



AGE GRADES IN AMUZI VILLAGE

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The aim of this paper is to evaluate the function of age grades in Amuzi Community. Age grade system has contributed enormously to the economic, social, political, cultural and environmental development of the community and has served as an agent of socialization. Although it has been undergoing evolutionary changes, its objectives remain the same, that is to bring development awareness to the people. In the past, as in the present, it has served as a custodian of the customs and tradition of the people, in the matter of preservation of justice and rule of law.

This is an original work carried out by the co-authors through empirical research conducted in our village, Amuzi. All the information was obtained from oral and written interviews, references to minutes' books of various age grades in Amuzi.

We must express our thanks to our parents, Mr. D. D. Ugwu and Chief Paul Mbanu Ekechukwu, who gave us the historical analysis of Amuzi Age Grade. Mention must be made of Da Anyanwu Nwovo, who despite his old age, traced the history of our people with particular reference to the beginning of Amuzi Age Grade as he remembers it from about one hundred years ago.

Our dearly beloved wives, Věra Ekechukwu and Florence Dike-Ugwu should be thanked for their patience and moral support throughout the period of writing this paper. We are specially indebted to the various age grades who allowed us the use of their minutes' books from where relevant information was derived.

The Historical Background of Amuzi Village

Amuzi is one of the smallest willages in Ahiazu Local Government Area of Imo State of Nigeria with a population of eight thousand inhabitants (by 1963 census) but the present estimate puts the population at twelve thousand inhabitants. It covers an area of twenty square kilometres and is situated twenty kilometres south-east of Owerri, the capital of Imo State of Nigeria.

Amuzi formed a part of Mbaise in the former Owerri Province, now divided into five local government areas, namely, Mbaise, Agbaja, Ekwereazu, Ezinihitte and Ahiazu Local Government Aeras. Amuzi is in Ahiazu Local Government Area of Imo State and shares common boundaries with Nguru in Agbaja LGA in the south, Amakohia Ikeduru in Mbaitolu LGA in the south-west, in the north by Ogwuama in Ahiazu LGA and by Obodo Ujichi also in Ahiazu LGA. Amuzi is an ancient village with a rich culture. Western culture penetrated quite easily into Amuzi as a result of the influence of white missionaries. Today, it has over two hundred university graduates. Age grade tradition in Amuzi dates as far back as five hundred years ago (Da Anyanwu Nwovo 1981 oral interview).

The Roles and Significance of Age Grade in Amuzi

Mate Selection

In the Igbo traditional society, the choice of a spouse was not so democratic as it is today. Marriage to the Ibo in general and to Amuzi people in particular has always been regarded as a sacred institution. This fact is responsible for the strictness in the choice of a spouse, family background and social status of both parents (Uchendu 1965). Choice of the social status of both parents is very important as it helps one to marry within one's social group.

In Amuzi, we have a minority group formed by "osu", the cult slaves. Cult slaves are people who were either bought by a master or someone who sold himself to a master and the proceeds from his sale were given to him directly. This person lived in the master's household and worked for him for a number of years until he could save enough money to redeem himself. If he behav-

ed well, the master could arrange marriage for him and give him necessary assistance which enabled him to set a new home. Then he had his freedom and could go back to his home if he wished. A slave could marry a free-born (diala) but a cult-slave (osu) could not and still cannot marry a free-born. This ugly custom persists in Amuzi as well as in most Igbo towns till today.

The choice of a spouse could be made by parents, while the would-be husband could also meet his wife during festivities, in the market place by recommendations of friends, relations etc. Apart from the above-enumerated formal means, young males could make their mate selection from girls who were exchanged from war prisoners as a result of inter-village wars. Nowadays, mate selection has taken another dimension. Young men and women feel they should have a say in the selection of their future partners.

The influence of civilization on the culture and tradition of the people has ushered in a new breed of young people who feel they should choose their future partners with minimum interference from their parents. In addition, urbanization and industrialization, which have taken young people away from the village to the towns, enable them to socialize with the opposite sex, which socialization might result in mate selection later. Institutions of higher learning have also become centres for mate selection among young people. In our village, the role of middlemen in mate selection cannot be overlooked. In typical Amuzi marriage, each of the two sides must provide a middleman. The duties of the middleman include inquiring to find out the following:

- a) whether either side has had a history of misconduct
- b) whether either side has had a history of premature deaths
- c) whether the family of the bride has had a history of twin babies*)
- d) whether there is a blood relationship between the two families
- e) and of course whether the bride or the groom are cult-slaves.

