

## Age Grade as Traditional Institution and Cursor for Rural Development in Nigeria

**Esekpa, Ofem Ibor**

Department of Public Administration, University of Calabar, Calabar, Nigeria

[Ofem-ibor@yahoo.com](mailto:Ofem-ibor@yahoo.com)

&

**Ufumaka Omaumi Joy-Jio**

Curator Slave History Museum

[joyufumaka@gmail.com](mailto:joyufumaka@gmail.com)

### **Abstract**

*In a traditional institution, Age Grade has witnessed significant level of development in most part of the country. However, the paper examined the significance of age grades and rural development in Nigeria. As a traditional institution, age grade help in improving the dynamics for both socio cultural, sociological and philosophical, by annexing the energies of various peer group and mobilizing them for rural development. The community indications of cultural involvement in rural area usually directs toward developmental ventures such as facilitation of education, employment, poverty reduction, provision of skilled and semi-skilled labour and provision of improved seed lines for agricultural purposes. The paper recommended among others that “As a matter of necessity, government should ensure a modus operandi of all peer groups (age grades) or clubs as constitutional to avoid harmful and barbaric practices while a department of age grade should be established within the third tier of government to encourage communities on rural development.*

**Keywords:** *Traditional institution, Age grade and rural development.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

In a traditional Institution, Age grade played a significant role in rural development which is usually characterized by social group based on perceptibility of traditional progresses. Erim Akpama and Aso (2001) viewed age grade as one of the social peer groups that connotes rural development within Africa. The historical analysis of age grade can be traced back since man’s creation. It is one of the oldest institutions practices as a cultural surviving organization which played a hitherto cultural role for development. The fictionalization of age grade toward social building is high on the developmental participation of the desire citizenry which there is deterioration in both magnitude and quality government.

Ele (2006) sees rural people as those who strictly engage on primary activities such as Agriculture, fishing, hunting and rearing of livestock for man, industry and commercial benefits. However, the rural people, have a vast major population of about seventy percentage (70%) based on socio-economic, political, religion, cultural norms and customs which in turn provides the unskilled and semi-skilled labour to urban areas. The rural people are the major source of formation for the country’s capital and market, for domestic principal feature, for man and it environs. The basic principle attached to age-grade and rural development is enhanced in cultural, economics and traditional polices programmes and Administration which gives rise to infrastructural development in terms of Roads construction/rehabilitation, electricity, pipe-born water, Education, employment opportunity, and industrial development which is centered on poverty.

In Nigeria, the formation of age grade varies from one tribe to the other based on cultural beliefs, custom amongst the peer groups which is seen as a socio structural arrangement held amongst the ancient traditional societies today is regarded as the social bed rock of rural

transformation. In certain village, age grades fall between three-five years while others fall between one to three years and each person is expected to belong to one age grade or the other at a particular time which is traditionally accepted as the basic primary duty. Forded and Jones (2005) stated that, the primary functional role includes community development, provision of welfare services amongst members, community policing, community safe-guiding during war, social control agent, provision of mutual support and forest tree cutting.

In the eastern part of Nigeria, the decentralized system of administration mostly practiced during the pre-colonial era gave an opportunity for communal participation among various institutions such as; age grade, council of elders, chiefs, parental, maternal formatives which aid in administrative system and implementation of major policies and projects such as clearing of foot paths, maintenance of streams, maintenances of government projects (pipe-born-water, electricity, health centers, schools and markets) etc.

Age grade further helps in organizing fund raising activities which is for rural developmental purposes and gives avenues for the payment of levies. Other duties performed includes maintenance of law and order, peace making during crises, decision making, encouragement amongst themselves, such as encouraging educational activities by contributing toward educational project promoting tourism centers, building of market centers, and promotion of transport service through the purchase of buses for transportation purposes.

