

## IGBO ETHNIC AGE GRADE LEADERSHIP STRUCTURE: A SAMPLE FOR SOCIO-POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC STABILITY IN AFRICA

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### Abstract

*This paper is an attempt towards presenting Igbo ethnic age grades leadership structure as an antidote to the leadership challenges in Africa. This conceptual paper adopted expository and critical analysis methodologies. The research argues from the observations made that the centralized chieftaincy, hereditary aristocracy, or kingship customs leadership frame prevalent in most regions of Africa denotes the god-like status of a leader with little or no scrutiny on community administration and lacks all-inclusiveness which by extension hinders the socio-political and economic advancement of the region. It breeds indifference, complacency or nonchalance and dispiritedness by those who feel alienated in the scheme of things. The paper therefore recommends the adoption of Igbo ethnic age grades leadership structure which is a hierarchical but two-dimensional order with clear distinctions between the male and female groups and usually categorized division of men and women into age grade 'societies'. This arrangement is premised on the ideology of all-inclusiveness and encourages competition, self-reliance and has the mechanism of watching closely and educating individuals and society on the socio – religious and moral life of the people towards achieving socio-political and economic- goals of the community.*

**Keywords:** Igbo, Ethnic, Age Group, Economic, Social, Religious

### Introduction

The theoretical aspects of the socio-religious norms of a people alone, cannot give an adequate picture of such people without due consideration of the actual existential experiences. To know whether people live what they believe, "one must look at what they do in connection with what they believe"<sup>1</sup>. Theorizing on an issue is one thing, and putting it into practice is another.

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<sup>1</sup> George, G. Udechukwu Dine, *Traditional Leadership A Sample of African Democracy Among the Igbo of Nigeria: A Christian Evaluation*, (Enugu: Snaap Press Ltd, 2007), 146.

Since “leadership becomes a fact when ordinary people take initiative, stir others to action, put civic concern before self, stand up for what is right and maintain order for the common good”<sup>2</sup>. This paper in the face of the socio-politics and economic challenges confronting Africa therefore explored and critically analyzed the *Igbo* ethnic age grade leadership structure and recommends its adoption as a means of achieving socio-political and economic stability in Africa.

### **The Ethnic Group Called *Igbo***

The archeological study of *Igbo* ethnic group showed that *Ndigbo* (*Igbo* people) “had been living where they are now since 2000 BC”<sup>3</sup>. The *Igbo* are the third largest ethnic groups in Nigeria. Nigeria is divided into six Geopolitical zones and *Ala Igbo (Igboland)* as it is popularly called is located at the Southeast geopolitical zone. *Igbo* ethnic region covers well “over 40,000 square kilometers of the Nigeria’s landmass”<sup>4</sup>. It stretches from the “coastline of the Bight of Benin, and continuing to the outskirts of *Ibibio* and *Efik* territories in the East with its Eastern boundary being formed by the Cross river”<sup>5</sup>. On the Southern and Western sides it “stretches to the border of the *Ijaw*, *Itshekiri*, and other ethnic groups, and then spreads across the Niger to confines of Benin. It narrows in once more, and “extends in wedge-like formation until its utmost Northern limits where it bordered with *Igala* and *Idoma*”<sup>6</sup>.

Oral tradition has it that *Igbo* ethnic group “existed thousands of years before other tribes in Nigeria and has the oldest kingdoms in the country known as *Nri* Kingdom”<sup>7</sup>. Therefore, *Igbo* ethnic region is “the birth place of many Nigeria’s ancient tradition and civilizations and dated perhaps four thousand five hundred years ago”<sup>8</sup>.

The region consists of more than “two hundred independent territorial groups, each composed of one or more villages or dispersed residential

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> D. D. Hartle “Archeology in Eastern Nigeria” *Nigerian Magazine*, No. 93 (June 1967): 14

<sup>4</sup> Emefie Ikenga-Metuh and Christopher, I. Ejizu, *Hundred Years of Catholicism in Eastern Nigeria: 1885 – 1985 The Nnwei Story A Historico – Missiological Analysis* (Nimo, Nigeria: Asele Institute, 1985), xi.

