

The Role of Age Grade in Ogba Land

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Abstract

Age grade has gained prominence in modern Ogba despite the clamour for western life styles which seem to abandon this age old association. The survival of the age grade in contemporary time in Ogba community could be linked to the various roles the association plays among her members and in the community in general. Therefore this paper focuses on the role of age grade in Ogba land. It aims at bringing to limelight the importance of age grade in the life of every Ogba man. In doing so it tabulated some of the achievements of age grade system in Ogba villages. The areas concentrated on include the socio-religious, political, economic and community development roles undertaken by age grade system in Ogba land using the literature approach.

Introduction

In Ogba land (Dike, 2010) if there is any cultural organization that is more prominent, I think it is the age grade. Age grade cut across socio-political and economic life activities of the people. The age grade system assumes the role of a political party, but it is not a party in that sense. Thus it is dynamic and can assume any role in the society. Within the age grade system are the age sets and age grade. The activities of age grade have become so pronounced that it is a worth while discussion in this paper. Johnson (2011) agrees with the view that age grade is an all embracing social culture in every traditional society. Michael (2010) also upheld the view that it is a vital system in the social structure of the society and the way of life of the people. Thus age grade is seen as one of the vital socio-cultural identity of a given people in the society. The Ogba people therefore appreciate the existence of age grade organization as a force to work with. Like other traditional institutions that have suffered the stampede of modernity, age grade system is one of the oldest surviving organization that has passed through the crucible of change phenomena in Ogba land. Writing on traditional change in African religion, Smith (2011) has noted that age grade structures in tribal societies have survived the test of time as a result of their important roles in the society. On same note Wilson (2009) noted that age grade was a factor in moulding the character of the youths in the modern society. It is therefore the aim or the modus operandi of this manuscript to amply examine the age grade organization in Ogba land. The origin of the aforesaid organization, its functions within the jurisdiction of politics, socio-economic and other religio-cultural sphere geared towards the developmental strides in Ogba land will be brought to bear on this research work using literature approach.

The Institution of Age Grade in Ogba Land

Here we are going to examine the origin and the formative point of Age grade in Ogba land.

The Origin of Age Grade Organization in Ogba Land

Age grade in Ogba has its offshoot in the very primordial existence of Ogba land. Akalaka who is the founding ancestor of Ogba land was said to have associated with his friends from Benin Kingdom whom he arrived with in Ogba land (Edwin, 2008). This association was almost an equivalent of the age grade. The experience he got from this association necessitated the establishment of other associations which was later tailored by his successors to age bracket. Therefore to this contemporary period it is true to state that the first type of association enlisted by any born male in Ogba is that type introduced by Akalaka known as Otu that is age grade or an association by people of the same age bracket. This is not to say that enlistment is restricted at the peer or teenager level. An Ogba adult male citizen of the land who have been nonchalant to practising this social culture can still do so as an adult. Nevertheless, at the boyhood level things were done together in hunting, fishing, playing, learning among others with other peers and it always precipitated to an age set with a particular name. The names of age grades in Ogba includes Imere Ogbo, Osukwu Ogbo, Okpurukpu, Awarawa etc. Fundamental to the origin of age grade even at its formative era was the spirit of "Ogbahood" or co-operation and togetherness. Thus they engaged in various co-operative activities such as cleaning the street, cultural promotion, enforcement of the laws of the land (Idume, 2011). In this view the origin of age grade in Ogba land is traceable to the protection of the ethno-cultural values of the land, Ogba welfarism, defense in times of war, mutual assistance in times of unforeseen circumstances and also in joyous moments like marriage, child dedication, burials of a-would be ancestor.

