CHANGES AND CONTINUITY IN AGE GRADE PRACTICES IN NIGERIA: A STUDY OF THE IGBO TRADITIONAL AND MODERN ADMINISTRATIVE SYSTEM

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Abstract
This study “changes and continuity in age grade practices in Nigeria: A study of the Igbo traditional society and administrative practices was an attempt to find out how social dynamics in age grade system as a result of modernization has resulted in an improved societal transformation especially in Igbo land. This is because, the Igbo accord great recognition and respect to the age grade practices as a vibrant part of the mainstream of the traditional and modern political and administrative institutions. This paper therefore, took an impact assessment of the activities of the age grade in Igbo land and how far it has changed and continued till date. In doing this, the study employed both historical and descriptive analytic methods, wherein data collected through secondary sources were descriptively analyzed. Modernization theory was adopted as the theoretical framework. The study discovered that age grades in Igbo land before now, operated under unwritten constitution, that changes and continuity in the activities of age grades have resulted in positive transformation and civilization in Igbo society and that many age grades still operate primitively without access to appropriate technologies. The study recommended among others, that government should as a matter of necessity ensure that the modus operandi of all age grades or clubs, are constitutionally defined to avoid some primitive, barbaric and harmful practices. All age grades must be duly registered by both the Corporate Affairs Commission (CAC) and Ministry of Local Government and Chieftaincy Matters, adequate technological skills and training for the members of age grades should be encouraged by relevant stakeholders. Also, obnoxious traditional practices/rituals that form part of many age grades initiation processes should be checked and eliminated in accordance with the modern and global best practices.

Keywords: Changes, Continuity, Age Grade, Nigeria, Igbo, Traditional, Modern, Society and Administrative System
Introduction

Age grade is an association of people of equal or about the same age, operating within a given territory or area with the aim of individual, collective and societal transformation/development. The organization, structure and activities of age grade practices in most Igbo communities differ. But mainly, they serve as an organ of development, maintenance of peace, law and order, depending on the community they operate. Over the years, traditional and even contemporary Igbo societies have recognized and respected age grade or group system. This may not be unconnected to their roles in community development. According to Wikipedia (2014) age grade is a form of social organization based on age, within a series of such categories through which individuals pass over the course of their lives. This is to say that, it is people in the same age range. Age grade system is said to be an age long socio-cultural institution in Igbo land, located in the south east of the present day Nigeria. It is one of the oldest institutions used in the administration before the advent of the white missionaries. People of the same age – born same year (grade) or within a two or three year period (group) indentify themselves and come together to form an organization. And because they are about the same age, democracy becomes the order of the day as issues are raised and decisions taken by simple majority.

The age grade in the traditional Igbo society is the most important agent of socialization apart from the family. Each age grade has definite role or roles it performed for them or community. Generally, age grades functioned in relation to service pertaining to security, sanitation and general administration. Each of them is organized under a leader and some other officials and can answer different names depending on the purpose, time or circumstances surrounding its formation. The general activities and forms of the age grades provide the platforms for the training and orientation of young ones especially the males into adulthood and full membership in Igbo society. In some part of Igbo land, it can lead to a form of initiation which is related to maturity to manhood. (Ishichie, 1977).

However, a review of the age grade system in Igbo communities from pre-colonial to the contemporary shows that, it is a vital instrument for fostering unity, good human relation and development among the Igbo. Thus, their roles have shifted from mere social organization to initiating and executing important social and economic projects in the various Igbo towns and villages (Ikwor, 1994). Membership of age grades in many communities is either compulsory or voluntary depending on the goal of formation. So, the extent of change in the structure, organization and formation has always been influenced by emerging globalization and civilization but its role has continued to be a factor of community development. It is therefore against the backdrop of the foregoing realities that his paper was poised to assess the extent of change and continuity in age grade system in Igbo society.

Igbo Society: A Historical Perspective

Although the origin or background of the Igbo has been an issue of serious debates and disagreements, many believe that Igbo originated from the Jews or Israel apparently due to having some similar cultural practices like naming ceremonies and circumcision of the male child after eight (8) days of birth. To Nwankwo (2004), Nri in Anambra state is regarded as the ancestral home of the Igbo. According to him, the Igbo generally had no kings (i.e. Igbo enwe
eze). However, few towns and villages like Onitsha had what looked like a recognized chief. The Igbo which presently occupy the south – eastern Nigeria operated a democratic system of government with the highest democratic institution as the “Oha-na eze (i.e. town/village assembly).

