



RESEARCH ARTICLE

REVIVING AGE GRADE SYSTEM IN IGBOLAND: AN APPRAISAL OF THE ROLE OF AGE GRADE IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF IGBO COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

Due to changes in social, political, and economic structure of our contemporary society and the inability of the government to adequately provide basic social amenities and over all development at the grass root, there is urgent need to mobilize the Traditional Age Grade in various Igbo communities in order to achieve development strides. This paper puts that Age Grade System needs to be reviewed due to essential role they play in the traditional Igbo Society in the past. The paper made it clear that Age Grade Organization is an instrument for social and economic development of any given society. This paper believes that in order to carry community development to the grass root, Age Grade as one of the institutions has to be mobilized to meet up with political, social and economic challenges, needs and aspirations of the people. The paper is of the view that the reason why special attention is given to Age Grade is because people tend to undermine the position and contributions made by Age Grade at community development. The paper x-rays bountiful qualities that characterized traditional Igbo Age Grade system that needs not be neglected by the society.

Keywords: Agegrade, Igboland, Development, Contemporary society

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1.0. INTRODUCTION

Age Grade refers to group of persons of the same sex and approximately the same age having certain duties and privileges in common and constituting a division of a tribe or society (Merriam Webster, 1982). Ezeogidi puts that Age Grade is a group born in the same year or age bracket of a one to three years or more. They maintain social relationships and do things in common because they behave in inter-dependence of one another. It is a form of social organization base on age, within a series of such categories through which individuals pass over the course of their lives (Wikipedia, 2022).

In Igboland the Age Grade is a cultural society of people born within a specific period of time... it is meant for people born within a space of three years, but in ancient times, an Age Grade comprised people born within a space of two planting seasons (Imobiansha, 2023).

In Igbo land, the Age Grade system is a proven approach to development (Igberere.org). it is an important phenomenon in the political, economic, and social life of the people. This is because the cooperative life of the local people centres around age grades, town unions, and secret societies. Evan Pritch (1940) refers to Age Grade as a system of progression in a definite order from one stage to another. At each stage, the groups undergo certain societal rites necessary for the performance of social functions commensurate to it. Prof. Babs Fafunwa (1974), believes that the Age Grade system was organized by many Nigerian communities for community development. Eisentad puts;

...age set system arise and function in those societies in which the basic allocation of roles is not over whelming determined by membership in kinship groups and where some important integrative functions remain to be fulfilled beyond those group.

There is a proliferation of status and roles for the existence of community in Igboland. Some writers emphasized more on the relevance of the Age Grade system in the societies where it is adopted as a political organ of community administration. Colin Turbal (1982) observed that



Age Grade system is a convenient device for the division of labour. This observation conforms with the system in Igbo communities. Hence, in Igboland, work is shaped among Age Grades. Members of the Age Grades accept their portion of work with open mind without any argument. This method encourages health competition among the age grades since each group strives to complete their own portion of work thereby giving such project speedy actions.

Thus, most development projects and important issues are handled by Age Grades. The Age Grade differs in structures, organization and functions from one Igbo community to another. The origin and role of Age Grades must be connected with the usual association of young males from childhood to adulthood including the formation of social group or companies from moonlight play and wrestling competition.

2.0. Theoretical Review: Functionalist Theory

The theory considered more appropriate for this study is the functionalist theory. This theory justifies the performance and demand of the age grade in the areas of the society they are found in entire Eastern region.

The functionalist theory, as also known as structural functionalism was primarily propounded by Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), French sociologists. The major assumptions of the theory include but not limited to the following:

1. Society is a system: The theory believes that a society is a complex system, composed of independent parts, with its own separate functions and roles.
2. Social order and Stability: It also assumes that social order and stability are necessary for the survival of society.
3. Social Institution are functional: The theory also views social problems such as poverty or crime, as dysfunctions that disrupt the normal functioning of society. These among others were the major assumptions relevant to this study.



3.0. METHODOLOGY

The paper took a descriptive approach in presentation and discussion of the research objectives and problems. The sources of data collection were from secondary which includes, textbooks, journal and conference papers, periodicals, magazines, and internet materials. Functionalist theory was employed as a theoretical framework of analysis. The study adopted qualitative content analysis in the general discourses.

4.0. DISCURSE ANALYSES

4.1. The Organization of Age Grade System in Igbo Land

The organization and arrangement of any particular category of Age Grade follows the general pattern of the Igbo Age Grade. However, age grades answered name according to the members of their category that were strong in warfare and those that commanded respect in the community. Regardless of the position each Age Grade occupies, men are not considered to be adults until they marry. However, bachelors spend most of their time in hiring errands and have virtually no role to play in community-wide policy-making activities.

Age grades according to Cutta, were the dominating factor in the sub tribal organization and indeed the power of the head, chief depended largely on cooperation with the Age Grade. Theoretically, the societies chosen to control the camp were subject to the orders of the sub-traditional chief but their duties were to clearly defined that practically they were their own masters.

Senior Age Grade (50-60years) are made up of citizens of the community who have reached manhood. They enforce the decision of the council of the village. It is composed mainly of male adults within the age grade of 50 and 60 years; they embark on development projects for the community. Middle Age Grade (10-29 years) are age group more association recognized and given a name by the elders of the communities. This group is assigned the responsibility of cleaning the paths, streams, markets and other public conveniences.



Recruitment/Membership

The recruitment of members of Age Grade system is never formally organized until members' reach adolescence. However, common association starts at late childhood that is seven to eight years to nine years of age, when they start to partake in community activities together and tidying up the town square. In the recruitment of members for an age grade, there are people who are the pioneer members of the age grade; they organize all the activities of the age grade. Thus, when person is recruited into an age grade, he will be expected to abide by the rules and regulations. He will be expected to meet up with his financial obligations.

