IJAAR PUBLISHING®

Scholarly Journal of Social Sciences Research | ISSN: **2955-0785**
Vol. 2, Issue 3 (March, 2023) | www.ijaar.org/sjssr

THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF AGE GRADE SYSTEM IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN OHAFIA LAND OF ABIA STATE, NIGERIA.

Mba, Ahamefula Uka, PhD
Department of History and International Studies
Hezekiah University Umudi, Nkwerre Imo, Nigeria
E-mail Address: dap@hezekiah.edu.ng or lifters_ent@yahoo.com
Phone Number: +234-8037368441

J.I.D. Anene, PhD
Department of Public Administration
Hezekiah University Umudi Nkwerre Imo State, Nigeria
E-mail Address: j.i.anene@hezekiah.edu.ng
Phone Number: +234-08033390253

Mba, Charity Ahamefula Jolly
Department of Systematic Theology
Hugh Goldie Theological Institute, Arochukwu, Abia State, Nigeria
E-mail Address: ihechilurum85@gmail.com
Phone Number: +234-7037510875

ABSTRACT

In Ohafia land, just like other Cross River Igbo group, age grade formation has been instrumental to socio-political and economic advancement of the people. It is one of the peoples' cultural expressions that has survived the pangs of modernity. In that, it has been a major instrument of socialization in the Community, thus the platform for the promotion of harmonious relationship and development. In that regard, it is not unusual among the people to note that, over 90% of social amenities in Cross River Igbo communities are provided by the age grades. The importance of age grade system in Igbo land has equally conferred on them, the honor and the responsibilities of making laws, enforcing them, as well as securing the Community from both internal and external aggressions. This is apart from their primary objective of the provision of basic amenities. For long, the contributions of the age grade to societal development have been neglected by successive governments in the areas where they are practiced, and this has drawn the attention of this research work. Local government and even the state governments as the second and third tiers of political administration can work more efficiently through collaborative efforts with the age grade institution in promoting social welfare, thereby bring more dividends of democracy to the grassroots. How this could be achieved is the focus of this research.

Keywords: Age Grade, Council of Elders, Projects, Cross River Igbo and Development.

INTRODUCTION

The Igbo Ethnic group in Nigeria is divided into five groups, with variations in language (tongue) and cultural expressions. The Cross River Igbo group in which the Ohafia people belong to, are located in the south eastern portion around the eastern flank of Cross River bank. The group is made up of Ohafia, Edda, Abam, Nkporo, Abiriba, Igberre, Item, Afikpo and Alayi. They constitute a population of over 7 million inhabitants. The major occupations of the people including farming, fishing and trading. In the olden days, people from this area are known to have been great warriors. At a point they have formed an alliance with the Aro traders during the slave trade era and were engaged to secure the trade routes. These groups have some rich cultural heritages in Nigeria, among which include the age grade institution. Though the origin of this culture is unknown, some scholars are of the view that 'the grading of boys and girls, men and women… is as old as Ohafia' Community. Agha in his submission about the origin of age grade asserted, thus, 'the origin of age group in Unwana was simple and dynamic. There were two friends who exchanged visits, assisted each other in farm work, house making, which culminated to the formation cultural bond. This later transformed or metamorphosed into age grade club.

In other words, the bond of love, togetherness, self-help spirit would have presented a very vital scenario necessary for the formation or better still the promotion age grouping. In that respect, age grade has been among the oldest cultural institution that has survived the pangs of modernity introduced by colonialism. It is however unfortunate that, in spite of the huge contributions of the age grade to the cause of Nation building in Nigeria, their inputs are yet to be appreciated. It is therefore on this backdrop that the research work wishes to highlight some achievements of the age grade institution and recommend a collaborative effort from the government toward developing the rural areas. Age grades should therefore not be seen as rivals but partners in progress considering more so toward grass root development.

This research is therefore, focused on the importance of age grade institution among the Cross River Igbo group. The researcher observed that, because it has become a culture, people of this region now view their contributions to the community development as their right to do so. More so, in the clime where government is inept to provide the basic amenities to the people.

THE ORIGIN OF AGE GRADE INSTITUTION IN OHAFIA IGBO OF NIGERIA.