<sup>5</sup> Sylvanus Ifeanyichukwu Nnoruka, *Solidarity: A Principle of Sociality A Phenomenological-Hermeneutical Approach in the Context of The Philosophy of Alfred Schütz and African Culture* (Owerri: Living Flames Resources, 2009), 175

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Onyeka, J. Amaegwu, *Dialogue with Culture: A New Method of Evangelization in Igboland* (Enugu: Snaap Press Ltd, 2010), 21.

<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of the Igbo People* (Lagos, Nigeria: The Macmillan Press Limited, 1976), 3.

grouping organized on the basis of patrilineal clans and lineages”<sup>9</sup>. Though their culture resemble in most cases, “diversity of culture could be found among the various groups. Traditionally, they are farmers and fishermen. There are also some who engage in trades in central markets”<sup>10</sup>. Religiously, *Ndigbo* practice Traditional *Igbo* Religion which is “bound up with entire culture and tradition known as *Omenala* characterized by the veneration of ancestral spirits, belief in nature deities, and above all worship, veneration and belief in Supreme Deity called *Chukwu*”<sup>11</sup>. Politically, *Igbo* have no centralized chieftaincy, hereditary aristocracy, or kingship customs as can be found in their neighboring ethnic groups. The responsibility of leadership is traditionally in the village councils, which are made up of different age grades, comprising head of lineages, youths, and elders, titled men and women as well as those who have established themselves economically in the community.

*Igbo* emphasis on individual prowess to succeed, enterprising and communal living according to *Amaegwu*, are “their basis of dynamism and astuteness”<sup>12</sup>. *Amaegwu* further describes *Igbos* as “goal-getters who leave nothing unturned to get to the top”<sup>13</sup>. He concluded by writing:

If there are three Nigerians walking namely: *Hausa*, *Yoruba* and *Igbo* and they meet a ripe apple, a *Hausa* man would say, If Allah sends down this apple I will eat it. *Yoruba* man would say, I will wait here for the apple to fall and we will share it. But an *Igboman* will climb the apple tree and bring it down himself. He will not wait for Allah to bring it down or wait till it fall by itself; instead he will bring it down himself and share it with his colleagues<sup>14</sup>

Little wonder the *Igbo* still triumph amidst the massacre of bombing, shelling and hunger of the Biafra Civil War that the whole world thought should have made them disappear from the face of the earth.

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<sup>9</sup> I. Nzimiro, “Study of Mobility among the Ibos of Southern Nigeria”, in R. Piddington (ed), *Kinship and Geographical Mobility*, ( E. J. Brill Leiden, 1965), 117-118.

<sup>10</sup> Sylvanus Ifeanyichukwu Nnoruka, *Solidarity: A Principle of Sociality A Phenomonological-Hermeneutical Approach in the Context of The Philosophy of Alfred Scgutz and African Culture*, 176.

<sup>11</sup> George, G. Udechukwu Dine, *Traditional Leadership A Sample of African Democracy Among the Igbo of Nigeria: A Christian Evaluation*, 9.

<sup>12</sup> Onyeka, J. Amaegwu, *Dialogue with Cultue: A New Method of Evangelization in Igboland*, 23.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

### Conceptualizing Age-grade

Before we go into the analysis of the *Igbo* ethnic age grades' leadership structure as an agent for socio-economic and political stability in Africa, it would be necessary we give full details of the concept of "age grade". The explanation will help us to illustrate the roles it plays in the formation of a socio-religious, political, and economic and social justice viability of society. Therefore what is "age grade" in the first place? There are many ways of looking at it. According to Dine, age grade could be described as "a natural register, record or means by which *Igbo* identify or group persons born within a given period of time"<sup>15</sup>. The essence of the grouping or identification is that it forms "the basis for measuring and grouping religious, economic, social and political interactions in the society"<sup>16</sup>.