#### **CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS:**

Various approaches, conceptually have being used for various connotation by various scholars. They include:

**Age Grade:** Age grade composed of social structure of any given community or village is aimed at development. It can be seen as an association of folk who are born within a birth range/bracket usually one to five years. It can also be defined as a socio-peer group made up of males and females born within a given age bracket who have a common goal or objective and operate within a set belief and customary rule. Onor (1994) defined age grade as a social institution comprising males and females born between two to three years of the same period. This implies in most communities or villages, individuals or group of individuals can belong to the same age grade within the age bracket of three, four and five years.

Wikipedia (2014) defined age grade as a form of social institutional organization based on age, within a series of such categories through which an individual or group of individual pass out the course lives (this implies same age grade). Erimet al, (2011), Okpa el at (2018) defined age grades as a traditional institution constituted by an essential system in which the social structures of Nigeria” society develop. It can also be seen as an association of people who were born within a period of time whose work is centered on attainment of goal and setting of values which regulate their conducts.

**RURAL DEVELOPMENT:** Following the conceptual understanding of the term rural development as part of developmental effort that is aimed at improving the life quality of rural dwellers through the provision of essential services such as pipe-born water, Roads, electricity, education, skills and unskilled technology. Basically, rural development can be defined according to Wzeath (2015) as a process which involves the total reduction of poverty and improvement on the life quality of rural people.

Olayiwok and Adeleye (2005) sees rural development as an essential facilities grouped into three, namely (i) Basic infrastructure which includes roads, pipe borne water, electricity, warehousing and processing equipment etc. (2) social facilities, providing facilities to include educational, health, fire, security services community development centres and small scale

industries (3) Basic institutional facilities which deals with research institutes, credit and financial institutes, and Agricultural facilities.

### **TRADITIONAL INSTITUTIONS**

Traditional institution can be viewed as a paramount institution or Natural institution which is ruled by beliefs and norms of a giving community or village. It provides a basic system of leadership from which law, order and culture originated from, to ensure a stable day to day governance. The significant role within a given institution gives way for a large degree of command, respect and loyalty among them.

Orji, & Olali (2010) defined Traditional Institution as a cultural arrangement where by leaders with track record proven are installed in line with the provision of their laws, norms, belief and customs. The purpose of the institution traditionally is to maintain and preserve the cultural frangible and unfrangible Norms of the people and conflict management amongst two or more people in a particular location.

Traditional institutions can also be viewed as the custodian institution of the people's customs, norms and beliefs practices, it is a symbol of native indigenous people's rights, traditions; laws, privileges and custom which include chiefs in council, elders, title holders, age grades, appointed based on their contribution to growth and development of various communities with fusion of powers between, the legislative, executive and judiciary.

Age grade contributes to rural development mostly in Nigeria, this is based on the effort of other partners of development carried out within the peer groups such as leadership roles, donations, security, moral checks on members and recreational centres in rural areas. Age grade is generally associated with communal works such as stone gathering, sites clearing, foundation digging, creation of job opportunities and literacy enhancement where community projects are to be executed.

### **THE SIGNIFICANT ROLE OF AGE GRADE ASSOCIATIONS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL COMMUNITIES IN NIGERIA**

The significant role of Age grade toward rural development according to Adam (1983) is tailored on the "social process" which entails a means by which people through age grade action become competent to control their various resources. In most communities, the coming together of various peer groups to cater for some of the socio-cultural and economic needs of the community and traditional setting, is purely based on voluntary effort of various associations without a clear-cut of government.

Ijere (1978) believes that traditional institutions were not abused since they habited self-help. Age grade is aimed at understanding the basic economic and social problem of the community. It is a process of identifying and solving of a particular problem. Hope (1980) added that, efforts and resources are derived from the government and non-governmental organizations for efficient and purposive change. Some of the major problem encountered by the rural people include poor health, poverty, malnutrition, low Agricultural activities, farm implement, poor housing, illiteracy and poor social Amenities. Rural people are dependent either directly or indirectly on the exploitation of soil for their Livelihood. U.K.M.O.D. (1970) further stated that, they engage in Agricultural activities such as forestry, commerce, fishing, rural industries and handicraft, trade and other related production.

