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## **The Igbo Age Grade System and African Traditional Religion**

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### **Abstract**

*The Igbo Age Grade System is a social phenomenon which is organized in various places throughout Igboland in order to give men and women common places in various age grade unions. Members discuss matters that are peculiar to themselves and as a result make their situations better. They also improve the environment in which they live by looking after it. They administer it by disciplining erring individuals, contributing towards its development through communal labour, constructing and maintaining roads, building town halls and bridges, providing portable water and among other efforts protect their communities from military attacks or invasions from their neighbouring communities. This paper intends to see how much the African Traditional Religion influences the Igbo Age Grade System. This influence helps a lot to shape the behaviour of the members and streamline them into effective handling of both themselves and their environment. The religion provides them masquerades for portraying their culture and entertaining the public. The aspects of religion are not acceptable to certain Christians and so some members call for eschewing the religion. This problem of disagreement is resolved by the majority decision of the age grade*

## Introduction

Very essential it is for an individual to identify his age mates and live and grow among them. This helps one to know one's age mates. It is by one's age mates that one is graded. By one's age mates, one is not talking of those born on the same day or the same hour. By age mates one has the peer group in mind. One is talking about those that grew up together played together, read together and faced other aspects of life at the same period of time.

The peer groups of different villages come together to form one particular age grade union in one quarter of the town or throughout the town. The formation takes time before it is completed. The selection of members begins the formation, it involves contribution of money for the outing and naming ceremony which brings the formation to an end.

The age grade system is controlled to a large extent by the African Traditional Religion. The gods of the African Traditional Religion act on instant justice. Once one goes contrary to the expectations of the gods, the offender is punished immediately so that others would learn their lessons. So the religion checks the youthful exuberance or excesses of the members of various age grades. This helps to make them behave themselves by respecting the laws of their land. It is by so doing that society becomes a good place to live in. so the importance of African Traditional Religion to the age grade system cannot be over emphasized.

## The Age Grade System

The age grade known as 'ogbo, ebiri or uke' as obtains in different cultural localities of the Igbo land means "one's age mates" Ogbalu (2006:29) observes the same:

All males in the town who have attained manhood (Iwanye akwa) are organized into age grades called various Otu-ogbo, ebiri and uke. Iwanye akwa (literarily putting on the loin cloth itself) is a ceremony marked with an entertainment to indicate that a male has attained manhood and is liable to duties and privileges of full grown up person in the community.

In addition to Ogbalu's idea of the male membership, it is pertinent to point out that women are not left out in the system. in some areas of Igboland like in Idemili Local Government Area of Anambra State, there are women wings of various age grades. The wives of the members of the respective age grades form their own unions and take themselves as being in the respective age grades with their husbands. They greet the same way, by addressing themselves as 'Ogbo anyi' meaning "Our age mate". In some places the male members have their peculiar ways of greeting which they extend to the male children of their members. One of the ways is by striking the back of the right hand palm of one another for three times before closing up in a warm handshake. But in Onitsha, both men and women participate together. They enroll into one union. They have the same uniform, have one ensemble for playing music on various occasions of theirs like the attendance of birthday ceremonies of the children of their members, the marriage ceremonies of the children of their members and the attendance of the funeral ceremonies of their members or those of the parents of their members, among other festivities. Mitchell (1968:3) agrees that the age grade unions are the bases for the growths of adolescents into lives of later ages thus: "Age grades form the structural framework

through which specific age-sets pass through clusters of rights, duties, obligation and privileges are associated with the different statures in the age grade divisions in society”.

The Igbo age grade system is one of the social institutions that contribute immensely towards the coherent administration or governments of the people from time immemorial. It does this by bringing the people and their administrators together and sponsoring some developmental projects.

Nobody today knows how the system came into being because the system is older than all the Igbo people alive today. But speculations have it that a group of people arose in the distant past and organized themselves into an effective pressure group to handle various aspects of society’s problems so well that others emulated them and up till today people of a certain age brackets still choose and organize themselves into an effective pressure group to handle various aspects of society’s problems. They work hard for the progress of society by carrying out developmental projects on the bases of the money they contributed.

