elders will be given

twelve yams, women and youths are given eight yams, while children are given four yams. This is a day that the celebrant's maternal people will proclaim him *Amudoluulo* which means that the celebrant is from a good home, and he understands what his people need.

3. ***Igba nju epele* -invitation of extended relations** This day is for distant or extended relation of the celebrant's mother and father. These second cousins, aunts from the celebrant's mother's side, maternal grandfather's people, celebrant's wife's aunts and grandparents. All these people make up what is called epele in Awgu. They will be entertained on dishes prepared with a cock, and while leaving for homes, they will receive yam gifts according to the category of the persons: titled men twelve yams non-titled men and women eight yams, youths six yams and children four yams.
4. ***Igba nju ikwu na ibe* -invitation of relations, friend and well-wishers** This is inviting everybody all over again together with friend and well-wishers of the celebrant. This is the grooviest day of all the days. If the celebrant has the wherewithal he will kill a cow that will be used in cooking food. It is not compulsory. On the day of *igba nju ikwu na ibe* eight gallons of palm wine will be used to pour libation to *Njoku* unlike other days that two gallons are used. Any guest honouring this

invitation will be obliged to come with either palm wine or such gifts as fowl or goat but not yam. Everybody will be entertained to their fill. One remarkable difference is that the celebrant must not run short of wine that day. It is unheard of for a celebrant not to have left-over wine after *igba nju ikwu na ibe*. These left over s of both food and yam earned the celebrant a sobriquet- *Omenyirioha* feeding the crowd with comestibles which they are unable to finish. As this pre- fiesta comes to an end, all are given yams according to categories-twelve yams for titled men, eight yams for non-titled men and women, youths receives six yams while children are given four yams.

Stage six: *ichu Ndaaza* - chasing away sand flies

This means decoration of such farm tools as hoe sticks *egu ugu* short matchete *mkpukpuru mma*, digger *ngwu ji* and *abo ji*. The celebrant kills a cock for all the farm implements to thank them for helping him in farm work. These were the tools used while working at the farm. They are appreciated by the decoration and by provision of two gallons of palm wine for pouring libation on them. That cock provided is used for cooking yam porridge pounded yam with soup is served to the invited particularly those people that helped the celebrant in farm work. Those invited are given presents of yam according to their personality.

Stage seven: *Mmezu Nnu* -concluding rites of yam title taking

This is the last day of the title taking. *Ekwe nnu* (nnu horn) will be beaten by the celebrant. The drum is buffalo's horn *mpu atu*. Buffalo's horn is used because buffalo is the largest of the animals hunted down in Awgu. Since *Nnu* title is the highest title, it is indispensable that the horn of the largest animal ever killed to announce the title's end will be made use of. Describing buffalo's horn further Nwafor-Ejelinma (2012:85) avers that "*mpuatu*- the buffalo's horn is a very prized drinking vessel for the ozo cult. The ozo man did not use any ordinary vessel for drinking wine or water. It is a very distinct status symbol" The celebrant goes round the village beating the drum. His friends accompany him round the village. At any junction, the celebrant beats his friend sing this song:

Nwokeke njekwuru oke iyaa *son*
of okeke strong man is true

Nje nje nje njekwuru oke iyaa *really*
he is a strong man is true.or

Nwokeke were ya gawa oo *son*
of okeke carry go oo

Onye riri ji ya ka m la akpo oo *the*
person I ate his yam am calling.

O di mma ihu la mbo were gawao *an*
honourable man carry go oo

Onye m riri ji ya ka m la akpooo *the*
person I ate his yam am calling.

At night, the villagers converge at his house for entertainment till dawn. He entertain them on foods: boiled yam, porridge pounded yam and palm wine. If the celebrant is wealthy he kills a goat or a ram to mark the end of his title taken but if not he use to cock which is the normal animal for it. All the people that come to the compound must go with at least two tubers of yam while going. The best friend of the celebrant who received the head of the *nnu* goat is obliged to come to this end of *nnu* with four gallons palm wine to show appreciation.

