



Traditional Institutions And EDDA Development: Focus On The Age Grade SYSTEM in the 20th Century.

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Abstract

Traditional institutions in Igboland are as old as the people and have played numerous roles in the development of the area. Edda, like every other Igbo communities, has her own traditional institutions that have served in the development of the community through the provision of good governance, sanitation, peace and security. This paper interrogates the roles of Age grade system in Edda in providing all these to the grassroots. Drawing from both primary and secondary sources, the paper holds that among the numerous traditional institutions in Edda, the age grade is the most important and cannot be compared with every other traditional institution in terms of developmental activities in Edda since 1900. No doubt, foreign religions have impacted on the age grade system in Edda, leading to certain changes and sometimes relegation of the institution. The paper concludes that the importance of age grade system in Edda cannot be over emphasized and must be held tenaciously, especially in the contemporary Nigeria where government security agencies appear to have failed in keeping the security of the local communities intact.

Keyword: Traditional institution, Age Grade, Peace, Security.

I. Introduction

One among the important aspects of the social structure in Edda in particular and Igboland in general is the age grade system around which their social and cultural life revolve. From time immemorial, and during the period under review, age grade system has remained one major veritable tool on which the administration of the traditional Edda society is based. No doubt, recent history reveals that town unions may appear to have taken the front role in terms of the administration of Igboland in general. There is no gainsaying the fact that town union is alien in Edda and was non-existent during the time under review. Isichei (1977) fin tunes the importance of age grade when she ranked the age grade second to the family as most important agents of socialization. Oko, Unya and Igariwey (2022) allude to Isichei's ranking of the age grade by identifying the roles of grade to include security, sanitation and general administration of a traditional society. The three functions of the age grade identified by the trio above remain the hallmark of an ideal society and remained a task for age grades in Edda. Going further, it will be important to make brief background of Edda to aid the understanding of the area and people under review.



Brief on Edda People

Who are the Edda people? Attempt to proffer answer to this question, takes one to the historical background of Edda which constitutes the area of this study. Edda, in political classification is one among the thirteen (13) Local Government Areas in present day Ebonyi State that is known and referred to as Afikpo South Local Government. It is located in the Southern Senatorial zone of Ebonyi state of Nigeria. Edda is made up of seventy two (72) groups of villages with hamlets (ezi) constituting secondary units for each of them. These seventy two (72) groups of villages are divided into ten (10) autonomous communities to include Amangwu, Amato, Ebunwana, Ekoli, Etit, Idima, Nguzu, Umunna, Oso and Owutu autonomous communities. Prior to the institution of autonomous communities in Igboland, Edda was administratively structured into Ndeelu (upper Edda) and Ndagbo (lower Edda). Edda boundary neighbours include Ehugbo, Amasiri and Akaeze in the north. On the South Edda is bounded by Ohafia, on the East by Erie and Unwana and on the West by Nkporo and Okagwe Ohafia. Arunsi & Ugoji (1994). Aside these close neighbouring communities, Abam, Arochuku among others constitute distant neighbours of Edda with whom they share cultural similarities and had formed alliance to prosecute their pre-colonial wars. Edda has similar climate with her neighbours and enjoys cordial relationship with her neighbours through inter-marriage, trade and commerce.

Edda people are bound by ties of blood (nwanne) based on double descent arrangement of matrilineal (ikwunne) and patrilineal (Ikwinna) families. Ikwunne is one common bond that unites the people. Edda is also classified as Cross River Igbo and shares the same language with other Igbo communities albeit, with dialectical variation which is common in Igboland.

