
**AGE GRADE SYSTEM AND THE POLITICS OF DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIAL
COHESION IN IKORODULAND**

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Abstract

Age grade system is both sociological and philosophical in contents and dimension. It is a system of social cohesion directed at annexing the energies of the different age groups and mobilizes them for development objectives and social harmony of the community. This system is common in African traditional societies. For instance, the Zulu kingdom, the Bantus, the Khoisans, the Igbos in the eastern part of Nigeria and the Yorubas in the south west greatly priced this system. This paper examines the importance of this system within the context of development and social cohesion in a fast flourishing community of Ikoroduland. This system of mobilizing citizenry at different age levels for community development is common among among the Yoruba communities of Ijebu and Remo origins. This work examines how this system has impacted positively on Ikorodu. This research however discovered that modernization and primordial sentiments places certain constraints on its effectiveness in contemporary times but this have not diminished its importance. Therefore, we conclude that it is a system that has continued to negotiate peace, development, harmony and development of Ikoroduland. This work benefitted from a deposit of oral tradition.

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Introduction

Sociologically, it is a social system in which age groups are identified with names and roles. Age group system is not peculiar to Ikoroduland. An individual moves through different social age status and roles as they aged. Historical works on this system appears replete with how it is being practiced through orderly structures in African Empires and kingdoms (Rusfell, 1971:82). The Bantu experience is a ready example but the political and developmental importance of this system in re-ordering growth and development processes have not really been excavated besides the little works that are available. (Keith 1990:17), Bathlomew 1995:18), Yameh, 2002:188), (Akhan, 2009:10). The scholars above studied different societies with passive references to its political and development importance. This must have partly been necessitated by the anthropological bases of most of these works. This work intends to examine the use of this system to propel development and social cohesion in Ikoroduland, a Yoruba community in the south-west of Nigeria. The age grade system in "Oraifite" in Igboland, the "Ariba" experience in Urhoboland demonstrate, in part, the importance and continuous relevance of this system just as it also appears in the work on "Ijebu" and "Remo" lands in the south-west of Nigeria. (Adenekan, 2008:19)

Conceptually, the system attracted debates particularly on the pattern, procedures and mechanisms for grading. For instance, David (1999:17) picked holes in the problems of attempting a generalized pattern of grading mechanisms. Bishop (2007:21) argues with conviction that the world standard for grading explains its functionality. Whatever the arguments were, a careful study of the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial Yoruba communities – Ijebuland, Remoland and particularly the Ikoroduland took no cognizance of the world standard for grading but rather, its domestic adaptability. This explains the uniqueness and responsiveness of the system to the individual society's needs and vision of the system. In Ikoroduland, a social category of people are those born during certain seasons, important social dates of events or particular period. For instance, "Bobadoye" group emerged at the installation of the present monarch in Ikoroduland, Oba Oyefusi. All the works above identifies that is a system of social development mechanism that remains useful to the transforming traditional communities where the system exists.

This work is divided into four parts. The first part is the introduction while the second aspect examines the age grade system by comparatively looking at Ikorodu and two other communities. The third aspect on the case study – Ikorodu, the fourth aspect is the conclusion and the last aspect of this work contains the bibliography.

The Age Grade System and Its Politics

Age grade system articulates the assemblage of people or citizens of a community into age groups for social participation in developmental processes and for the articulation of brotherhood and identity (Raymond 2006:223). In some community like the Bantus in South Africa, it includes the grading for passage into adulthood (Brettold, 1989:14). Thus, boys and girls are grouped for social developmental importance. process underscores the vision for continuity and sustenance of communities.

In Bantuland, this method assists greatly in the creation and maintenance of warriors for the community. In 'Yorubaland' however, for instant, in 'Remoland', while the need for identity and social participation in social function and articulation of developmental needs and efforts annexation amplifies the relevance and continuity of the age grade system, there

is no credible evidence that the need for territorial protection played any role. This is also evident in the application of the age grade system for social development in Ikoroduland.