Taboos of *Nnu* Title Taking In Awgu

Someone cannot take *nnu* title if the father and elder brother has not taken else he incurs the wrath of the god of yam *Njoku*. Women do not take yam title because in Igbo culture, yam is crop for men alone. Any person who did not take the *nnu* title cannot eat from the food cooked with *ewu nnu*. Women on their menstruations do not enter into the yam barn of titled men. Women wearing pants, shorts or trousers do not enter into the barn of *Omenyirioha*. It is a taboo for someone to steal yam from the barn of *Omenyirioha*. If a man has not performed the yam title taking, he cannot kill goat for other people performing *nnu* rite, else he attracts the wrath of *njoku* the god of yam.

Social Significance of Yam Title Taking

This social ceremony creates family gregariousness and unity. During the course of yam title taking the

celebrant's family members are brought together. The celebrant feeds these relations, both those at home and those who return home for the ceremony. Important family matters may be discussed during the course of the ceremony.

This ceremony accords the celebrant a new social status. He is no longer an ordinary person as he has attained a new position. He is now a member of *Ndi Ichie* Awgu –a group of elders who involve themselves in decision taking on the welfare of the people. These people in village gathering are given a special privilege they are given concession to speak before the ordinary people. This is because those other people helped themselves in their yam and they have resolved to be giving respect to him. Many widows long to be friend to any of these title holders because they can provide for them in and out of famine. In the olden days parents hanker after daughters marrying such men or their children because they can comfortably provide for their needs in terms shelter, food and clothing. This corroborates Oforchukwu (2011:40), he says that the Igbo people appreciate hard work. A man who works hard is praised and appreciated. If a man is looking for a wife, the first thing people would ask is "Does he works hard? People are prepared to allow a hardworking person to be their prospective in-laws. It is believed that a hardworking person would cultivate yams that would feed his entire family.

Young men usually approach them during planting season with two gallons of palm wine, a cock and a head of tobacco soliciting for seed yams. They are

mandated to oblige with their request if they are hard working. Achebe (1958:13) says that there was a wealthy man in Okonkwo's village who had huge barns, nine wives and thirty children his name was Nwakibe and he had taken the highest but one title which a man could take in the clan. It was this man that Okonkwo worked for to earn his first seed yams. The night of *mmezu nnu* is a special night for lovers to meet at the celebrant's place; lovers old or young stay together eat, drink and dance freely till dawn. Many young people get married after making acquaintances among themselves at yam title taking.

The day of '*igba nju ikwu na ibe*' people from other villages and towns are invited. People may meet their age long friends there too. Relatives may even get to know each other better. A person who has taken the yam title has acquire various names for himself, his wife\wives and his children these include for the man- *Omenyirioha*- he who feeds the crowd with comestible which they are unable to finish for the wife\wives she is called *ekwuanyuoku* (continous fire on the hearth this is because any day of the occasion the wife will continue to cook until night). Everybody that comes to the celebration must eat. It is unheard of for cooked yam to finish on any of these day. After the yam title taking children born to *Omenyirioha* are called *Udeji* or *Uduji* for boys while girls are named *Ukaji*.

Religious Significance of yam title taking

Any person who has attained *nnu* title is considered a virtuous person; otherwise the person will not survive *igbu ewu nnu* stage. During the slaughtering of the goat, the celebrant is asked whether he had stolen any person's yam or animal before. If he had committed this crime the yam title would not be conferred on him. If the person is free of such, he then swears an oath of doing no evil against his fellow human being in future else *Njoku* deity will strike him dead. This open confession of cleanliness marks the man out as truthful, honest, and straightforward in his dealing with others.