*Igbo* in the past did not use calligraphy as means of recording events, because the culture did not provide such means. That does not mean that they did not record events at least in a natural way. Natural events and seasons which could help the memory, "served as means of recording events. Parents, for instance marked the period of their children's birth by counting on what season and events that took place at that time"<sup>17</sup>. The *Igbos* for example are used to the saying: "*Ndi amuru na afo chijiri n'ehihe*" (those born in the year there was eclipse of the sun), *Oge agha mba uwa nke abuo kwusiri* (at the end of the Second World War) *Oge Azikiwe zoro ochichi onye isi ala naijiriya* (when Azikiwe contested for the Presidency of Nigeria), *Oge naijiriya nwere onwe ha n'aka ndi ocha* (when Nigeria gained independent) *Oge ndi ami napuru ochichi n'aka ndi nkiti* (when the military took over the mantle of leadership) etc. Hence, the seasons and events influence the ways *Igbo* determine age grade.

According to Meek, age grade refers "to a group of persons having an age relationship of a wider span of years and usually comprising a number of age sets. The groups perform social, political and even legal functions in the societies of which they are part. As members of the group move through life, their responsibilities increase with their age"<sup>18</sup>. Writing on the significance of age grades among the *Igbos*, Nwazojie opined that:

The age grade (OTU-OGBO) refers to persons who have, at childhood, gone through the initiation ceremonies at the same time, or persons united in one group by reason of an age relationship of a three to five years margin: persons for instance, between twenty and twenty five

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<sup>15</sup> George, G. Udechukwu Dine, *Traditional Leadership A Sample of African Democracy Among the Igbo of Nigeria: A Christian Evaluation*, 103.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

<sup>17</sup> Ibid

<sup>18</sup> C. K. Meek, *Law and Authority in a Nigeria Tribe*. (OUP, London, 1937) 197-200.

years of age form one age grade, and those twenty-five and thirty years old form another age grade and so forth. They often choose a name, eg., *Udoka* (Peace is greatest); *Igwe bu ike* (unity is strength)<sup>19</sup>.

Describing the age grade in the context of socio-symbolic fashion and placing emphasis on the incidents that determine the name Emecheta writes:

There were various different societies in the town, most of them existing for social purposes, but in the main, it was one's age group that determined membership. Age groups were created at three years intervals, each one characterized by an important incident. Children born during the civil war would become known as the Children of Biafra, and when babies born at that time grow into adolescence, they will hold meetings, organize dances in the Big Eke Market; they might have special dance which will take years of practice for the *Ifejioku* yam festivals<sup>20</sup>.

Nnoruka while stressing on the symbolic nature of age grades states "that names taken by age grades symbolize the solidarity that characterized the group. Such names are: *Njikoka* (Unity is more precious than anything); *Obinwanne* (Fraternal love); *Udoka* (Peace is a precious value); *Igwebuike* (There is strength in unity); *Ofuobi* (One of mind);"<sup>21</sup>. *Onye aghana nwanne ya* (Be your brother's keeper).

### Age Grades Dimensions

Age grade has three dimensions. They are: the religious, social and political dimensions.

### Religious Dimension

The religious dimension of age grade is anchored on the belief that, "God creates human beings in a well-set order of birth. He assigns each person a duty to perform in the society of a certain region, in a certain community at a certain period of time"<sup>22</sup>. Persons who are born within the same period of time are believed to have common tasks from *Chukwu* and to have an ontological unifying force which binds them together. Persons of same age have, as it

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<sup>19</sup> Nwazojie, cited in George, G. Udechukwu Dine, *Traditional Leadership A Sample of African Democracy Among the Igbo of Nigeria: A Christian Evaluation*, 104.

