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## Age Grade Associations and Capital Formation: A Case Study of Ndi-Igbo of Southeast Nigeria

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### Abstract

Ndi-Igbo of southeast Nigeria developed institutions and mechanisms that encouraged both their socio-economic development and growth at the individual, group and community levels. In the area of capital formation among the people, age grade associations existed as indigenous institutions through which the people accessed resources to attend to their needs. The paper concluded that age grade associations operated as pressure groups which were pervasively used by the village bureaucracies to mobilize the people to achieve economic, political and socio-cultural gains. As a means of capital creation, the contributions of this viable institution could not be overemphasized. The descriptive and analytical methods were adopted in writing this work.

### Introduction

This paper will treat age grade associations as veritable non-agrarian institutions for capital formation among the Igbo of southeast Nigeria. Age grade associations are locally called *Otu-ogbo*, *Ebiri*, or *Uke*. It is an organized group of people who are born within a given period of time. The age branding methods used varied from one community to another. The predominant age bracket used is usually one to three (1-3) years, or more. This work will discuss the origins, formations, and functions of age grades as viable source of capital formation. The scope of this paper covers the five Igbo States of Southeast Nigeria, namely, Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo; and the period is between 1900 and 2010.

### Origin of Age Grade Association in Igboland

The origin the Age grade association people cannot be explained explicitly; it is an age-long institution. As observed by Chief Agbai, "We met it at birth and our parents did not

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start it".<sup>1</sup> The composition of age grade varied from place to place. In some communities, it maintained a particular sex line, while in others, it could cut across such lines. Chief Emenike said that in Ibeku, Umuahia, men form the *Uke* (Age Grade Association), and their wives could decide to come together to form their own. Also, married women in the community within an age bracket could form their own *Uke* without reference to the ones their husbands belonged to. The maidens of the community did not form any *Uke*.<sup>2</sup>

In Ohafia, membership of the age grade association was based only on age brackets (usually 3 years) and not on sex. Once a *Uke* was formed, it was open to all males and females that fall within the age limits of the group. The wives of the male members did not have automatic ticket to membership, except their ages fell within the required bracket. Their wives could belong to other age grades, which accommodated their age. In the mixed age grades, the men held their meeting separately from the women, though once in a while, they held joint meetings. On occasions hosted by members, such as wedding, child presentation and burial, men and women of mixed age grades attended such functions together.<sup>3</sup>

### Age Grade and Community Development in Igboland

With respect to personal benefits, the age grade was used to bind members together, which enabled among them mutual aid. They used the opportunity to leverage one another in the areas of farming, building, marriage, burial, et cetera. They usually ignited healthy competition among members, which was instrumental in inspiring them to achieve a lot individually. On the community basis, age grades were very effective in community assignments and they also undertook public works. They were like pressure groups used to mobilize the people to achieve economic, political and socio-cultural gains for the community. These they achieved at different stages of their life span. Nwabughuogu<sup>4</sup> has observed that through this system, the senior grades were differentiated from the juniors, which gave room for the senior grades to supervise the younger ones in the community works assigned to them. Other functions of age grades included, among others, the maintenance of law and order in the society, settlement of disputes within and outside its membership, construction and maintenance of roads and markets, maintenance and cleanliness of the local

streams, guarding the public morality and defending the people against any form of aggression.

Furthermore, age grade associations were very instrumental in maintaining peace within the community. The composition of membership of each age grade comprised people from different families and backgrounds. One of the major goals of the group was that members strove to maintain the bond holding them together, which was a very formidable means of peace and stability among the people. Any differences that occurred in the community were investigated objectively and resolved amicably by members who saw themselves more as brothers and sisters, without taking sides based on family ties or other affinities. Besides, the system enabled capturing the census figure of the people. As an integral part of the society, everybody aspired to belong to age grade. In traditional Ibekuland, for instance, the limit of the composition of every *Uke* in terms of numbers was thirty (30). At the completion of this number, commenced the formation of a new *Uke*, starting with the age grade taking a name. Therefore, it was easy to access the number of the matured men that could be levied, by counting the number of *Uke* in the village. This was instrumental to raising capital and effective administration of the people.<sup>5</sup>

In traditional Igbo society, the economic benefits of age grade associations were many. The effectiveness of the system varied from place to place. It was very effective in Nkporo, Item, Alayi, Abiriba and other areas. The level of effectiveness of the system in the areas mentioned could not be compared to other places like Anara in Isiala Mbano. Though the people had the culture of '*Iwa Akwa*', which will be explained subsequently, they did not look up towards the age grade for governance and development. Rather their radar focused on title societies for leadership and development of the area.