The Igbo Communities who as a matter of fact desperately needed protection for the land acquired, and rivers for fishing must have delegated such responsibilities to some people invariably of the same age bracket. It could be, the idea of grouping could have elicited the foundation for the age grade formation. In Afigbo's account, he opined, thus, 'the Eastern Igbo culture has a strong non-Igbo flavor. These including well developed age grade originated from the non-Igbo speaking within the cross river bank to the migrating Igbo population. Prof Agha U. Agha 'The age group system in Unwana became evidence when the people settled down to build home and communities 'This is a fact, and may hold water because the non-Igbo people that is the cross river Igbo people met on arrival were chased away. According to the Ohafia tradition they were never assimilated as to create room for cultural exchange. This is because cultural exchange and assimilation can only happen when people have socialized over a long period of time. Until recently most cross river Igbo people have been experiencing land disputes. This of course would not promote mutual relationship necessary for cultural exchange. In that respect, cultural exchange and assimilation can only take place with sustained social relationship kept over a long period of time. With regard to this, it is obvious to see that age grade institution originated naturally with the Ohafia people.

Nevertheless, there could be other cultural affinity (cultural borrowing) as a result of sustained peaceful relationship now, but not the age grade system.

The age grade system as constituted in Ohafia land is better organized and more result oriented. The quantum of project executed by age grades in Ohafia land is more pronounced than that of non-Igbo neighbors. In effect, considering the assigned social responsibilities to the age grades among the cross river Igbos, it is obvious, that the age group formation emerged due to the following reasons, thus:

(a) For the protection of the Community from attack.

(b) For weeding and Clearing of the Market square.

(c) For collective farm work.

(d) Building of rest houses.

All these social responsibilities are lacking among the non-Igbo group. Agha again stated, thus, 'the panacea for the formation of age-grade was to encourage socialization. Its origin in Unwana was simple and dynamic. Similarly, age-grade emerged through the following, thus:

(a)Friends who exchanged visits.

(b)Friends who assisted each other in farm.

(c)Assisted in house making.

(d)Helped each other where there was need.

This clearly explained the real motives behind the origin and functionality of age-grade association. Presently, the dynamism of age-grade functions is conspicuous through the following project execution, thus:

(1) Construction of hospital
(2) Building of Schools
(3) Construction of roads
(4) Building of Civic center
(5) Construction of borehole
(6) Installation of Electricity

The provision of such amenities, though required huge financial demands have often been executed by the people who have continued to promote self-help effort.

AGE-GRADE AND SOME NOTEABLE PROJECTS EXECUTED IN OHAFIA LAND.

Research shows that during the early stage of the age grade formation, group social responsibilities are centered on the age grade responsibility to the group. In other words, the major recipient or beneficiary of the age grade projects are members. At the early stage, members organize or take turn to work on members' farm. The age grade could organize collective hunting expeditions, construction of houses, fishing etc., with the money realized from sales, committed to the members need.

In view of Prof O. Njoku, in Ifemesia about the age grade, explained the age grade to be "vital institution among the Igbo for fostering Communal and humane life'. In continuation, he saw the age grade institution as "the matrix of socialization, resource mobilization, self-actualization and community development'. Ikpa in Onwuka Njoku's, concur when he

described age grade institution in Ohafia as "way of life, and as old as the community'. In effect, due to the fact that, social responsibilities are entrusted to the citizenry very early among cross river Igbo group, the formation of age grade starts at the early teens.

In Ohafia land, age grade like in other Igbo people that practice age group social system, age group is usually separated by three years' age gap. Sense of responsibility it elicits meant that groups began to organize very early. In that respect, sense of competition is inculcated to the people very early. The age grade is also made strong because of the honor it carries on successful project execution. Among the people "to be old…is a blessing and it carries great respect and authority'. That is why every age grade looks up with enthusiasm to transform by age into the revered council of elders (Ndi-Ichin). The council of elders are believed to be nearer to the ancestors, thus, growing up to that age, is believed to offer members the opportunity of communing with the ancestor on behalf of the community. This attracts honor and dignity in the community. In Ohafia land, age also counts in sharing of kola nuts, drink and food in public gathering.