According to Ndoh and Emezi (1997), the Igbos who lives in the forest belt, occupy an area of approximately 15,000 sq miles. They argued that the prominent feature of most Igbo society was thick forest which in their view, serve as a natural defense against invasion from external enemies. It is argued that the Igbo are by nature extremely egalitarian and individualistic. They believe in personal freedom and very strong resentments for autocratic government over them. Most observers believe and agree that the village was the centum (i.e. centre) of political, economic and social life for the principal institutions – the council of elders and the village assembly of which every grown up male was a member. The council of elders was responsible for issues affecting tradition, custom and ritual, while essential matters of policy affecting the life of the villagers were decided by the village assembly.

Another important feature of the Igbo political system was the existence of age – grades. The age grades possessed an influence over their members. The initiate and enforce laws which are binding on their members (Ndoh and Emezie, 1997). The Igbo are classified as stateless or acephalous (segmentary) society because there is diffusion of powers among different groups or persons. The Igbo as ethnic group has no centralized traditional political system, rather they had separate independent governmental system (egalitarianism), which varied from one group to another but of the same pattern of governance. Others also see the Igbo as operating and practicing open (representative) government otherwise called gerontocracy. In fact, there is an agreement among some scholars on the general view of the Igbo life that is highly egalitarian, relatively classless, democratic and based on decision making through the openly arrival at consensus of persons (Okpata, 2003).

**Political Administration**

The basic political unit in Igbo land was the Umunna, which comprised a group of families that trace their decent to a common ancestor. While the highest platform for political decisions and actions in the village or town assembly comprised of the paramount king or rulers; the council of elders and the age grades (Afigbo, 1980). All adult male attend and participate in the meeting of the village assembly. In such meetings, titled elders or paramount chiefs presided over affairs, deliberated over issues and announce the final decisions which quite often won the approval of the people or the whole assembly and vice-versa. Therefore from the political point of view, the village assembly was the largest unit of government in Igbo land where controversial issue had place for public deliberations. Consequently, the second highest political unit was the council of elders that normally comprised the first sons (Okparas) from different families (kindred). As heads of their respective families, the Okparas are the elders and direct descendants that could trace the lineage of their various kindred, (Ndoh and Emezi, 1997). They were in charge of the sacred symbol of Ofo. They were expected to live by the truth hence they were in charge of Ofo believed to have been set aside by God, as symbol of truth. It was because
of the roles the eldest sons (Okparas) play in family or kindred relationship that made some people refer the Igbo traditional political system as gerontocratic.

**Judicial Administration**

The council of elders made up of the eldest sons from different families, settle disputes between and amongst their families and within families levels. They also handled major disputes as a council. However final adjudication of cases was especially the earth goddess play great role in judicial functions. The age grades settle minor disputes among themselves. The traditional Igbo political system relied much on oracles, which provided spiritual satisfaction and played vital roles in political and socio-economic activities. They were usually consulted before major military expedition were undertaken to provide verdict for disputes (Afigbo, 1981). There were also titled men who were not necessarily elders and whose position were not inherited but contributed to social order within the societies they existed. Members of such titled holders were also disciplined through sanctions, (Ezenwaji, 2002). They had chief priest who performed sacrifices to appease the gods seasonally, thus the Igbo respected deities and departed ancestors. The chief priests or the eldest sons sometimes were the link between the living and the deities or dead ancestors. Therefore profaning of deities was viewed as a serious offence among the pre-colonial Igbo (Okpata, 2003).

**Historical Perspectives of Age Grade practices in Nigeria: A Discourse**

The organization and structure of age grade system in traditional Igbo societies where it operates differ from society to society. In sociology and Anthropology literature “age grade” or “age-set” is usually referred to as peer group. It begins, in these societies, with informal peer alliance formation of children born within a time bracket. It was this age group of childhood adolescence that graduated into adulthood. In most communities where age grade operates, their functions and reasons for their formations are clearly established. They performed several important social functions in their various communities and even at individual levels. They operate as an organ of development, maintenance of peace, law and order. Forded and Jones (2005:15) assert that:

*They helped in community development and in the welfare of their members, for instance, in clearing paths, cutting forests, acting as market police and guarding in settlement in time of war, and in providing mutual help and exercising discipline over their own members who had misbehaved.*