The age grade associations took formal character at about adolescent age. At about twenty (20) years of age, the group was formally initiated into manhood.<sup>6</sup> At this stage, it was believed that such a person would be capable of having a home, providing for his home and defending it. The initiation into manhood took different forms in different Igbo societies. In Nkporo, for instance, it was referred to as initiation into *Agbala*. Also, in Edda, the group initiated was formed into the *Egbela Edda Secret Cult*.<sup>7</sup> In many parts of Imo State it was called '*Iwa Akwa*', and '*Iwanyi Ogado*' in Anambra. The

initiation assured one some degree of social prestige in the community. He could, for example, call on the community to accompany him take a wife, and they obliged him. Without being initiated into manhood, he could only make such a call through his father or relative who must have been initiated. The rite of passage has attracted comments from scholars. According to one source, for example:

In many areas this rite of passage is a ceremony called *Iwa Akwa*. This is a mandatory entry into manhood. With this rite, those involved moved into adulthood and are expected to undertake the responsibilities such as marriage, payment of levies etc. At this stage, they can represent the village in the gathering of adults. Initiation is important as a process of age grade formation and membership because those who perform the *Iwa Akwa* at a period must belong to a particular age grade. At no time, do age grades enter the manhood stage at the same time. And when this happens, age grade has been formed and a stamp of responsibility put on the group initiated.<sup>8</sup>

Chief Agbai noted that Nkporo village in Abia State has a very elaborate, pragmatic and effective age grade system. Respondents stated that after the initiation into manhood rites, the next ceremony was performed when members were about the ages of thirty-eight to forty (38-40) years. The ceremony was called '*Ingwa mmang*'. At this age, they were believed to have acquired positive traits in life that would equip them to assume responsibilities. The ceremony conferred on the age grade the title '*Uke Ji Ogo*', which meant, the age grade that governs the community. They had the responsibility to maintain peace, law and order, and to defend the people from any form of aggression, as well as general governance of the community. They constituted the war generals that led the people during wars. They made laws, enforced discipline and initiated community development programmes and activities.

They also noted that, the *Uke ji ogo* governed the people in consultation with the Council of Chiefs and Elders (*Nde Ichie*) who belonged to senior age grades. They also had the support of their wives who participated actively in ensuring that the government of their husbands was

successful. The wives took care and presided over the affairs of women in the society. The age grade could appoint a wise Elder as its patron, and would always seek his counsel on certain issues of their administration and development.

### **Ceremonial Ritual of Ndi Igbo Age Grade Requirements**

They further observed that the *Igwa mmang* Ceremony was performed every seven years, which implied that the government of each age grade, *Uke Ji Ogo*, ended every seven years with the initiation of a new group. However the people and 'Nde Ichie' could push out a non-performing *Uke Ji Ogo*. The outgoing *Uke Ji Ogo* would perform a higher traditional ceremony known as '*Uche*'. This was the ceremony of '*Igbotto Nma*' (Laying down the matchet). It was a ceremony of retirement of the members from active duties to the community. Therefore, they became senior citizens of the community once they performed this ceremony. Their pride was the exhibition of the infrastructural and other development projects they bequeathed to the community. After the *Uche* ceremony, the *Uke* members were elevated to the level of 'Nde Ichie' (Elders). As has been pointed earlier, they would no longer participate in communal labour nor be levied any more. From the wealth of experiences they acquired over time, they became a source of advice and inspiration to the younger age grades. My respondents said that most of the infrastructural developments in Nkporo were achieved through the age grade system. From the traditional period to the modern times, age grade associations were very outstanding in making roads, building markets and bridges, etc.