<sup>20</sup> Emecheta, B., *The Joy of Motherhood*. (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1978), 49.

<sup>21</sup> S. I. Nnoruka, *Solidarity: A Principle of Sociality A Phenomonological-Hermeneutical Approach in the Context of The Philosophy of Alfred Scgutz and African Culture*, 221-222

<sup>22</sup> George, G. Udechukwu Dine, *Traditional Leadership A Sample of African Democracy Among the Igbo of Nigeria: A Christian Evaluation*, 104-105.

were, “a close “spiritual” or vertical bond which binds them together”<sup>23</sup>. This vertical bound creates “horizontal attachment of every individual person to his or her age grade”<sup>24</sup>. This religious significance has a sort of permanence in the sense that the force remains until death takes it away.

### **Social Dimension**

The social dimension of age grade “emanates from the religious dimension. That means that those who have the same ontological or religious tie naturally have basic social bond. They are socially attracted to each other in the community”<sup>25</sup>. Their social tie is based on the belief that they have been solidly united by God. Hence, they become stimulator or accelerator of changes which retain an indelible mark of friendship among mates, and ever remains a point of reference throughout the life span of members. Emphasizing on the social dimensions of age group Basden asserts that:

The friendship made in boyhood days remains unbroken throughout life, and forms a fine feature in . . . friendship thus formed, continues unimpaired after marriage for the wife does not supplant the friend of many years’ standing... indeed he is more often at play than at work...simultaneously he is gaining experience of the world and almost as soon as he becomes man-conscious he takes his place and part in the affairs of the village<sup>26</sup>.

Like the social dimension emanates from the religious dimension of age grade, the social dimension of age grade opens up an avenue for political dimension.

### **Political Dimension**

The political dimension is a higher customary or traditional social stratification formed by individuals from different age grades within the society. The membership of this group depends on fulfillment of certain conditions which the rank requires such as achievements in life and positive contributions towards development of the community. Age grades are varied and their roles are also diversified. As matter of fact, age grades are identified by the service they render to the community.

### **The Socio-political and Economic Conditions of Africa**

The socio-political and economic condition of Africa is characterized by leadership failure of lack of accountability, all-inclusiveness, respect for

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid

<sup>24</sup> Ibid

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 106

<sup>26</sup> G. T., Basden, *Niger Ibos*, (London: Frank Cass and Co Ltd, 1966), 194.

human rights and majorly looting of public treasury. This is because there are no checks and balances on the socio-political and economic structure of the African societies. At the independence of African states, the citizens were promised by the politicians that the impunity of the colonial years resulting to devalues of African natural endowment in an imbalanced and unjust exchange, unaccountability, wanton abuse of the citizens' rights would be a thing of history; civilian political actors would be circumspect in the conduct of political affairs; and respect for the rule of law would be championed. These promises up till date are yet to be fulfilled. Instead, the leadership of African states has continued to assert itself in a way that has been overbearing for the citizens. The political office holders loot the public treasury at will and run the states like a family business.

Despite decades of self-rule, the states of Africa are still faced with different kinds of leadership failure. The state is still authoritarian. There are litanies of reports detailing the misappropriations and misapplication of state resources by government office holders. The struggle for political offices by politicians has added a new dimension to the failure. Characteristically, some politicians maintain retinue of thugs who perpetrate acts of violence against their opponents; these range from assault on liberty, freedom of expression, political rights violations, assassination of political opponents and kidnaping for ransom.

On the part of the common people, they have been driven beyond the threshold of poverty. Out of survival instinct, they send their wards into the streets as beggars and street hawkers of goods whose rate of return can barely offset their daily needs. Security personnel from different security services who are supposed to protect and defend the people, routinely violate the rights of the citizens. The citizens have resigned to their oppression and suffering and passively hope in an almost fatalistic manner for external liberators.