Fatunbi (2008) who wrote on the social impact of the Age Grade System in "Ilisan Remo" in Remoland was very vivid on the issue of identity and its contribution to development. Sekoni (2007:41) had argued that generally, each community in Yorubaland knows the uses and purposes of the system.

The basic arguments here are that, general theoretical application is unnecessary and secondly, the uses and relevance of this system in the different social milieu in which the practice exists provide the basic context for the examination of its importance and sociological relevance. If its relevance are vivid, then its politics underscores its channels of societal cohesion, brotherhood feelings and its development variables.

The groupings ensure the existence of distinct social units for the delivery of social value for organic social development. The yearly celebration of traditional festivals and the distinct articulation of presence by the different groups paying homage to the king (monarch) and promises of what each group would do for the society before the next age group festival year underlines the competitive relationship between the age grade system, the groups and the society. This therefore helps in so many ways to unearth the philosophical principles underpinning the age grade system – a system articulated for development and stability. The monarch, at times, would present to the groups the needs of the society and the groups in return make promises deliverable before the next festival. This is an alternative politics for societal unity, cohesion and development. No wonder communities where it exists continue to protect and use same to negotiate sustenance, development and politics of identity.

IKORODU: THE AGE GRADE SYSTEM, DEVELOPMENT AND POLITICS OF IDENTITY

Like other Remo kingdoms, the Ikorodus also practice and celebrate the age grade system. In Ikoroduland, the stratification is done in a way that allows for graduation from one age grade position to another. This allows for the maintenance of names associated with the grade groups and also for the determination of social age mates, categories and responsibilities associated with the groups.

Traditionally, in Ikoroduland, the articulation of the grading system begins by bringing together those that are born for five seasons of Eluku festival. By this, a grade consists of those born between five years. The age groups between five to twenty years. This space consists of three groups which are considered to be the grooming periods. They are well protected and their needs attended to because they are considered to be the future of the community.

These groups buy and wear same clothes, dance and celebrate at every annual traditional festivals and particularly the annual age grade festival called "Odun Egbe." Translated as "the festival of the age groups" They are often less conspicuous beside the beauty of their apparels and age. This is the beginning of social integration into the mainstream functional responsibilities for the maintenance of the social system, contribution to the development of the society, respect for common history, common identity and institutionalization of the pride of egalitarian consciousness. The social nexus between the age grade as a social unit

and the community appears rather interesting. This unit sees the maintenance, functionality and continuity of this system as a must (Ikorodu Oga, 2006). Thus, families nurture and train the younger ones. Later register them with the appropriate age group and take over the social and financial responsibilities involved in their participation (Ariyibi,2012). The community in turn honour the families whose children are actively involved in community social transformation(Benson, 2012).

The age grade group of twenty five year and above seem to be the army of development in the community. They have different names ranging from “ti wa ni ilu” which means “Ikorodu is our own” to “ilu eni ni ilu eni” which means “your community is your community” others such as “Bobakeye” which means “rejoicing with the monarch” “Iloiwaju” which means “For progress and Development”, “Atunluse” which means “for the reconstruction and maintenance of the Ikorodu”, etc.

The annual celebration is grandiose and characterized with funfare, colourful clothes, lavish parties, dance and paying of homages to the monarchs and the sacred but traditional historical sites of the community. The social importance of the festival is though noteworthy but its developmental importance appears huge and how it is used to facilitate identity, brotherhood feelings and sense of belonging seems overwhelming. It was in this vein that chief Aboaba Ogbara (2012) says that,

We know what our community needs. We always try as much as possible to rise up to our responsibilities even within our constraints. We know that it is our duty to develop our community – Ikorodu – and we shall within the limit of our resources.