**1. Co-operation:** The sociological norms of age grade are entails toward cooperation among its members which is pre-dominantly carried out amongst the peer group to give the general "prominence" to the general members of the association with a focus of coming together among the

peer group. Ordr (2011) stated that, the association is structured with the aim of providing welfare support amongst members who lose their member through death.

Another aspect of co-operation connotes “entertainment” which is carried out by most age grade mate thereby keeping the community lively such as masquerades and dance during festivals, coronations and morality upheld amongst members by enhancing roles and regulations that guides the conduct of the association. Mostly the Age grade upheld the cultural heritage (frangible and non-trangible) of the community through cultural participation, association and identification of members in terms of ritual activities, community activities and outbreak of war.

**2. Administration:** In most communities, administrative duties are mostly carried out within the members of the age grade based on representation within and outside of the community. This can be observed during erecting market shades, clearing roads, parks and streams. The executive arm of government is headed and carried out among the peer group association mostly those in advanced aged year. Rules and regulations are usually guided by the age grade’s (constitution) as a document which the whole community focuses on as activities that are prepared and revolved within the community.

**3. Judiciary Activities:** Itsoya (2016) Believes that most of the judiciary activities are carried out within the peer group association such as settlement of disputes based on criminal activities. This is done effectively by the age grade representatives. Anya (2008) further added that the political deliberation imbued by age grade gave opportunity for the association to evaluate and identified budding Elites and eloquent intelligent speaking to linked persons. Age grade basically, is seen as a political, cultural and economical source of strength for development of rural areas. Age grade also determines who goes for what post in politics within and outside the community, it also helps in decision making within the community.

**4. It renders Assistance:** The Basic task performed by Age grade gives opportunity for rendering assistance to both their affiliates and the community as a whole. During hardship, assistance is given in form of donations, either cash or land to the member. In terms of development most of the Age grade encouraged the establishment of commercial venture (business) activities to foster the development of the community. According to HSOYA (2016) it was observed that, during marriage ceremony, age grade raise money for its members if he or she is not financially stable. It also helps in loaning money to it members.

**5. Security:** The day-to-day activities of security mostly within rural areas is carried out amongst the different age grades. By cultural law, rural areas are divided mostly, based on lineage, age, pattern with tasks attributed to the overall sustainability of the community conformational rules and regulation governing the entire village. Okafor (2007) stated that in a traditional institution security maintenance, law enforcement is the duty of the age grade which is seen as a practical deity with virtually office holders, ethics, values and moral. Age grades are made of people who share common beliefs, ideology, with activities aim at achieving a common goal or objective for the benefit of the community. The traditional beliefs shared amongst age mates centered on individuals’ recognition and procedures which helps to co-ordinate behaviours in rural areas.

**6. Self-help Assurance:** Most individual within a particular age grade rendered a self-help assistance in their rural community, this is done either in kind or in cash. This is based on enthusiasm from individual or group of individuals in particular. Some major or minor projects

executed upon is based on consensus with an aspiration of all classes of the society. However, self-help assistance has produced its importance as an easy, all on board and result oriented manner to a cooperative mode of translating board room, ideals to meaningful development, novel principle into standard intervention method in a financial development.

The development association in most of the various communities have both democratic and cultural structures with an executive board that work together with most committees and sub-committees depending on the nature of the project embarked upon, for example age grades organize, cultural inclusiveness, fund raising, grant, traditional dishes, Arts-exhibition and dances.

1979 UN food and Agricultural Organization lay emphasizes on individual or group of individuals participating in various institution or system which govern their lives as a basic human right, essential for realignment of political power in favour of disadvantaged group for socio-cultural, economic and political growth. The disillusionment and development strategies enhance most community to become critical to the development of some community through popular support and local action. Behind the concern, Cohen and Uphoft (1980) believes that, group or individual participation grew out of disillusionment with various institution to develop, buttressed by diffuse democratic and liberal institution. Furthermore, self-help assistance entails the total involvement of people or group of people in decision making, implementation and evaluation of projects. This includes secured participation, and germinates. The problem likely occurs as people do not have good knowledge as regards to their problems and this equate the objective risk being jeopardized due to ignorance, beliefs and norms.