Fafunwa (2004) on this noted that they were also used for educational purposes, citizenship training in general or for purely political activities. Moreover, the age grades sometimes levied themselves to raise money for some important community project, acting as village police and executive agents for the supreme governing body of the town or the village – the town or union – enforcing penalties and collecting fines imposed on individuals or sections of the community by the union. As the younger male sets helped in those simple functions like sweeping the village square regularly, the female ones helped in clearing the market square on market days and the path to the community stream on specific day. It is not unusual to see age grade exercising some influence on their members. They operated under unwritten constitution and bylaws. But in
recent times, they operate under written constitutions that regulate their activities and conduct. For instance, if a member steals, or is found wanting, or in any other anti-social act, he is immediately tried and appropriate penalty is meted out to him. For those who do not belong to any age grade or do not want to belong, sanctions are their penalty. Generally, the roles of age grades in contemporary Igbo society have come in the way of construction of drainage in the community, renovation of schools, building of market stalls, maintenance of the town union secretariats, security, maintenance of law and order, awarding scholarship to indigent brilliant children in the community, attracting development projects from government to their communities and so on.

It should be noted that age grade practice in Nigeria is dated back to the pre-colonial era during which the Igbo adopted it as a political institution in their traditional political administration. Under this system, males within a given age brackets, usually 5 years, for instance, those born from 1860-1865, were grouped under a particular age war duties preparing one term centre for ceremonies. From among members of each age grade, a leader and other officials were elected to handle the affairs of the age grade in line with the traditional practices. In most parts of the country today, age grade practice is still in practice as it has been observed to be an effective mechanism for checkmating social vices and for capacity building at the community level. Even today, the place of age grade system in Nigeria is still being prioritized in the Igbo land though it has been modernized to fit into the modern democratic society.

Consequently, there was no law guiding the appointment of the leaders but it is imperative to note that before one can be assured to be the leader of age grade, such person must be a person of unquestionable character who have distinguished himself in many ways with very sound knowledge of the customs and tradition of the society. Additionally, one with commanding personality, one who is industrious, brave, eloquent, intelligent, affluent and initiative is also acceptable with prior approval of the council of elders.

The age grade in Igbo traditional communities performed social and political functions. Ezenwaji (2002:206) asserts that, these age groupings were indeed:

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\text{A system by which democratic communities cooperated for work and war, government and entertainment in so many ways, age group fostered communalistic and human being, aimed at community acceptance, progress and development.}
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In his contribution, Anyaele (1994:312-313), noted that age grades perform varied but development-oriented functions including: Defending their communities against both internal and extend aggressions, carrying out civil and communal works, performing political duties in maintaining law and order, performing socialization functions, checking wrong use of powers by paramount chiefs and council of elders, execution of policies and decisions made in their communities and performing ceremonial functions during important occasions.

Changes in Society as a Result Of Changes and Continuity in Age Grade

Changes in the society are factors that resulted to changes in age grade system in Igbo society. It is worthy to note that society can be classified according to the circumstances surrounding its existence. Thus, we have traditional, transitional, modern societies and so on.
(Ezenwaji, 2002). It is pertinent to point out that no two societies are alike. The physical and social conditions of these societies are the distinguishing features marking out one society from the other. From the above classes of society, the Igbo society before the advent of colonialism falls under traditional society. Traditional society can be referred to as the first form of organized society that existed. Foundation of this social group was based on blood ties (kinship relation) sharing a special habitant with strong sense of group solidarity, (Ezenwayi, 2002), a contemporary illustration of traditional society is close to traditional rural agricultural life in which social organizations are based on tradition handed down from the past, relationship very informal with little or no innovation and population very homogeneous. In terms of Nigeria historical development, the term “traditional society” is used for the states and empires like Hausa, Bornu, Yoruba, Benin, the city state of Niger Delta and others that existed before the colonization of the country by the British government, (Afigbo, 1981).

As society progresses from traditional to modern, the age grade system in Igbo land also change along side with the changing society. The age grade system historically, lacked access to appropriate technology and consequent limitation on productivity reacted on the economy. Nearly all the members of this society were farmers, fisherman and herdsmen; all faced common problems and performed similar functions, have common perception of their environment, and devoted a high proportion of their resources on agriculture. The members tried to produce nearly everything they needed within the society. In traditional society, age grade existence was often anchored on monarchy where the king was appointed from the founding dynasty (Adanson, 1972). Today, age grade are a more organized, have constitutions, uniforms with most of their names changed to clubs to reflect their mode of operation and purpose of establishment. Their functions have also been extended to meet the demand of the contemporary society. (Nwankwo, 2004).