Some Igbo communities' dictates at a proper time, that children of the community with the same age bracket shall congregate or organize themselves in an Age Grade, while in some Igbo communities it is the Age Grades themselves that determines. The youth that forms a given age grouping therefore fall with the same age bracket. Four years range is acceptable. Also members of the same Age are naturally known by the period of upbringing and interactions. The parents know the ages of their children and therefore can determine their age group.

Apart from membership that is naturally determined acclaimed and defined, the Age Grade system also gives room for admission of members not within the age bracket. In this respect, admission of willing indigenes is allowed, subject to verification of the character of the person concerned. Admission is guided by the intention of the person to be admitted and his general characters.

Functions of the Age Grade System in Igboland

It will be appropriate to have a look at the role of Age Grades in the development of Igbo communities. The Age Grades perform immeasurable function in the art of community development. The role of Age Grade in the community is oriented towards the needs of the



society, need because, it is the event of period that determines what an age grade will do to help the community. For instance, the past, the main pre-occupation of the Age Grades was the defence of the territorial integrity of the community. But now it has extended and involved the provision of social amenities since there are no more wars to fight in defence of the community and in the growth of the community economical and societal standard.

It is generally agreed that the age grade system has important and relevant functions in the social and economic existence of any community. On this role, Fajana maintains that;

It plays an important role in the political, social, and economic arrangement of a society. Apart from the political role, it also assigns roles or functions to each person in this community.

Bradbury (1951), observed that age grade arrangements play administrative and regulatory functions and he goes on to say that the system collaborates with the title organization and the hereditary chiefs to ensure law and order. In S.N Eienstadt's (1971) contributions, he maintains that;

...at each stage in the Age Grade system, each member in conjunction with other members play different roles in the society. Through participation in the system, each Age Grade learns and acquires the social heritage from the age higher than it.

Hence, the role of the Age Grades in Igboland generally has taken a drastic and radical dimensions. Emphasis has been shifted from the traditional defence system to a more complex role of providing essential amenities for the well-being of the citizens. Apart from economic aid, there are successful projects or economic activities, which Age Grade stimulate in the minds of their members. It is generally agreed that the Age Grade System has relevant social functions to perform in the social existence of any community. According to researchers with functionalist orientation, the Age Grade system performs a socialization function which is very important for the promotion of the cultural heritage of the society. This view was upheld



by Granstad, hence he said, through this system each Age Grade leaves and acquires the social heritage from the Age Grad higher than it and from the community.

If one on looks into various views held by these authors, one would believe that the Age Grade Organization is an instrument of social development of any society. Age Grades always engage in many projects like building of schools, civic centres and providing aids to the less privilege's ones. For instance, the Age Grade has built school, churches, and markets for their community such as in Nkwesi, Oguta L.G.A, Imo State.

Furthermore, the Age Grade help in the preservation of the customs of the community, and serve as an effective institution for social control in the society. Those Age Grade choose their leaders and made rules and regulations for their guidance. Infact, every member of the society is expected to conform these rules and regulations.

Age Grade also provide security, for example when there is occasions, the senior Age Grade's function is to prevent the situation by bringing the matter effectively under control. In this way, they organize themselves on how they will be guarding the village both in the day and at night time. More so, each age grade is expected to buy a dog that will help in warding off wild animals.

Age Grade further contributes in the maintenance of order and enforcement of judicial decisions in some communities. In this way, Age Grades form a centrifugal force for communal cohesion, social solidarity and traditional stability. They create incentives for social dynamics and humanism. They leave some legacy which their children unborn will copy and make their own input. Thus, progress continues from generation to generation and no group would allow itself to be instrumental to any setback or any inglorious legacy.

4.3. Age Grade System as Agent of Development

Following the change in political, social and economic structures of the society and the inability of the local and state government to carry out their duties and policy of community



development to the grassroot, the various institutions in various community has to be mobilized to meet the political, social and economic needs and aspirations of the people. Thus, the role of Age Grade has taken drastic and radical dimension. Emphasis has been shifted from the traditional defence system and sanitary role to more complex role of providing essential role of providing essential amenities for the well-being of the society.

Due to neglect and lack of government presence in the rural communities in terms of providing social amenities such as health facilities, good water, electricity, education, one can appreciate any local arrangements by the sons and daughters of the community to provide for themselves these basic amenities that are lacking. To this end, Age Grade in Igbo communities are to widened their horizons and diversified their orientation to meet up with those rapid changes in the society.

5.0. Conclusion and Recommendation

5.1. Conclusion

The Age Grade undoubtedly constitutes a very vital feature of the traditional life of Igbo communities. The Age Grade is a particular institution that commands respect and has a resounding, important influence in any area where it exists. As people in different communities decided to organize themselves into Age Grades and age sets, it gives them a sense of belonging. This paper has shown that the Age Grade have contributed to the unity of Igbo communities and it is one of the convenient ways to accord respect to individuals according to age status irrespective of some one's social and economic status. The Age Grade help to protect the norms and values of the community by exercising some forms of control over their members for the purpose of discipline. The Age Grade and town union can do things in collaboration to ensure that development strides are achieved for the good of the community.



5.2. Recommendation

Government should integrate Age Grade System in their community development projects. Considering their socio-political vote of Age Grade especially in /and dispute resolution, maintenance of law and order, Age Grade should be in corporate into the decision making system of the government, especially the government at the grass root.

Competing Interest

The author had declared that no conflicting interest existed regarding this paper.

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