### **Contributions of Ndi Igbo Age Grade Association to Development**

In modern times, they have embarked on building markets, schools, hospitals, churches and others.<sup>9</sup> This could be said of age grade associations in Igboland, especially in communities close to Nkporo (like Edda, Ohafia and Abiriba). Their achievements were very outstanding. In Ohafia, a ceremony similar to *Igwa Mmang* was called '*Izara Afa*' (Taking Name). At this ceremony, the age grade will chose a project, which they strove to complete and bequeath same to the community at '*Igbotto Mma*', '*Igbotto Omu*' or '*Igba Uche*' ceremony, which marked their retirement from active service to the community.<sup>10</sup> In Etiti Edda, the age grade that was

involved in fund-raising and development levies was the Adumba Age Grade, which was the ruling age grade of the community. Through their efforts, schools, market stalls and other developmental projects were executed in the community.<sup>11</sup> Over a period of time, the achievements of age grade associations in the developmental programmes of communities are well noted. Each age grade wanted to out-perform the other, thereby creating an arena for healthy competition and quality services. In modern times, some of community developments that were attributed to the Abiriba age grades include the following:

- (a) Contribution towards the running of Enuda College [now Enuda High School], a contribution which started in 1952.
- (b) The erection of the 'Obu Agha' in 1960 by Senior Erinma Age Grade.
- (c) The erection of the traditional rostrum in 1964 by the Akanu Age Grade.
- (d) The erection of the palace of Enachiokon of Abiriba by *Ekpa Nkume Age Grade*.
- (e) The erection of the Akahaba Abiriba General Hospital by Akahaba Age Grade.
- (f) The erection of the Egwuona Girls' Secondary School by Egwuona Age Grade.
- (g) The building of the Okezie Midwifery School by Okezie Age Grade
- (h) The construction of a Modern Library by the Akanu Age Grade
- (i) The installation of a Tower Clock by Ojighirindu Age Grade.<sup>12</sup>

Odumuko stated that the community had benefitted from the developmental projects of different age grade associations existing in Okwuta Isieke. He said that among other projects, the bus stop in their community was built by *Otu Obi* age grade.<sup>13</sup> These and many others were the achievements in community development, which were initiated by age grade associations in the traditional Igbo society. The system was a source of capital formation for the benefits of the members and the community.

### **Dynamics of Capital Formation by Ndi Igbo Age Grade Association**

In the traditional system, age grade associations raised their funds they used for the developmental programmes through different means. In some areas, especially communities that collectively own palm plantations, age grade associations could pay the community a stipulated sum of money. This payment would give the right to harvest the palm fruits whenever they are due, for a period agreed with the community, six months or one year. The age grade association could sale the harvested palm fruits processed or unprocessed. The money the age grade got from such sale was paid into the association's purse.<sup>14</sup>

Besides, the age grade associations could source funds through doing jobs for members of the community who needed their services. They could build house for or work in the farm of a community member who approached them. The way they operate was that during the days they do works, the person that engaged them would provide food and drinks for them. They do not charge any amount of money. After the work they accept whatever the person paid, and most times the amount was reasonable. The *Otu Ogbo* keeps the money in their common purse.<sup>15</sup>

Also, they could raise funds through tasking their members to make contributions, locally known as *ntu ntu*. Another means age grade associations form capital was through hunting expeditions. During festive periods, members of an age set could hunt, and sale the bush meats to the people. After settling the expenses they incurred during such expeditions like buying gunpowder or hiring guns, the age set save their gain in the group's purse.<sup>16</sup> Through these means discussed above and others, the age grade associations were to form capital, which was used execute both the projects they chose to do and those that was assigned to them by the community.

Members of an age grade who had challenges could access interest free loans from the group's purse. In the traditional system members of an age grade association did not work together only for common goal, they also worked together for individual benefits. When a member was in need to build a house or renovate one, they came together to do the work. Also, during farming season, they chose different days to collectively work at individual farm of members, locally

called *ohe oru*.<sup>17</sup> Age grade associations, as a means of capital formation, as well as its developmental contributions and importance among the Igbo of Southeast Nigeria, cannot be overemphasized.