#### **FORMS OF TRADITIONAL INSTITUTIONS IN NIGERIA**

Traditional institutions operate in the different forms, according to Emmanuel and Boypa (2011) cited in Weber (1964) they include:

- (i) Gerontocracy Tradition: This traditional institution involves the “Elders”. The Elders are seen and believed to be the knowledge reservoirs, full of wisdom and experience. The grey hair in their head is seen as a symbol of maturity, old age and the ability to direct, control and guides the younger generation on how decision should be made and carried out for the development of rural communities or villages.
- (ii) Patrimonial traditional institution: This entails “Traditional Domination” is a traditional institution embodied by administration and a military force which are personal machinery for the master. Examples include the Oyo Empire during and before colonial era. The traditional pattern of domination declined during colonial era, Lagos, Ekiti, Ondo, Osun and Ogun that welded greater authority.
- (iii) Patriarchal Traditional Institutions: This is based on “inheritance” This involves leaders who inherit their position of authority. Example are Obi of Onisha, Obong of Calabar, Oni of Ife, Sultan of Sokoto, Shehu of Borno etc. their Origin can be traced to a male portative ancestor who are the original founder of various clans and dynasty establishers. In the South East of Nigeria (Igbos), the traditional institution is not inherited but roundly achieved and rule rotationally. One is expected to win base on contented keenly election passed on the throne to his son unless being found unsuitable to bequeath the throne.
- (iv) Feudal Traditional Institution: This is a “modern traditional authority” which is base on the limit of the master through the development of more reutilized, contractual even relationship between sub-ordinate and superior. In Europe, during the middle age, people received land and protection from the land owners and worked and fought for him in return. In Nigeria, mostly in the Northern and the Southern part of Nigeria, tenants are treated as feudal (Hornby, 1989).

Bloom and Offong (1987) observed that, “In Africa Traditional Institution is still powerful although younger and more elites and educated men and women are willing to challenge the past, much social and political action is still influenced by the traditional defence of young people to elders, of females to male and of those without title to those with them. An interesting Example of the use of traditional institution is the device of indirect rule. In the past, chiefs, Obas and Emirs have salaried agent of government”.

Furthermore, efficiency, high level of calculability, legal authority and modern administrative system of government and other associated kinds of administrative task rules as a form of revolutionary form of government which gives rise to cultural, political, environmental and financial institution which temporarily succor as a force of authority which enhanced political stability, loyalty to constituted authority, transparency, accountability and welfare citizenry in a rural area

### **Conclusion**

The paper examined the significant of age grade and rural development in a tradition institution. Age is seen as a socio-cultural deterioration society which provides security, welfare services, communal policing, mutual support, socio-economic strength of customs and tradition, entrenched institution as a unifying belief and a source of entertainment and societal development. Age grade enhances primary activities such as animal rearing, subsistence farming, hunting, Agricultural activities and fishing.

Despite the above, Age grade has failed to address the problem of environmental degradation, infrastructural development, poverty eradication insecurity, unemployment and disease. Other socio-cultural problems include insurgency, kidnapping and social infrastructural development like water, electricity, education, industries and sufficient written documents.

### **Recommendations**

The laudable role played by various age grade in a traditional institution has been the foundation of strength for development of rural area; in a bid to strengthen them, the paper therefore recommends the following.