On the aspect of origin and migration of the Edda people, two traditions of origin exist. First is the oriental or hermitic hypothesis which traces the Edda origin to the Middle East. This account labels Egypt take off point in the Edda migration. Proponents to this hypothesis on the Edda story of origin are G.T. Basden, who has based his argument on the semblance in the Igbo and Jewish cultures (Basden, 1912); and E.K. Ijomantaw whose version holds that the Igbo at the earliest time, once settled in the Nile Valley prior to their southward migration to Sudan and later to West Africa. Other supporters of the oriental hypothesis are Olauda Equiano, Herbert Richmond Palmer among others who have tried to establish connections between the Igbo and

the Arabia (Afidist, 1932). The second tradition of origin links Edda origin to the neighbouring Cross River region. A.E. Afigbo (1983), has opposed the oriental hypothesis on the Edda Origin as not convincing. Evidences such as similarities in language and pigmentation between the Edda people and the Middle East people in this regard appear to be completely lacking. More so, artifacts such as pieces of earthen pots and implement carved with stones and radio carbon dated as back as 2,935 BC to 670 BC and 15 AD reveals more that human settlement took place in the area under review prior to the time of the alleged migration from the Middle East as peddled in the oriental or hermitic hypothesis that is to say therefore that the origin and migration of the Edda people is better understood when traced internally within Igboland.

Age Grade System in Edda

Age grade otherwise known as 'Uke' is a group of people born within a given age bracket who come together to form an organized working system or ally. 'Uke' is a common place in Edda that provides a strong social structure. People within the age difference of three to five years form an age grade. Males and females belong to the same age grade, and work together on matters of mutual interest. Interestingly, in Ebunwana Edda for instance, a woman by virtue of marriage is allowed to belong to the same age grade with her husband. This is not generally accepted in other Edda communities. In the pre-colonial Edda society, new members of an age grade go through forms of initiation though not blood bound. Age grade system has lasted in Edda and has one of the most elaborate and organizational procedure.

Age Grade is an entrenched culture of the entire Igbo people. In Edda, age grade served as a tool for governance, social mobilization, development, security and social control and has remained one of the most power forces for the provision of political leadership of the people. Age grades have also proved to be instrumental in the economic and infrastructural development in Edda. Although information on the inception of age grades in the social life of the people remains sketchy, oral tradition is replete with the fact that the age grade system in Edda is as old as the people and undoubtedly, complemented the family in molding the social behavior of Edda people. The system has also helped to create a sense of oneness, social discipline and cohesion among the people. It constitutes a system through which the various villages co-operate for war, peace, work, governance and entertainment.



Time and events have caused trends in the functions of age grades in Edda. For instance, in the pre-colonial period, 'Ukejiogo' (strength of the community) have been the warriors that protected the community from external invasion. Going further, at the inception of colonial rule, according to Uhere (2015), "it was apparent that war had become one of the means adopted by the earliest inhabitants... to solve the problem arising from their internal readjustment." Oral tradition illustrates the realization of the importance of the army in protecting the community from external aggression and in prosecuting their own wars. Just like every other Igbo community, there was no standing army and as, troops were raised when the need arose (Aja, 2005). In Edda, age grades constituted military structure from where the soldiers were drawn. No doubt, every able bodied young man participated in the wars; age grades remained the only platform for their categorization, mobilization and control.

With the independence of Nigeria in 1960, the roles of age grades in Edda shifted from just serving as soldiers of war to instruments of executing socio-economic and developmental projects. They also conducted peace talks amongst Edda communities and between Edda and their neighbours to bring their feuds to peaceful resolutions. This was made possible through the instrumentality of wrestling especially, among the Edda people. Age grades of equal categories from the different Edda communities engaged in wrestling and other acrobatic competitions on friendly grounds for familiarization and sense of oneness as a people. Their competitive spirit shifted from just wrestling to healthy developmental competitions as age grades in the different communities worked hard to overrun their contemporaries in other communities in the provision of certain amenities to their people. In fact, there is no aspect of Edda life that can be mentioned without a link to the age grade system. Suffice therefore to say that the social-political structure of Edda will not be complete without mentioning the age grades.