At the day of counting of yams, the cock slaughtered at the entrance of the barn is used for instituting *Njoku* shrine in the celebrant's barn. He now performs the functions of a priest of *Njoku* to the shrine in his barn. During every New Yam festival he pour libation and feeds the *Njoku* shrine with porridge yam that has no salt in it.

After each harvest, the *Omenyirioha* titled man will select the biggest yam in his barn and placed it on the *Ajoba ochiri Njoku* in his barn. This yam is called *Ji Njoku*. It will not be eaten unless all the yams in the barn are consumed. When other yam has been eaten, this yam will be brought out only by the titled man. He will slaughter a cock and pour the blood into the *Ajoba Ochiri Njoku*. This cock will be used in cooking the *Ji Njoku*. After cooking, the *Omenyirioha* man will pour libation and feed the *Njoku* thanking him for last year's harvest and praying for a bountiful one that year. After praying, he and

the rest of his family will consume the remaining porridge. When there is land dispute or quarrel between the village people that demand truthfulness, an *Omenyirioha* titled man is invited because he has taken the oath of truthfulness and honesty. He tells the truth as required. He will not take any bribe from group else *Njoku* deity will strike him dead.

Findings

From the study, the following findings were made:

1. *Omenyirioha* derives its name from the ten days of the initiation ceremony whereby the celebrant ensures that there are leftover of everything such as food, wine and meat till morning.
2. In taking *nnu ji* title, the celebrant must be of his readiness, he must not buy yam from the market to augment his own yams. He has to share his yams both to relative, friends, well-wishers in-laws and even his enemies.
3. By taking the oath of *nnu* the celebrant has sworn to desist from any wrong doings and evil deeds. He has attained the highest status, this makes him one of *Ndiichie* Awgu, whether he is a young boy, young man or an adult.
4. *Nnu* is the only title that depicts the strength of someone in farm work unlike other titles like *Ogbu evi* and *Ogbu inyinya*.
5. *Nnutitle* holder is a priest of *Njoku* deity because after every harvest and during new Yam festivals he is mandated to pour libation to the deity.

6. After harvest each year he is expected to share yams to the widows and destitute of his village.
7. At planting season, he receive many young male farmers who comes for seed yams for shared cropping.
8. *Nnu* derives its name from the uncountable number of yams shared during the course of the title taking by the celebrant.
9. By bringing many young men and women together at the night of *Igba nju ikwuna ibe* and the night of *Mmezu nnu*, many marriages take place after every *Ime nnu* rite.
10. At death a member's body is a town's corpse. He will be buried in his barn and only yams will be eaten throughout his burial and funeral cere

Conclusion

From the findings above, one will agree with the researcher that *Nnu ji* title is worth taking. It is the only title that the holder works for it before it is bestowed on him. Unlike other titles which can be bought with money, *Nnu ji* can only be got through farm work. Whoever performs this title taking is a an endurance person. This is an agriculturist who deserves an award both from local and state government because he cultivates many acres of land without tractors and ploughs. The research recommends that youth of nowadays should be encouraged to learn about this title taking and work towards achieving it

rather than engaging themselves in armed robbery and kidnapping. If they use their strength in farm work, they will be well fed, buy various clothing and even buy cars and build houses honorably. The government should be made to know about this title and encourage the indigenes Awgu in planting of yams with herbicides, tractors, ploughs, insecticides, pesticides and harvesters. This title taking should be included in the curriculum of Igbo culture to be taught both in the school and colleges so that the future generation will not forget their culture. Again, by this era of get rich quick this culture should be made available to the radio and television houses for them to help in disseminating the culture. That a man can achieve a title through hard work and not through politics and fraud (a.k.a.419). Also Governments at the three levels are required to help in upholding this culture that can help in formation of virtuous characters in the younger ones. An Igbo adage says that a hungry man is an angry man. If the youths can go back to farming and realize the dignity attendant to this culture, many of the present day social vices will be controlled as nobody will be neither hungry nor angry.

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