Achievements also count. In that regard, an age grade that executes a very important project tends to enjoy more honor than other with smaller project. This applies to individual's contribution to the community development. This account's for 'Nwata kwu aka ye ezoro okenyi rie nri' (If a Child washes his hand he will dine with elders). That is to say, in Ohafia or Igbo culture, individual contributions to the community also count in the people's roll call of honor.

The honor accorded to projects execution by age grade has competition between age grades in Igbo land. In Njoku's account, 'such had evolved group loyalty and solidarity, and at the time inter-personal and inter-age grade rivalry'. Socially, in Ohafia land, the age grade is divided into three stages or groups. These groups include those below 18 years, the adult from 18 years to 60 years and the last group from 60 years and above. At the ages below 18 years the Umurima are not officially recognized and thus, referred mates as ndi wu enyi. From the ages of 18 years, the age grade is recognized and attached to older age grade for mentorship. At this stage too, the age grade has officially acquired the name of older mentor. The feat is usually celebrated. In effect, the new age grade assumes its first name on completion of assigned project by the council of elders or the Ezie-ogo-in-council. The next group after this, extend from 18 years to 60 years. This group "constitutes the most virile, physically able and even impetuous members of the Community'.

In olden days, that character or quality of social services rendered by the age grade depended on the need of the time. For instance, in Igbo communities where age grade association was formed, the 'Uke Umurima' that is those below the age of 18 years, usually sweep the market square and weeds the pathways to the stream. The next to this age grade, that is from 18-60 years. In this group, were selected the Community guards. It was also from this group, that the Community warriors were selected. This group equally contributed for the execution of projects that will benefit the entire Community. Immediately after this group, is the council of Elder (Ndi-Ichin). The age range for this age grade is from 60 years and above. This group is political leaders, who also doubled as judges in the Community. They are equally involved in the enforcement of laws and order. It is also the Council of Elders that assigned younger age grades responsibilities.

Some of the projects assigned by the council of Elders include project with direct impact to the community. Such early projects included, thus:

(a) Make shift bridges.

(b) Construction of culverts.

(c) Opening up of pathways.

Following the arrival of Colonists, age grades were intermittently engaged as head porter ages, in construction of colonial buildings, construction of trunk roads. In effect, the contact with the white people influenced the functions of the age grades in Igbo land. For instance, the introduction of western Education and Christianity aroused the interest of the age grade who started funding the education of the indigent people in the Community. Within that period too, some age grades were assigned the responsibility of building teachers quarters. Others could go on to execute others projects as captured beneath in Amangwu Ohafia Community, thus:

LIST OF SOME AGE GRADES IN AMANGWU OHAFIA.

S/N	NAME OF AGE GRADE	PROJECT EXECUTED	YEAR CELEBRATED IGBA UCHE
1	AZUMINI	PRESENTED LIFE GOAT TO THE COMMUNITY.	1900.
1	IDIMA	CONSTRUCTION OF RAILWAY LINE.	1910.
2	NDIENI	CONSTRUCTION OF RAILWAY LINE.	1914.
3	ADUANU	CLEARED PATHWAYS.	1916.
4	AGENT	CONSTRUCTED LOCAL BRIDGE.	1919.
5	BRITISH	CONSTRUCTION OF FIRST TRUNCK C ROAD.	1924.
6	OKEZIE	CULVERT.	1930.
7	MBAUKWA	LOCAL BRIDGE.	1936.
8	LONDON-ANUMKPU	CULVERT.	1940.
9	LUCKY	ROAD.	1946.
10	ELEHUWA	ROAD.	1950.
11	EMEAGO	ROAD.	1956.
12	ADINTI	ROAD.	1960.
13	NCHINA	SCHOOL STAFF QUARTERS.	1963.
14	OBIMBA	COMMUNITY PRIMARY SCHOOL's HEADMASTER's QUARTER.	1966.
15	ENYIMBA	COMMUNITY PRIMARY SCHOOL's STAFF QUARTERS.	1976.
16	AKAHUWA	SECONDARY SCHOOL 5 ROOMS BLOCK.	1982.
17	ONYIWA	SECONDARY SCHOOL BLOCK.	1988.
18	UGWUMBA	GENERATOR ROOM.	1996.
19	AKAJIAKU	NDI UKE BRIDGE.	2002.
20	IKEMBA	CIVIC CENTER.	2006.
21	UGOMBA	ROAD CONSTRUCTION.	2010.