The Formative Point of Age Grade in Ogba Land

The early point in the association of age grade is the formation of age sets. That is those born of the same time usually form an age set (Imeh, 2011). It begins possibly at the age of five or six years. During this stage leadership prowess or some talents begin to manifest evidently in some of the boys. It was reported that the first Ojokar (traditional defense minister) of Ogba land exhibited his war talent during his early age grade association. As the boys grow in age they undergo initiation process known as 'Idumini'. It is an initiation to manhood. A male citizen in Ogba who have not passed through this initiation may be deprived of many cultural rites of the land. Graduates of this initiation proceeds into adulthood and were expected to undertake social responsibilities such as marriage, building of personal houses, contribution of levies, and taking of chieftaincy titles. When anybody is admitted into age grade he is expected to

show seriousness by assuming responsibilities. As from the age of twenty to thirty, age grade begins to take its proper cultural place in the land. As a group that have come of age it begins to shoulder or perform many economic, political and socio-religious roles in the community (Patrick, 2001). We can hardly think of any progressive issue in Ogba land where age grade is not involved. For example, in the month of October, 2011, kidnapping came to its height in Ogba more especially at the Ikiri road linking Ogba and Elele. Most of the age grades and other associations were invited to the palace of Chukwumela Obi II, the Oba of Ogba land to suggest means and ways of stopping the social malady of the period. So far the outcome to the meeting was very progressive. Age grade therefore is a cultural way of life of the Ogbas as every activities revolves round it. A man who does not belong to an age grade has not done well in Ogba's traditional Weltanschauung.

The Role of Age Grade in Ogba Land

At this point let us dwell a little in examining the various social roles that have been played by age grade in Ogba land.

Socio-Religious Role

Age grade system in its social context disseminates egalitarian social principles of life, creating a sense of oneness and brotherhood within the rank and file of age grade members (Ordu, 2011). It is a system that affords an opportunity for mutual social aids. For example, during the death of a member the social effect of age grades manifest more prominently. At this stage, age grade members would rally round the family of the deceased. If the death occurred outside the home base, age grade members see to it that the corpse is preserved and honourably returned home. Furthermore, the age grade would see to it that the fallen member is given a befitting burial, and publicity given to his death. At times if the dead member had no befitting accommodation, members see to it that good accommodation is provided for the family. This concern can continue for the children or wife left behind. It affords a type of social security insurance (Emmanuel, 2009).

Age grade system keeps the community lively with dances and masquerades, especially during what could be regarded as 'national festivals' (Monday, 2007). They take care of the morality of their members by having a number of rules guiding the social conduct of their members. The age grade keeps alive the cultural heritage of the community through participation, identification and association. It defines the social privileges and social activities of members such as war making, ritual and other communal activities (Isaac, 2010).

Socio-Political Role

Age grade system is an agent of inter administration in Ogba land. In some areas where age grade is very effective, they are represented in local governing bodies such as town union and the like. It is a common feature for an age grade to be consulted in matters involving duties in the community. This is true during certain activities like clearing the stream and its path, erecting market shades, rural or village road construction and repairs (James, 2010). In some areas, the executive function of government is the sole duty of the age grades especially those in the advanced age. As every age grade has its constitution, such documents often have the entire community in focus when prepared, since the age grade operates within the society. In some areas age grades play judicial roles. In this context, representatives from each age grade form a committee which co-ordinates activities and settles disputes within age grade group. That is why Anya (2008) argued that:

The age grade system in political deliberations helps the leaders and the people to identify and evaluate budding elites and talented intelligent eloquent speakers.

This assertion only indicate that age grade was a means of identifying talented ones. But in spite of this and the fact that the members of the age grade are political beings in the society, the age grades are not formed primarily for partisan politics. But as people awake in the community, they must dance the tune prevalent in their time. One such tune is politics. So when age grade pull their weights effectively and collectively, they can influence political activities of the town and can reset the hand of the political clock. Often through a type of remote control, age grade control the political activities of their communities. The philosophy behind age grade politics is republicanism. In the republican philosophy of age grade, it becomes part of the decision making process of the communities. Age grade no doubt is a political pressure group especially in deciding who goes for what posts in politics outside or within the communities.

Socio-Economic Role

The economic functions of age grade in Ogba land are very close to the socio-religious roles. And the age grades perform various activities that are of economic interest both for their members and the community at large. They offer economic aid to their members especially at crisis moment in life. Often times, age grades generate economic competition among the members and amongst age grade groups. The age grades do embark on economic ventures for the development of the community.