One particular age grade starts by the members deciding to come together for they are of age. In addition the community demands that they should start organizing themselves when their immediate senior age grade had been named and started to pay taxes since five years or the likely length of time a particular community allows each age grade to be older than the other. When the time comes, some of the prospective members come together and choose a pattern within the village whose turn it is to provide the venue. When they gather, they admit themselves to form a screening committee that considers who is qualified or not. The members of the committee accept their peer groups and where they are in doubt of one’s age, they call for the birth certificate or the baptism card to enable them ascertain the age. The admissions of members are endless. They admit new members from time to time even when they had done their outing ceremony. The difference is that as time goes on they add to the requirements for the admissions of new members. The requirements are mostly dues and levies already paid by the members. When an age grade has taken a name and done its outing ceremony it begins to add other requirements like wine, tobacco and cigarettes.

The ages of the members of one particular age grade are not the same. They are the people who were born within the age brackets of ten years. Between the ages of the oldest and the youngest, there could be a gap of ten years or more. In some cases, the oldest in an age grade can be older than some members of the immediate senior age grade. Surprisingly somebody can be in an age grade and his elder brother is in a junior age grade to his, probably the elder one did not think about becoming a member and when eventually he became interested he went to the age grade that is junior to his younger brother’s and they admitted him. Ilogu (1984:15) accepts this view and states that the members are those “born within a five years period constitute one age set, such a group is drawn from all lineages (wing within a locality) like a village”.

The members are equal among themselves. Even though some are older than others, they treat themselves as equals. When one claims to be older than the other, he is normally advised to go to an elder age grade otherwise he should behave himself in spite of the age differences. They organize themselves by selecting their leaders who pilot the affairs of the age grade contestants for the office indicated. Officers for whom votes are cast for are

the chairman, the vice chairman, the secretary, the assistant secretary, the financial secretary, the treasurer, and the provost. There are modifications in these posts from one age grade to another. The leadership of one age grade is in consonance with the leadership of the Igbo people which is highly democratic. Basden (1982:32) observes same about the general leadership of the Igbo man with respect to the control of the land jointly owed by a family: “It can be generally accepted, though not without variations, that under native law land cannot be alienated from the family, the head acting as trustee of the property”.

Because of the tendency to quarrel, the age grade system brings discipline to bear on its members by the use of the constitution. The constitution contains various rules and regulations that prohibit the members from indulging in various misconducts like stealing, fighting, taking the wife of a fellow member to bed, rapping, and disobedience to the directives of the executive officers, non-attendance of funeral ceremonies of members or relatives of members. When any member contravenes any of the sections of his age grade’s constitution, the members try him and punish him accordingly. In some cases, the constitution makes a provision for a fine, a suspension, a termination of membership etc, Okafor (1981:48) notes thus:

The age grade also transmits moral values. In societies where the existence of age grades are recognized and valued, members are socialized to value path of hard work and efforts in their performance of duties ... They give helping hands in the execution of community projects such as: building markets, constructing bridges and roads and public building.

When an age grade has organized itself well enough and the members are mature enough to be able to pay taxes, they begin to prepare for the naming ceremony. This is enhanced by the members’ enthusiasm to have their age grade named so that the older ones will stop referring to them as “Ogbọ iruro” meaning the age grade of grass or “ogbo jọtu” that is the age grade of cigarette smokers or still “ogbo akwukwo simentị” which means the age grade of the cement-wrapping paper. One other measure for naming an age grade is its sponsoring age grade that is its immediate senior. It is the town union that regulates when the older one was named and determines when the subsequent one should be christened.

The naming ceremony of an age grade is not a little thing. It is a gigantic project for which the members of the age grade prepare by themselves over a long period. They contribute their funds and save in the bank because of the all-involving ceremony. They make sure they save enough money by being too strict in collecting levies and fines dead on time.

The naming ceremony necessitates an elaborate preparation. This ranges from finding and clearing a venue which could be the village square or a school field where proper arrangements for seats and booths or canopies as obtains these days are made. The age grade buys a lot of food and drinks are made. The age grade buys a lot of food and drinks of different sorts which would be served as the rules and regulations of the naming ceremony demand.

The age grade concerned all over the villages or quarters of the town come together very well in advance to determine the name they will take, The decision on the name is

considered on the bases of various episodes, issues or events in society. The phenomena of the weather or climate at the point in time can contribute. If there is drought at the time they may choose Achagbuna (meaning let lot the sunshine scotch to death); at the end of a war, an age grade may take the name “Ogbanaruruagha” meaning that they survived the war’, the policy of the age grade may contribute to the choice for the one that feels strong can take a name like ‘Otakaagu’ meaning that the age devours like the lion. Beauty can determine the name of an age grade like the one that took ‘Omaumaawa’ meaning those that are so handsome that they put on clothes just for the sake of it. The era of the white man’s culture over African tradition during colonialism made a certain age grade to take the name, ‘Umuoyibo which means the children of the English era.