22	**EKWUEME**	**ROAD CONSTRUCTION/MODERN TOILET.**	**2017.**
23	**IFEMBA**	**ROAD CONSTRUCTION/MODERN TOILET.**	**2021.**
24	**UDOJIMBA**	**ON GOING PROJECTBUILDING OF MODERN TOILET.**	**NOT YET COMPLETED.**
25	**ANAGHAUKA**	**ON GOING PROJECT GRADING OF ROAD.**	**NOT YET COMPLETED.**
26	**IKEJIMBA**	**YET TO BE ASSIGNED PROJECT.**	
27	**IBUZOMBA**	**YET TO BE ASSIGNED PROJECT.**	
28	**IKEJIMBA2**	**YET TO BE ASSIGNED PROJECT.**	
29	**IBUZOMBA2**	**YET TO BE ASSIGNED PROJECT.**	
30	**IKEJIMBA3**	**YET TO BE ASSIGNED PROJECT.**	
31	**IBUZOMBA3**	**YET TO BE ASSIGNED PROJECT.**	
32	**IKEJIMBA4**	**YET TO BE ASSIGNED PROJECT.**	
33	**IBUZOMBA4**	**YET TO BE ASSIGNED PROJECT.**	
34	**IKEJIMBA5**	**YET TO BE ASSIGNED PROJECT.**	

It is also worthy of note that during the colonial era in the early part of 20th century … a number of age grades from their different villages were used at one time or the other for the construction of the rail tracks. 'In the case of Amangwu Ohafia, such Age Grades like Ndeni and Idima were engaged' (Okorie uma page 21).

Similarly, in Unwana Community, a neighboring Cross River Igbo Community to Ohafia, the under listed age grade existed, thus:

LIST OF RECOGNISED AGE GRADES IN UNWANA COMMUNITY IN EBONYI STATE.

S/N	NANE OF AGE GROUP	APPROXIMATE YEAR FORMED	PROJECT
	GERMAN	**1905-1907**	
	AGENT	**1908-1910**	
	OJIMBA	**1911-1913**	
	OCHIEGBE	**1914-1916**	
	EMEKWE	**1917-1919**	
	IKEMBA	**1920-1922**	
	LONDON	**1923-1925**	

	ENYA ANWU	**1926-1929**	
	UGURU	**1930-1934**	
	MBAKWE	**1935-1939**	
	EJIOGO	**1940-1942**	
	NDUAGU	**1943-1946**	
	EKWUEME	**1947-1953**	
	IHIEMBA	**1954-1958**	
	ONYIRIMBA	**1959-1963**	
	UDO BU IKE	**1964-1965**	

From Agha's account on age grade formation in Unwana Community, it seems there is lack of machinery to enforce project allocation and execution as obtainable in Ohafia. In that regard, there is strong attachment to age grade formation, but no incentive to carry out social responsibility. This is a deviation from the Ohafia people, where projects assignment and execution is of paramount importance, before an age grade could celebrate smooth transition to the revered Council of Elders, and thus afford peaceful retirement from communal taxes. In Ohafia, an age grade must complete and hand over assigned project to the Ezie-ogo-in-Council before the next age grade could take up the next project execution. Project execution could linger when the members of an age grade had no strong financial members. It is there not uncommon to see pressure being mounted on weak age grade from those under to hasten up. Such pressure has benefited the Igbo Community more so, where government intervention in the provision of social amenities are slow in coming**.**

THE SOURCES OF INCOME TO THE AGE GRADE IN IGBO COMMUNITIES.