### **Conclusion**

This paper examined age grade associations as veritable non-agrarian institutions for capital formation among the Igbo of southeast Nigeria, with emphasis on the origin, formation and functions. The findings portrayed age grade associations, as valves for developmental efforts of the various communities in the southeast of Nigeria where the age grade system exist. The age grade institutions unarguably brought dividends to individuals, groups and communities within our area of study that have used the system to raise funds for the execution of projects. With respect to individual benefits, the age grade associations created a harmonious atmosphere that enabled mutual aid and cooperation in turn guaranteed, among other benefits, in the areas of farming, building construction, contracting marriages, burial rituals, and in healthy competition.

At the community level, the age grade associations successfully undertook community assignments, public works and mobilized the people to earn achievements, which include, and not limited to, education, businesses, crafts, skill acquisition and entrepreneurship. This paper has demonstrated, with examples, the usefulness of age grade associations as a veritable means of capital formation among the people. It will, therefore, be stating the obvious that this particular indigenous institution has continued in its relevance among the Igbo of the southeast Nigeria even with the existence of the modern financial institutions.

**Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup>Interview with Chief Agbai Agbai Iro, 89 years, Ukwa Mkpоро, Abia State, Retired Principal, 18/10/2013.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Chief Moses Emenike, 63 years, Amaoforo Ibeku, Abia State, Clan Head, 22/09/2013.

<sup>3</sup>Interview with Chief Kalu Ukpai, 74 years, Ebem Ohafia, Abia State, Farmer, 22/11/2013.

<sup>4</sup>A. I. Nwabughuogu, *The Dynamics of Change in Eastern Nigeria, 1900-1960: Indigenous Factor in Colonial Development*, Owerri: Esther Thompson Publishing Company, 1993, pp.39-40.

<sup>5</sup>Interview with Chief Moses Emenike, 63 years, Amaoforo Ibeku, Abia State, Clan Head, 22/09/2013.

<sup>6</sup>P.E. Aligwekwe, *The Continuity of Traditional Values in the African Society. The Igbo of Nigeria*, Owerri: Totan Publishers Limited, 1991, p. 71.

<sup>7</sup>R.O.E. Maduka, "Age Grade Factor In Igbo Tradition of Politics", in U.D. Anyanwu & J.C.U. Aguwa (eds.), *The Igbo and the Tradition of Politics*, Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishing Co. Ltd., 1993, p. 63.

<sup>8</sup>R.O.E. Maduka, "Age Grade Factor in Igbo Tradition of Politics", p. 63.

<sup>9</sup>Interview with, Chief Agbai Agbai Iro, 89 years, Ukwa Mkpоро, Abia State, Retired Principal, 18/10/2013; Orji Igwe Aja, 74 years, Ukwa Mkpоро, Abia State, Farmer, 18/10/2013; Onu Kama Onyioha, 55 years, Ukwa Mkpоро, Abia State, Traditionalist, 18/10/2013.

<sup>10</sup>Interview with Onwuka Eke Agwu, 56 years Asaga Ohafia, Abia State, Trader, 22/11/2013.

<sup>11</sup>Interview with HRH Eze Louis Isiene, Etiti Edda, Afikpo South Ebonyi State, Traditional Ruler, 06/04/2013,

<sup>12</sup>Interview with R.O.E. Maduka, "Age Grade Factor In Igbo Tradition of Politics", p. 68.

<sup>13</sup>Interview with Odumuko Ozurumba, 60 Years, Okwuta Isieke, Abia State, Community Leader, 20/09/2013.

<sup>14</sup>Interview with Ogbonnaya Akuma, 63 Years, Ebunwana Ede, Ebonyi State, Tailor, 08/04/2013.

<sup>15</sup>Interview with Odumuko Ozurumba, 60 Years, Okwuta Isieke, Abia State, Community Leader, 20/09/2013.

<sup>16</sup>Interview with Charles Okoko, 54 Years, Ozu Abam, Abia State, Historian, 25/03/2012.

<sup>17</sup>Interview with Charles Okoko, 54 Years, Ozu Abam, Abia State, Historian, 25/03/2012.