*) The negative evaluation of twin babies referred to here is now a thing of past. Today, people regard the birth of twin babies as the highest gift from Almighty God.

At the conclusion of these enquiries, if the outcome permits marriage, the courtship starts and marriage follows.

Grouping the Age

In Amuzi village, every child is born into an age grade. Age grade is the age grouping of male children born in the village within a span of three years. Every child born in Amuzi is exposed to socialization, informal and formal education like his counterparts everywhere in the world. Before his formal education, his parents will teach him about the norms of the society, the do's and the don't's, how to till the earth, cut grass, fetch firewood, fetch water, and in some cases, how to be a good hunter.

A new baby is first of all initiated into the society by those children of the village whose ages range from one to ten years. At the end of confinement known as "omugwo" which lasts for eight weeks in the case of first birth and four weeks in subsequent child births, children ranging from one to ten years gather in family of the parents of the new-born baby for the naming ceremony.

The naming ceremony is characterized by the preparation of a pot of special vegetable soup and a mound of "fufu" made from yam and cassava. This is distributed to the children, after which the naming ceremony starts. The grandparents of the new child participate in the feast, followed by the immediate parents and relations. Each of the children present gives a name of his or her choice. Names are usually not given for fun. They have some distinctive significance which depend very much on the situation. A child may receive many names. He may be given the name of the market day on which he was born. Also he may be given the name of the deity which his parents consider responsible for his birth. In some cases, names will interpret the sorrow and agony of the past of the family circle. For example, a child may be called "Ozoemene" — "Misfortunes should not repeat". This shows that the child's parents lost another child or children in the past. Another name like "Chukwuemeka" meaning "God is kind" signifies the happiness of the parents who lived perhaps without an offspring a long time or parents who have not been blessed with a male child in the past. Age grades consist of two stage namely "Isi Nwannunu" — age grade celebrated with the head of bird

known as the first initiation, and "Omugwo" — child birth celebration known as the second initiation.

The young males group themselves into ages ranging from seven to thirteen years. This is limited to the ward, the reason being that children cannot travel far away from home.

They form a cabinet with a king or president at the head. Every member must kill a bird with a bow and arrow. Any group member who accomplishes this task would leave the bird on the arrow that killed it for presentation to his mates. This is to prove to them that he actually killed the bird and did not pick it up dead. After showing this to every age group member, he would go home with it and present four big yams in addition. Pepper soup would then be prepared with the bird and the four yams. The yams would be peeled and cut into pieces so that each member would have a piece. The bird would not be cut but would be cooked whole.

As soon as the pot of the pepper soup is put on fire, the boy sounds the first wooden gong. The second gong sound would be heard after a fifteen-minute interval. The last gong sound would be heard when the pepper soup is ready. If members delay in coming, he would increase the frequency of the gong, inviting them to hurry up so that the soup would not get cold.

The Sharing of the Pepper Soup

In the sharing of the pepper soup there is no formality in the sitting arrangements. Pepper soup is shared by all members irrespective of their status in the hierarchy of the administration. In any case the host will offer the members kolanuts with palm-wine, served in calabashes, through the king.

Some of the children who are well-behaved, take their share in the guests' house.

After the feast an announcement is made by the king before the closure of the celebration informing the members of the day the actual festivity known as "Iheberi Isi Nwannunu" (Age grade celebrated with the head of a bird) would take place. The host, having completed the preliminary festivity, would normally be informed about the main festivity which takes place four weeks later.

On the eve of the ceremony, each member would contribute four yams and some money as embodied in the constitution. These contributions would be handed over to the host to assist him. The main festivity is much more elaborate and expensive than the preliminary feast. Members at this time invite their relations and other age groups to share their merriment.

"Ihebirisi Nwannunu"

Order of Procession

Ordinary members would be the first to enter, followed by medical corps and judiciary, with the king and his cabinet at the rear. Before the king enters, it would be announced so that everybody would get up to greet him. The whole is characterized by a proverbial silence that could make a deaf hear a drop of pin on the floor. Anybody caught making noise at this moment is fined by the judiciary for disrespecting the king. The host would offer four kolanuts with alligator pepper sauce and a calabash of palmwine to the guests through the king.