Age grade could raise money through various sources. By engaging on collective form work for payments, age grade could raise money. They could acquire land on lease, farm the land and sale the proceeds to raise money. Members of Age grades pay monthly dues, and also impose fines on defaulters in order to raise money. Some age grades could grant loans with interest to members, and by so doing raise money. The author's age grade used money raised by members to purchase 20 plots of land. The reason being to sell the plots to execute community project when officially assigned. In effect, such investment is meant to relieve members too, from heavy taxes for the sake of executing the project. The idea of investing the age grade money into some businesses is due partly to the cost of project execution. In addition to that, what propels an age grade into aggressive source for fund is bordered on 'healthy competition to demonstrate which age was the strongest or most prosperous' in terms of quality and volume of project executed.

Age grade do give soft loans to members. The money granted as loans are usually generated from the age grade's savings. To members, interest rates are usually low. To a non-member, an age grade member could serve as a guarantor, in addition to granting non-member applicant higher interest rate. An age grade is also known to have floated a transport business, the reason being whatever money raised to be plugged back to the age grade account.

In Igbo land, age grades have rules and regulations guiding them. Offences like incest, fighting between members, and indebtedness to the age grade, abuse of female anatomy, adultery, stealing, and non-participation on age grade assigned duty by any member, all attract fines. This is usually remitted into the age grade account. In olden days, age grade could form dancing group, and were they were usually invited to perform on a special occasion for a fee.

Morally, the age grade institution in Igbo land is seen to have fostered sense of communalism. From the cradle parents are known to have played a very prominent part in bringing Children born within the same age range together. By assigning the responsibility of sweeping the markets square to younger age grade, weeding of pathways to much older age group, security of the community to the youth age and yet to another group the enforcement of law and other, everybody is made responsible in Igbo Society. It is also by manner of project execution that an age grade in known and respected. In other words, for the sake of popularity show, an age grade could accept to execute capital intensive project. Presently, age grade does tarred roads, embark on rural electrification project, the provision of pipe born water, construction of hospitals etc. These supposed to be projects ought to have been executed by the government.

BENEFITS OF AGE GRADE TO IGBO COMMUNITY.

Benefits derivable from the age grade membership are numerous. In other words, age grade formation has been a blessing not only to the members, but also to the Communities in Igbo land where they exist. Mba, aptly captured the importance of age grade to Igbo Society, when he stated, thus, 'one cannot talk about Community development in Ohafia without specific mention of the part our old age grade system play'. Njoku in Uma Eleazu added his voice in affirmation, when he described age grade as 'a basic institutional form as far as the continuity and stability of the social system are concerned'. In Chieka's submission, he maintained that age grade 'also had the additional advantage of providing for the natural, unenforced and uncanvassed emergence of leadership among various groups that made up a community'. Apart from that, age grade is known to have been engaged to settle disputes. They have equally formed the bulk of reserves, when able body men were drawn in olden days to prosecute wars. According to Agha on age grade, he stated, thus, 'they are willing to sacrifice personal satisfactions for the group and the Community at large'. Age grade is also known to have supported sick members financially, and have floated loan schemes to assist the poor in their midst.

Among the Cross River Igbo group where the age grade institution is very strong, the sense of solidarity among age grade is also very strong. Age grade bond in Igbo land is as strong as blood relations. Membership goes beyond mere socialization. Age grade is known also to have 'fostered communal and humane living among the Igbo'. Since age grade usually have leaders appointed by the members have provided a platform for leadership training. Among the Ohafia people much younger age grade often have matrons and patrons whose responsibility, it is to offer leadership guide on societal norms and belief system. The moral training offered by the more advance elders to the age grade has created synergy to morally sound individuals who could be entrusted with the responsibilities of future leaders. Since the age grade is formed with focus on community services, this has elicited competition in nature of project assignment among the age grades. Age grades are known by their names; such names have always served as a tonic to be more committed to community services.

It is therefore not out place to hear age grades bearing such names like 'Omenuko' (Provider in time of difficulties). Akajiaku (The controller of wealth), Ihemba (The light of the community), Ibuzo Mba (The first among Equal) etc. Such names have proved very decisive in projecting the vision and missions of the age grade. The joy of being recognized by the community, is known to have prompted people to join the age grade in Igbo land. Similarly, age grade could enjoy whatever government goodies offer to the community where such is observed. Prominent members of an age grade could assist less privileged members in times of difficulty. Government has often recognized and appreciated the social services, rendered by age grades. This has attracted a kind of recognitions. For instance, during the recent

COVID 19 pandemic, when government distributed palliatives, the age grades were considered first, especially the aged. This was done because government recognized the fact that age grade 'was an association for mutual help and companionship' which is a panacea to peaceful communal life.