Arunsi & Ugoji (1994) states that Nguzu Edda, has a tradition of maintaining seven age grades at any point in time, with the "EnwoghiEfa" and "AnuMkpu" youngest and eldest respectively. While other communities usually maintain more than seven age grades in a generation, but age grades in almost all Edda communities choose names that sound similar to reflect their principles and ideologies. Such names include Ifemba, Obimba, Oganiru, Ejiudoeme, Egbebere, udoka, Agumba, Ifemba, Ugwumba, Mbakwe among others.

Before the retirement of any age grade from active participation of community affairs, such age grade must have carried out projects in the village and as approved by the elders (NdeIshina). Retirement of Age Grades (Igbotonma) is usually an elaborate occasion and an event every Edda person both male and female folks look forward to experience.

Age Grades as Catalyst of Development

Age grades have remained units of community development in Edda. They constitute means of allocating public tasks, protecting public morality, surveillance for security purposes and collection of levies for the common good of the community. The developmental roles of age grades in Edda have been changing since 1900. But for the purpose of this study, we will consider age grades contributions in community development.

Judging from their nature and functions, age grades in the past were utilized as army of the people after their training through the Egbela society. They were vibrant and as mentioned earlier, provided military personnel to prosecute wars among other things during the pre-colonial and colonial times. Uke jiogo who were reoffered as the ruling age grade were assigned with the task of enforcing the laws and orders set by the various Ezeogos (kings) and their Council of Elders (NdeIshina).

The age grades were used to collect levies in the villages, performed sanitation duties like building of road paths/maintenance, and helped to check the morals standards of communities. Their women among other tasks ensured the streams and their pathways were clean. They acted as agents of social control to enforce compliance to the laws of the land and made sure that people lived within the rules of peaceful co-existence.

They handled social welfare activities by joining hands and contributing labor to help build mud houses for their members without a fee charged. As stated earlier, they mobilized labour to cultivate each other's farms through 'oruuke' or 'oruoha' communal effort. Age grades served as status symbol as people grow to maturity and become part of the society. Their first assignment was to join the 'uke' age grade as responsible members of the society.

They formed the executive arm of the government in law enforcement. The Uke jiogo was always the apex age grade that supervised the younger ones, while the 'Odin Ali' were the major executors.

In Edda, abound developmental projects executed by different age grades in their various



communities. Such projects include; building of town halls, class room blocks in schools, construction of culverts and bridges, bus stop blocks and market stalls. Age grades have also extended their developmental efforts to supporting Church projects of the Presbyterian Church in Letu Edda. Egbebere hall in Ekoli Edda and Emekwe bridge in Amangwu Edda are among the examples. The Ejikeme age grade in Ekoli Edda and Ugwumba age grade in Eburnwana Edda have also attracted the building of Health Centres to their communities.

Though age grades are very powerful instrument for community development, they had some constraints that sometimes affected their effective operation. Some of these constraints include poor leadership, wasteful spending by members, lack of laid down rules for formation of new age grades and religious differences among members. These setbacks were settled through the intervention of older and or other age grades.

II. CONCLUSION

Edda, even in contemporary time is largely a traditional society based on gerontocratic values. The life of an individual in the traditional Edda society appeared meaningless without such individual becoming a member of an age grade. Age grades in Edda constitute one very powerful traditional institution and have served as a means of allocating public tasks, protecting public morality through censorship, surveillance for security purposes and collection of levies for the common good. Active life cycle in Edda traditional society especially during the period under review began with the age grade and terminated with the age grade.

In recent time, wide interactions between Edda people and their neighbours have led to cultural borrowings and exchange of ideas have brought about the founding of Town Unions in Edda and appear to have taken over the roles of the age grades. This constitutes one of the problems in the contemporary society some persons no longer find the age grade desirable may be as a result of their conversion to foreign religions, thereby relegating the age grade institution and its importance in the traditional life of the Edda people. These town unions in some instances have become tools for politically minded persons to manipulate the society to serve their personal gains.

Based on the foregoing analysis, this paper recommend therefore that the values of the age grade system should be revived because, age grades

system in Edda serve to uphold the core values of a traditional society upon which Edda is founded.

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