### **Age Grade Leadership as an Agent of Socio-political and Economic Stability**

Age grade organization forms the basic essential traditional school for socio-moral education of individuals in general and towards leadership in particular. This entails stages of rigorous exercise of physical, moral and mental faculties directed towards socio-economic and political viable cohesion. In Igbo culture as well in other cultures, it is believed that "if a child

fails to make serious effort, he becomes a failure”<sup>27</sup>. That means that any child who is in any age group but fails to make himself available for the training will “neither be ‘mature’, nor will he develop leadership capabilities and can easily be a tool for anti-social activities in the society”<sup>28</sup>.

What prevails in age grade is the atmosphere of freedom and great measure of independence. The organization in most cases is determined by the individuals themselves. This means that they enjoy that freedom to direct their own affairs. Amidst the freedom to direct their own affairs, they are particularly conscious of their duties to their fatherland. It is a disgrace to any age group if they are found not measuring up with the demands of the society at every point in time. Thus, age grade is an avenue for every child in a society to strive for peace, unity, prosperity, affluence and never dare to offend such lines.

Every age grade is also very careful not to violate the culture of the community. They strongly believe that retribution awaits offenders. Hence, the freedom does not mean freedom to cause pandemonium in the society. There is a limit to every exercise of freedom either by individuals of any group or groups. The age grade is not systematically organized as would be expected in the modern sense of the word. Seniority by age is definitely an asset for non-progressives. The progressives who start to climb by marrying a wife or wives and taking the first titles lead the organization. Age grades provide for every member of the community the opportunity to train and achieve greatness, as it is not customary to claim honour, success and good name when one does not deserve them.

Thus, every individual in an age grade competes with one another to ensure that he is not left behind in all round scale of success. Every member of an age grade also encourages and supports each other in their group to see that the integrity of the group holds sway in the community. For example, “when labour larger than house hold unit is required for prestige farming, a temporary and flexible nature of work group, which normally breaks up after need of that moment is usually established and labour is supplied to every member”<sup>29</sup>. The team work which the group enjoys stimulates competition as defaulter with no cogent reason in this practice is usually eliminated in the next cycle.

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<sup>27</sup> George, G. Uchechukwu Dine *Traditional Leadership as Sample of African Democracy Among the Igbo of Nigeria: A Christian Evaluation*, 110

<sup>28</sup> Ibid

<sup>29</sup> V. C., Uchendu, *The Igbo of Southern Nigeria*. (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1965), 77



Age grades also organize credit association. The credit association is a platform where members of an age grade or different age grades come together to pay an agreed subscription at regular intervals and then the fund is made available to each member in turn. The “duration in which the subsequent contribution would be made is usually 28 days”<sup>30</sup>. This gives each participant ample time to look for his or her share of the contributions. Every credit or contribution groups usually have a head. In most cases, it is in the home of the head that the members gather to contribute the agreed sum of money; in a case where one could not meet up with the payment on the said date, “the head or the more financially buoyant person in the group pays for the person and collects it from the defaulter afterwards, sometimes charging a little interest”<sup>31</sup>.

The credit associations also open up avenue for loans to the members. The duration of the membership depends on the individual’s discretion. Some withdraw from the group as soon as they have their financial problems solved; others remain on account of social significance of the group. The socio-economic impact of the credit association is that traders or businessmen most times depend on it for their subsistence. It also serves as an avenue for those who do not have capital but wish to start trading to do so and to those who are not financially buoyant to save a considerable sum of money for solving bulky financial needs. The leadership role here is directed towards training people in honesty, trust in business enterprise and self-reliance for progress. The nature of age grade is therefore very clear as a way of enriching every individual in any age group. It is the traditional machinery whereby those involved get rich without much strain. Hence, the group’s initiative for success is born in the individual through group interest and belongingness. Members of age grade also carry out mutual help within the group. This could take the form of: “helping the members who want to marry but are unable to meet up with the requirements of the in-laws; helping sick member to do his work in his farm before the favourable season runs out; helping their bereaved members to defray the funeral cost; provision of basic needs of life for widows of their deceased member”<sup>32</sup>.