There is the principle of economic security in a well organized age grade system. At times, they help members to raise money to carry out some projects. It is on record that in some areas members of an age grade have succeeded in

owning permanent residential houses through a system whereby they pay monthly levies. When the levies are collected the whole of it is used in starting a building for a member and then completed.

During weddings, it is the age grade of the members that sees about raising the money for the member if he is not financially able. Age grades that are well organized give loans to their members so that no one is Idle, because the failure of a member of one age grade is a spite on the others.

The Role of Age Grade System in the Development of Ogba Community

So far, the discussion on the age grade has centered so much on the individuals, and groups. But the actual essence of age grade is to be found in its role in the development of the Community, as a process of achieving economic, social and political well being of the community. And it is in this context that age grade is a source of pride and a thing every community desires to have. A community without age grade system should be regarded as a family without youths, and its progress and future are in the dark arena, and only God knows what would happen. In actual fact, the origin of age grade proper should be located in the need for the good of the community. In its rudimentary stage, the age grades emerge to guarantee protection and security of property of the community, nature potential social and political leaders of the community. All these are geared towards the upliftment or development of the community. And often these are things political governance in the traditional setting would aim at for any community (Ejor, 2010).

Since the achievement of independence, the desire to be like others in terms of development has made age grades more meaningful and pragmatic in many Ogba communities. The decline in the economy of the nation and the effect of the Nigeria civil war in the Ogba areas have also heightened the desire for age grades as sources of complementing the efforts of the government.

Some age grades in the remote Ogba now want to transfer the good atmosphere of the urban areas to their village. To achieve such desires, the age grades have become indispensable social, economic and political factors.

In many areas in Ogba land, the age grades in collaboration with other agencies such as town unions and of recent, social clubs, have become sources of development and governance. Today in many towns and communities there are imposing town halls that have the history of their existence traced to the age grades.

In some areas, the only market has its existence connected with one age grade or the other. The quest for water in some communities has become so enervating that age grades have initiated the move to supply water to the town. Some have successfully done so while in some areas, they have set the ball rolling and other agencies have rallied round them to make the dream real. It is true of electricity. There are many communities that have electric light through the

efforts of the age grades. The face of such communities have changed through the activities of the age grade. There are very clear cases of the development successes of communities that hinge on the age grades. Age Grade took it upon itself to complete the first concrete houses in all the villages as comfortable recreation centre for the elders who had retired from active life in the community. They were followed by the Okwa Age Grade which built more sophisticated rest houses with art galleries in various villages in 1958.

Some of the contributions of Age Grade in various Ogba communities could be illustrated below:

S/No	Name of Age Grade	Contributions	Year of Contributions
1.	Dohine	Water supply or the installation of mono pump in Obigwe village	2007
2.	Ekwela	Supply of Electricity in Aga village	1999
3.	Onotu	Build a market in Obaji village	2009
4.	Eluoyibo	Build a rest house for elders	1978
5.	Umuoya	Provided security in Akabuka village	2007
6.	Obakata	Provided security in Idu village	2005
7.	Okwa	Build a rest house for elders	1958

This list however is not complete, but serves as few examples to the developmental efforts of Age grade in various Ogba communities.

Conclusion

Age grade system has survived the crucible of change in contemporary Ogba communities, because of its important roles in the society. Age grade in Ogba land could be seen as way of life among the people, because it encapsulate every socio-political, economic and religious activities of the people. Thus we see age grade as a make up of human limitations, because through it the Ogba people help themselves in times of need and other developmental strides in the community. It is therefore on record that age grade has helped her members to complete their houses, set up businesses among other ventures. The system to that extent has provided many social amenities and infrastructures for the development of Ogba land.

The age grade system is therefore worthy of encouragement, hence we are using this medium to call on government of Nigeria to further ameliorate the system so that age grade institution could contribute more towards the civilization of the society. On same note age grades in other tribes should emulate the good works of age grade system in Ogba land. In doing so we shall all be involved in building a better Nigeria for the future generations.

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