On the day of the naming ceremony, the concerned age grade provides the venue, the food and drinks for various age grades in its community and reserves a special front position for the sponsoring age grade, that is its immediate senior for which it has to be respectful as a matter of utmost care. The reason is that once they are angry, they would punish them by boycotting the ceremony or fining them various sums of money or materials like cartons of beer or any other thing.

The new age grade that is doing its outing ceremony should entertain each of the older age grades with the stipulated requirements of food, certain cartons of beer, certain crates of soft drinks, a certain amount of tapioca and its sauce and a bottle of spirit. The requirements may change from one age grade to another as well as from place to place.

The sponsoring age grade names the new age grade. This is done by the chairman of the sponsoring age grade pronouncing the chosen name that brings the occasion to an end.

The age grade system is a very good beneficial institution in Igboland. The system contributed a lot to making peace. It settles disputes among its members or between its members and non-members. The system contributes towards the development of various communities. Igbo people feel very marginalized with respect to Federal Government sponsored projects so they levy themselves to provide amenities for their survival. Nwadinigwe (2003:37) is aware of the developmental contributions of age grades to their communities which could come in forms of material and non-material developments:

Most age grades in Igbo land, ever up-to-date, are seen embarking upon the development and upgrading of the infrastructural facilities of the said town. They sometimes call for the abrogation of some obnoxious practices and fight against juvenile delinquencies.

Age grades provide their communities with army they need for their security against attacks from neighbouring communities. The young ages of thirty years and there about constitute themselves into soldiers in the course of fighting inter-community clashes. The soldiers so raised fight with clubs, stones, spears shields and dane guns in defence of their fatherland. The same is the case in East Africa where Mair (1974:71) writes: “Age grade system are characteristics of Eastern Africa, the warriors are mainly responsible for offensive and defensive fighting ..., while the elders are expected to spend much of their time in a discussion of public matters”.

In addition, age grades help in conducting funeral ceremonies of their members and the relatives of their members by digging graves and burying them. They also play music and dance to it with or without masquerades as the occasion demands for masquerades do not attend the burial ceremonies of women. Age grades constitute themselves into a means of social control with regard to their function of bringing discipline to bear on indisciplined members of society. They act as policemen.

The age grade system confers dignity on its members. It makes each of its members to have authority as they stamp their feet on the ground. The advantage is crystal clear when one matches the dignity of a member with that of a non-member. The non-members are so disregarded that they are insulted in the public and are not allowed to air their views. When they have problems for which they lodge complaints to different people to proffer solutions, they are normally asked whether they are members of the age grade system to which they can take their complaints. When one is not a member, disappointments and disregard are written on the face of one's sympathizer.

The age grade system also protects a people or the cross section of a community when the need arises. In the event of one part of a community feeling marginalized, the age grade system can give the oppressed part some protection for it to acquire autonomy where the matter cannot be resolved. Ndulue (1993:76-7) observes that the age grade system protected the Agbaja Quarter of Abatete when that quarter felt marginalized and attempted a session. Abatete is an autonomous community in Anambra State of Nigeria.

Because the disagreement between the leaderships of Abatete Patriotic Union and the Abatete Community Council had come to the open, leading to the dissolution of Abatete Patriotic Union Executive Committee and the formation of a new cultural union, and because the leadership of the dissolved Abatete Patriotic Union Executive Committee was from Agbaja, Agbaja in reaction boycotted. The new cultural union formed a union of Agbaja age grades. The stage was then set for the centrifugal force and deeper crisis which entangled Abatete for almost two decades.

The Agulu People's Union is interested in streamlining various age grades in Agulu into various age grades that would cut across all the village boundaries. By the way, Agulu is a town in Anambra State of Nigeria. Different age grades operate on village levels and are so localized that each of them cannot be interested in pan-Agulu business as one body. This is why they recommended that each age grade registers with the town union for streamlining them into five age grades of the following age sets:

- (a) 18 years - 34 years
- (b) 35 years - 49 years
- (c) 50 years - 64 years
- (d) 65 years - 79 years
- (e) 80 years - and above

(The Constitution of Agulu People's Union p.6)

### **African Traditional Religion**

African Traditional Religion has been the expression of the knowledge of God and the respect Africa has for Him by worshiping Him although the white man did not recognize the religion when he set his foot on the soil of Africa. Today, it has been widely accepted as a means of referring to the God Almighty. This religion is an embodiment of the African culture in the sense that everything African has this religion deeply or profoundly intertwined in it. Ilogu (1985:7) is aware of this when he states thus: “They are very religious people who have not been very easily won over to Islam. Christianity, therefore, is the only higher religion competing with the traditional religion for their allegiance”.