Modernization: A Theoretical Explanation

This study adopted modernization theory as its framework of analysis. This theory was first used by an 18th century French philosopher, Marquis de Condorcet with the ideas that technological advancements and economic changes can enable changes in moral and cultural values. According to modernization theory, traditional societies will develop as they adopt more modern practices. Modernization itself refers to a model of a progressive transition from a “pre-modern” or “traditional” to a “modern” society. Modernization theory attempts to indentify the social variables like changes and continuation of age grades practices that contribute to social progress and development of societies, and seeks to explain the process of social evolution. Modernization theory not only stresses the process of change, but also the responses to that change. It also looks at internal dynamics while referring to social and cultural structures and the adaptation of new technologies. Be that as it may, modernization theory is apt owing to the fact that, it will encourage new processes and improvement in the age grade system to meet up with the ever changing world. This will enable it to be based as a mechanism for the maintenance of social order and the ways in which primitive societies can move towards joining the global village. The Extent of Changes and Continuity in Contemporary Igbo Society
Youth organization replace the age long age grades practice for instance, in some communities, we have the Amokwo youth forum in Abia state which is sub-graded and organized between the younger age group and the older boys, with the same old responsibility. What has changed is the nomenclature. They still organize communal work; defend the sovereignty of the village and even more. This is because they organize and pursue development projects like bridges, culverts, town halls etc. The age grade system has been modeled to suit the realities of the present age. Masquerading has become ceremonial though the women have not been allowed to participate or go close to the masquerade but the mystery s surrounding it before now has become a thing of the past. For instance, the “Ogboo Obashi” in Ohaukwu community of Ebonyi State, which was enshrined in mystery, rituals and atrocities, in the past, is fast losing its ground to something positive as it is now in video with the help of computer. (Odoemene, 1993). The adherents of Christian religion and even the elites who refuse to do second burial now carryout elaborates social burial to pay the last respect to their parents at the first burial. But, the truth remains that the Igbo have grown beyond their traditional rural life though they still reversed their cultural norms and are good in reflecting on their historical antecedent.

Discussion and Implication of the Study
Apart from the traditional value accorded to age grade in Igbo community, it gives a person a place for adulthood and leadership status in the society. Their contribution to communal development is enormous. In fact, this is the essence of it and of course, its positive results are evidenced in the many self help community project and infrastructures they execute in different community in Igbo land with little or no government efforts. This is so because initiation and completion of projects is a major qualification to celebrate their birthday anniversary. This explains why each village penalizes any age grade that fails to complete its project(s) before the anniversary. It is a standing traditional order in practice even to date. Most of the school buildings, bridges, market/lock up stalls, health centers, etc their roles in contemporary Igbo society include:
- Execution of communal labour
- Enforcement of decision of the community
- Punishment of earring members a role that enhances people code of conduct in the community
- Provision of security as local vigilantes
- Arrangement of venues for communal matters
- Provision of infrastructural facilities through self financing projects
- Assisting of members when and where necessary, especially if invited.
- Being part of the traditional political institutions and so members have access to attend Oha-na-Eze forum of community.

Conclusion
Age grade practices in Igbo society is an age longed practice that has been from generation with slight changes following the transformation in the society which the root cause is the society. In spite of the above, there is also continuity in the age grade practices in Igbo
communities because it is considered as a strong factor and instrument of societal development, defensive body against neighbouring enemies, body used to secure compliance from the members of the society, source of entertainment in the society amongst others. Thus, the study on the age grade practices have brought to fore that no matter the level of societal changes and civilization; age grade practice is a phenomenon that cannot be underrated because of the important role it perform in Igbo society. Despite the changes that have occurred, they still exist.

**Recommendations**

In a bid to strengthen the existence and laudable role played by the age grade in Nigeria Igbo society, the paper therefore recommends the following:

- Government recognition on the existence of age grade considering their role in community development
- Creation/establishment of age grade office at the local government level for effective coordination and registration of members;
- Elimination of any obnoxious traditional norms/rituals that form part of the age grade practice, where such practice exists in contemporary world.
- Inclusion of the officials of the age grade in government pay roll to motivate them.
- Government should as a matter of necessity, ensure that the modus operandi of all age grades or clubs, are constitutionally defined to avoid any unwholesome practice.
- All age grades must be duly registered by both the Corporate Affairs Commission (CAC) and Ministry of Local Government and Chieftaincy Matters to certify their operations within their jurisdictions.

**References**