The companionship and prompt intervention to members who are in need, are among what have been sustaining the existence of this culture among the Cross River Igbo group where it is practiced. Age grade could redeem from captivity one member or recover the run-away wife of another. Age grade could also bore the financial burden of the burial of dead poor member, and also to take title, especially if there was any political or social issue at stake. Age grade also, 'provides a context in which Ohafia people for instance, put their differing human resources to maximum use'. Since the age grade platform provide the springboard to self-evaluation to progress, and achievements of individual to the community services. It has thus become a norm for anyone born the people of Cross River Igbo to identify with one. Commendation received, with elaborate ceremony accorded to age grade that successfully executed assigned project, is also one of the reasons why people belong to it.

CONCLUSION

Age group Institution among the Cross River Igbo of Nigeria has been instrumental to socio-political and economic development of the region where massive corruption has prevented the government from rendering some basic services which the citizens have inalienable rights to. Age grade intervention to the provisions of these basic needs have become apparent due to the fact, that its formation has elicited competition. This competition has continued to hype the nature and quality of projects execution among the age grades. In olden days an age grade could present a live chicken to the council of elders (Ndi ichin) to signal their retirement to the council of elders, having spent their younger years as warriors.

Presently project execution has marked distinct stages of age grade development. For instance, for an age grade to be officially recognized it must execute a project. This project is specifically for naming ceremony (izara afa or aha). The nature of project assigned by the community to an age grade at this level is less capital intensive. In other words, age grade could be assigned to construct culvert, grading of local roads, provision of certain numbers of electric poles or even drums of electric cables etc. are some of the projects assigned for the sake of naming ceremony.

In Ohafia land a new age grade is officially recognized when the one on top has been retired into the council of elders. At the level of retirement into the council of elders such an age grade must have executed a prominent project. The end of execution of such project, which could be the construction of hospitals, building of civic centers, schools, tarring of roads, building of markets, provision of pipe born water, etc usually attracts elaborate ceremony.

It should however be noted, that an age grade cannot only be retired from the community service on completion of the assigned project, as their wise counsel could be sorted for at all times. In other words, why they may be prevented from paying taxes, they could however offer words of advice to the community when needed.

Considering the services rendered by the age grade institution in the Cross River Igbo, government should consider partnering with the group in other to draw governance to the grass root. In other words, the rural dwellers who are the major beneficiaries of these projects still need government supports. The supports could be in form of engaging Medical personnel who should be employed in the rural hospitals. In addition, the schools built by the age grades should be adequately staffed. In that respect, government on its own owes it as civic

responsibility to augment the age grades contribution by providing electricity. This will arrest rural urban migration.

REFERENCES

Agha U. Agha. *Unwana in Transition The History and Culture of A Cross River Igbo Community.* Nsukka: AL-Vian *Pr*inting Press, 2018, pp.101-102.

Adiele, Afigbo. *An Outline of Igbo History* .Owerri: Rada Publishing Company. 1986, p.12.

Agha, U.Agha. *Unwana in Transition the History and Culture of A Cross River IgboCommunity*.p.22

Njoku, O.N. *Ohafia A Heroic Igbo Society*. Okigwe: Whytem Prints Nigeria. 2000, p.26.

Chieke, Ifemesia. *Traditional Humane Living Among the Igbo An Historical Perspectiv*e. Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers. P.81.

Njoku, O.N. *Ohafia A Heroic Igbo Society*.p.26.

Okorie, Uma Mba. *Evolution of Community Development in Amangwu Ohafia.* Aba: Sornic Graphic Press.2009, p.21.

Agha, U. Agha. *Unwana in Transition the History and Culture of A Cross River Igbo Community*.p.21.

Okorie, U. Mba. *Evolution of Community Development in Amangwu Ohafia*. 2009, p.22.

Uma, Eleazu. *Traditional Institutions and Modernization*.p.56

Agha, U. Agha. *Unwana in Transition the History of A Cross River Igbo Community*.2008, p.106.