One of the aspects of African culture in which the religion is involved is the Igbo Age Grade System. The Igbo Age Grade System adopts covenant making as a very important issue of its security. This is because the religion with its vengeance and quick reaction has been capable of bringing sanity on the path of the members of age grades.

In various parts of Igboland, the age grade system is referred to as “*ogbo bu iyi*” which literally means that the age grade is a covenant but the real meaning is that the members of one age grade are so bound by the covenant that they are not only one and take care of themselves but would also do not harm one another in any way.

This issue of covenant making is done in order to guarantee safety of the members from various attacks that may emanate from the members themselves. At the young age brackets of twenty or twenty five, the members of one particular age grade organize themselves but they are very likely too young to indulge in various devilish manipulations that would involve the use of charms or any other means of wickedness.

The members of one particular age grade enter into the covenant to prevent evils. They can do this by choosing one potent idol or the other by which they would swear to protect one another. They would swear on various terms of oath like that they would not take away the wife of one another or do anything that would be harmful to one another.

These days, some Christian mentality has been introduced. This has made the covenant to be entered into by the use of the bible or other non-fetish means. This made some Christians to accept the covenant.

But some other Christians, the Pentecostals or the fanatic ones, reject the covenant in its entirety. They state that oath taking is against their faith. They state that the Lord Almighty gave an injunction in the bible that they should not enter into a covenant with their hair or any part of their bodies or swear to an oath but that they should tell the truth wherever they go and that is enough. This does not ensure security. Telling the truth is an answer to all questions of sin but the posture of the Pentecostals does not guarantee honesty.

One other reflection, of the African Traditional Religion in the Igbo Age Grade System is masquerades and masquerading. Some Christians do not take kindly, the provision of masquerades for their age grade dance. Their reason is that masquerades and masquerading will involve the use of charms which is compatible with Christian belief. A lot of them especially traditionally conscious members of the age grade would not accept this for they have been looking towards their age grade’s masquerades. This had brought

quarrels in various age grades and it has made some Christians to denounce their memberships.

The issue of the rejection of aspects of African Tradition Religion is not in doubt because of the conflict of the white man's religion and the tradition of Africa. Hastings (1976:38) observes it thus:

Many missionaries were extremely ignorant of the societies they had come to evangelize with ignorance partly blameworthy, partly next to inevitable. Moreover they came with an almost impregnable confidence in the European West and in all the ways of society and culture which they had taken for granted in their own homes, whether evangelical or catholic.

This conflict of local and foreign religion has caused various disagreements among members. Some have even opted for partial memberships of their age grades. They argue for memberships of their age grades without participating in the masquerading aspect. But those who are interested in masquerading see the suggestion of partial memberships as a diversion from success. They also make the memberships a single type. Those who are not interested in masquerades do not keenly participate in their age grades' dance. Some even insist that the masquerades would not attend their funeral ceremonies.

### **Conclusion**

We have now seen that the age grade system in Igboland is a very important vehicle of the administration of the Igbo culture area. It contributes immensely by disciplining disobedient people and settling cases with the view to providing peaceful environments. It also contributes in various ways towards the development of the Igboland.

It is this all-important cultural institution that African Traditional Religion controls by making the members of various age grades to behave themselves. They behave in accordance with the covenant. Because of the fear of the vengeance of African Traditional Religion nobody enters into a covenant in the tradition of that religion and treats the dictates of his covenant with levity. It is this that checks the excesses of members and so enhances peace and equality that yield love for one another. The advocates of masquerades and masquerading insist that without masquerades the age grade has no instrument of attraction of the public to its activities. In spite of that, it creates the impression of lack of manhood. The age grade that has no masquerades seems a gathering of women who are excluded from masquerades and masquerading.

These days, some age grades have masquerades whereas some do not. The decision for masquerades is made on the basis of the majority vote of the members. In spite of the disagreement over the application of African Traditional Religion, the age grade system improves the lives of people (both the members and non-members) on the one hand and develops their environments on the other hand.

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