The moral formation of an individual member depends on his age grade. A heady member who goes against the tradition and the customs of the community is usually brought to task by his age grade by punishing him in a

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<sup>30</sup> George, G. Uchechukwu Dine *Traditional Leadership as Sample of African Democracy Among the Igbo of Nigeria: A Christian Evaluation*, 126.

<sup>31</sup> V. C., Uchendu, *The Igbo of Southern Nigeria.*, 79

<sup>32</sup> C. Ifemesia, *Traditional Human Living Among the Igbos: A Historical Perspective*, (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishing Co, 1979) 85.

way, which may be considered adequate for his misconduct. The punishment also serves as a deterrent to others who may wish to toe the same line. Age grades also regulate the behaviour of other grades in the community. It acts as police in apprehending offenders and ensuring their presence at trials. Age grade acts as a check on those in authority to prevent abuse of power. It sanctions decision by elders such as collecting fine. Even the elders are also brought to order if they adopt undue control over the community by the age grade. Thus, the government of the age grades also stands as a counterbalance to the extreme conservative attitude which elders are prone to adopt. Age grade supply defence to the community in case of tribal war or inter-communal clash and labour force for the sustainability of the community such as; clearing and maintenance of village square, source of water, paths, markets, general security of lives and property within the community and other community development programs. Age grade can singly or in conjunction with another age grade render charity works to any member of the community in time of joy or pain. At "funeral for instance, such charity work could take the form of provision of water, fire wood, clearing the compound, digging grave and staying with the family of the deceased for some days. At marriage the charity work may include manual work, financial aid and gift to the bride. Old people in the community who have no child/children are also taken care of by the age grade"<sup>33</sup>.

From the above delineation, we can say that *Igbo* ethnic age grade leadership structure is a leadership structure that is most natural to humanity and not just Africa alone. The age grades leadership structure unlike other African traditional leadership structure opens up avenues for interactions among individuals in a group and the corresponding sets of groups within the community generally, though sometimes they can maintain loose relationships. Be that as it may, age grades leadership structures have the common objectives of watching closely and educating individuals in the socio-political, economic, religious and moral life of the community, thereby helping to accomplish the maturity of individual and society at large. Age grades leadership structure aims at the gradual achievements of the socio-religious and moral order of the community through collective influence. It serves to remind each member that no man is an island in the society. The age grades leadership structures have special roles in mapping out camps of leadership situation where the individual and collective leadership roles are fulfilled on the basis of merit in line with the moral convictions of the community.

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<sup>33</sup> J. U. T. Nzeako, *Omanala Ndi Igbo*, (Ikeja: Longman Nigeria, 1972), 63-73

## Conclusion

The *Igbo* age grades leadership structure is a leadership style that tallies with the collective life of the people. It is the “normal means if not the only means, of expressing collectivist sense”<sup>34</sup>. The collectivist existence of a group is guided by hierarchical coexistence, which helps to regulate activities of leadership while at the same time, promoting healthy competition in the community. The monolithic leadership structure in almost all the regions of Africa in most cases does not give room for checks and balances and discourages all-inclusiveness. *Igbo* age grade leadership structure is an all-inclusive leadership pattern of governance that is found in every level of age and social units of the community, it is either monolithic or lineage-determined. It is a leadership structure based on collectivism that improves the quality of life of every individual. It operates on the belief that individual is a subject to the community and the community a subject to individual. Therefore, whatever affects an individual affects the community.

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<sup>34</sup> J. K., Nwankwo, ‘A Canonical Evaluation of Igbo Traditional Association’, cited in Goerge Udechukwu G. Dine, *Traditional Leadership as Sample of African Democracy Among the Igbo of Nigeria: A Christian Evaluation*, 140.

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