In 1970, the age group called “ilu eni ni ilu eni” contracted a local engineer known as Engineer Remilekun Falekan to clear, grade and make motorable the roads linking Ikoroduland with “Itamaga” from “Itumoja” and “Ota Ona”. Ikorodu to “Ibeshe” and Ikorodu to “Baiyeku” (Ifatoyinbo,(2013). The age group called “Bobakeye” group contributed fifteen percent of the total cost of renovating the burnt personal house of the monarch in 2003(Bobakeye,2005).”Tiwa ni ilu” yearly pay for the maintainance of the roads to “Ejina” and its vicinity (Ajisafe,2013). “Ejina is the seat of the first palace and the most important centre of Ikorodu tradition where the king meets yearly with his subjects and on important traditional festivals. It is also a place where ikorodus assemble every year for the renewal of oaths between the monarch and his people. It also houses virtually all the traditional grooves and conclaves.

“Iloiwaju” and “Atunluse” groups instituted scholarship programmes for the students of Ikorodu origin(Efuwape,2013). They disburse the scholarship through the Ikororodu resource committee. All the age groups actively partici[pates in the yearly renovation and maintenance of the architectural beauty of Ikorodu Town Hall(Sanni,2012)

While all the groups are contributing to the development and social cohesion of the community, the intra-royal crises, primordial attachments and effects of modernization have negative effects on the efforts of the age groups. Royal affiliations of the groups, the politics of the princes occasioned by internal crises in the traditional political hierarchy appears to also have effects on the unity and cohesiveness of the group.

If the age grade system facilitated social development, it has also promoted sense of brotherhood and encourages humanitarian activities. This also explains its importance in the context of easy identification. Chief Anibaba (2012), a member of “Bobakeye” age groups says that

The age group system has really helped us in Ikoroduland. We can easily identify ourselves and those that were born in foreign lands have their names registered by their parents or family members. Most of them always come during festivals, pay their dues and take part our the activities.

All the age groups have means of identification ranging from slogans to emblems and stickers. These modes of identification appear to have really assisted in engendering opportunities in both private and public places. Thus, it is not uncommon to hear the Ikorodus asking a question “which age group do you belong”? Whenever there is any claims and counter-claims on nativeship. This, according to Chief Anibaba (2012)

...has allowed us to separate the native from non-native. It has equally allowed us to know who is where and who to send to where.

This process makes it possible for us to annex our resources, energies and opportunities for the transformation of Ikoroduland to a growing modern town. He however claims that

This system is really helping us. Ikorodu is the most developed and transformed town in this axis of Lagos state. Igbogbo kingship is older than that of Ikorodu but we are the pride of all.

The age grade system in Ikorodu seems enviable because of its structured mechanism to facilitate development, resolve identity question, identity and brotherhood hegemony with little reliance on state government of Lagos. This mechanism appears flexible to enable changes, challenges and continuity. This is because the last one and half decades in the life of Ikoroduland. It has been a turbulent socio-political period in which the social environment recedes into Hobbessian anarchical imagination in which the societal chord of the society almost broke into pieces not for social decay but political turmoil. During this period, the age grade politics resurrects the society through annual festivals in which violence is forbidden.

Conclusion

Age grade system in Ikoroduland of a Yoruba speaking community in the south west of Nigeria, just like in other Yoruba communities, is used for development and social cohesion. The modes and dynamics may differ but its uses and importance for development purposes cannot be denied. in It is an unique system which accelerates development, facilitates peace, enables brotherhood unity and ensures the politics of identity. It is celebrated with funfare, happiness and sense of absolute aesthetics of colours and people. It is a period of renewal of pledges to the community and also for the acceptance of new challenges and responsibilities. Though, it is a social system but the socio-cultural dimension which is an integral part of its importance becomes vivid during annual cultural and the age grade

festivals. They often use this periods and seasons to showcase what they have done and what they are presently doing for the community. Ikorodu Council of Leaders carefully ensures the representation of all the groups on the board of Ikorodu Oga Resource Committee for Development. This must have partly been informed by the perceived relevance and importance of this system to the development of the community despite the obvious constraints confronting the groups.

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