- ❖ A department of age grade should be created or established at the third tier of government (local government councils).
- ❖ Traditional norm or ritual which are Obnoxious should be eliminated within the traditional institutions, age brackets or peer groups such practices should exist in our temporary world.
- ❖ Government pay roll should include age grade as a way of encouraging traditional development.
- ❖ Government should encourage age grade registration by both Nigeria corporate Affairs commission (CAC) and ministry of Local Government and chieftaincy Affairs at the Local Government Area.
- ❖ Financial assistance should be encouraged by both Government and international donor agencies as a means of supporting age grade association for community development to better the lots of rural dwellers and other traditional institution.
- ❖ As a matter of necessity, government should encourage modus operandi amongst peer groups or clubs that are officially established as a means of promoting rural development in order to avoid unwholesomeness.
- ❖ Cultural policy of government should be reviewed to back up age grades traditional institutions so as to enhance socio-cultural and economic activities of rural people.

- ❖ Local security and regulatory bodies should be trained and strengthened to work with traditional institutions to avoid abuses by some overzealous individual or group of individuals that may take laws into their hands in the process of discharging their duties.

## REFERENCES

- Adeyemi, S. (2015). Age Grade System and the Politics Of Development and Social Cohesion in Ikoroduland. *International Journal of Research in Economics and Social Science*.
- Cohem, M & Uphoff, N. (1980) Participation Place in Rural Development; seeking clarity through specificity, *Word Development P(3)*; 213-350.
- Emmanuel, C. and Boypa O. E. (2001). *“The Sociology of Traditional and Modern Political Administration system and some contentious issues in contemporary Nigeria*. Published in Calabar by Emmadex Venture, Nigeria.
- Ezenwaji I. J. (2002). *Traditional Administrative System in Nigeria*; A study of selected Nigerian Societies, Enugu: Institute for Development Studies, University of Nigeria.
- Food and Agricultural Organization (1979). *Report, World Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development* FAO, Rome 12-20.
- Georgewill, N. K. (2003). *An Analysis Of Rural Development Policy Ensures in Nigeria*. A Case Study of Abia State, Unpublished M.SC. Thesis Department of Economics University of Port-Harcourt.
- Ihsoya, E. R. (2016). *Age Grade Association and Socio-Economic Development of the Northern Senatorial District People of Edo-State, Nigeria*. An unpublished thesis of the department of sociology, university of Calabar.
- Imaga, E. U. L. (2001). *Element of management and cultural in Organizational Behaviour*; published in Enugu Rhyce Icerex, Nigeria.
- Iroh, W. (2015). Age Grade System and Community Development in Ohafia Local Government Area ,Nigeria Unpublished Thesis.
- Ndukwe, C. (2015). Changes and Continuity in Age Grade Practices in Nigeria; A Studies of Igbo Traditional and Modern Administration System. *Journal Of Policy and Development Studies*, Vol.9,No 3.
- Offiong D. (1989). *Continuity and Change in some traditional societies of Nigeria* (Zaria; ABU Press Ltd).
- Olayiwola, L and Adeleye, O. (2009) *“Rural Infrastructure Development in Nigeria”*. Between 1960-1970 problems and challenges.
- Ordu, W. N. (2011). *The Application of brotherhood in Ahoada Religion* Clean Publisher, Port Harcourt.
- Ovji, K. E. & Olali, S. T. (2010). *Traditional Institutions and their Dwindling Roles in contemporary Nigeria*. The River State Example. In T, Babawale, A. Aloa & B. Adesoji (eds) Chieftaincy Institution in Nigeria, Lagos; Concept Publication Ltd.
- Pelume, J. & Nnanemerem P. O. (2019). *“Muih-Disciplinary Journal of Research and Development Perspective*, 268 Volume 8, number 1, June, 2019 (ISSN 2315-9936/ Publish in Calabar, University of Calabar-Calabar Nigeria.
- United National Organization (1956). *Twentieth Report of Administration Committee on Co-ordination to Economic and Social Council*, 24 session, Annex II, Document E/2931
- Weber, Max (1964). *The theory of Social and Economic Organization*, New York; the Free Press.
- Wikipedia the free Encyclopedia Meaning of Age Grade. Retrieved 4<sup>th</sup> June 2014.