Most invariably some guests criticize the size of the kolanuts. Some members would make sneaky remarks that these small kolanuts could conveniently enter into a fowl's eye-hole. The kolanuts are exhibited according to the custom as handed over to them by tradition. The minutes of the last meeting will be read and the association will map other programmes that will follow in the next meeting.

The cooks and stewards would be getting ready to share the food. But before the sharing, the medical corps would be invited to inspect and make a report to the house on the suitability of the food to the health of members. The functions of the medical corps apart from the inspection of food, include inspection of the environment, the arrangements of the seats and the provision of suitable shades. If the medical corps find the food and the environment suitable, then the dishing out starts. But if the food is not tasty, the cooks are fined for negligence. Some members would eat part of their share in the host's house, while others would take their shares home intact.

Second Initiation

"Omugwo or Childbirth Celebration"

At adulthood, the group would start setting up families. The first birth by a member of the group marks the beginning of adulthood age selection. The group would then invite the elders to help them in the selection of their rightful age grade of the group. It is significant that parents should be invited since they know the birth-date of every member of the group. Moreover, age group of three years span are combined to form one age grade.

The second initiation, "Omugwo" or childbirth celebration is wider in outlook than the first initiation — "Ebiri Isi Nwannunu" or "age grade celebrated with the head of a bird" in the sense that it involves the entire Amuzi village.

The market day chosen for age grouping is particularly significant not only to the group but also to the entire Amuzi Community. On the appointed day, the group will offer four kolanuts and a calabash of palmwine to the eldest of the elders present, who blesses them by saying that "he that brings kolanut brings life" and remarks that it is a thing that is traditionally handed from one generation to the other. Their grandfathers handed this custom to them, and today, they are handing it over to their children. He will lift these kolanuts up and ask the ancestors to bless them. He exhibits the kolanuts according to the custom, starting with his nearest kinsmen and ending up with the distant kinsmen of the village. Care is taken not to break the line of kinsmen during the process of exhibition, "Izi Oji".

The ceremony is declared open by the pouring of libation with palmwine asking God to bless and guide the group throughout their lives. Christians among them grace the occasion by offering short prayers. This day reminds the group that they are of age, mature, responsible and can assume the mantle of leadership including leading inter-village wars, wrestling matches etc.

The "Omugwo" Festival

The "Omugwo" festivity is very expensive indeed. Attendance is not limited to members alone but to members' wives, other age grades, friends, relations, in-laws and well-wishers. Our unmarried daughters do not form age grades but wives of members automatically belong to their husbands' various age grade. They

make little financial contributions to the wife of the host on the eve of the "Omugo" festival. This entitles them to certain rights and privileges, e. g. sharing in the foods, drinks etc.

They grace the occasion with songs and music, thus giving moral support to their husbands. It is much more elaborate than wedding feasts. It might involve in some cases the killing of more than a cow depending on one's economic status in the society. The festivity runs through ten market days of which the ninth marks the peak (Igbasinkasi) that members brought along with them. "Igbasinkasi" marks the end of the ceremony during which the remnants of the food cooked would be shared out. The administration body of the festival takes the same form as in the first initiation ceremony, thus you have the "Eze" — King — President and his cabinet and other functionaries. In fact the first initiation is a replica of the second initiation by the kids who are following the footsteps of their parents.

In "Omugwo" festival (like other important festivals in Amuzi) there are certain local food items that are as common as bread and potatoes in Europe. These include "ugba" (oil-bean salad prepared with stockfish), palmoil, garden eggs and hot pepper sauce. Also foods like "fufu" and rice are served with special soup made of "egusi" (melon seeds) and "olubiri" (bitter leaf). These diets must meet the requirements in quality and quantity, the measure of which is represented by a wooden box for rice and oil beans or ugba and a long stick for "fufu".

There is always much to drink, especially palmwine. Towards the end of the ceremony, the next member to host the festivity the following year would be announced. The announcement is marked by the would-be host and his wife dancing to the tune of the music while a feather would be planted into the man's hair with the presentation of the wooden measure box containing the head of a cock.

The Organization of Amuzi Age Grade

Selection of the Village Army

Before the advent of western civilization, age grade served as the base of the village government, and even today it still fulfills this function but within the framework of the constitution of the country generally. In the past, great villages were known

by the number of age grades they had, as this represented the size of their army. During the dark ages when inter-village wars were the order of the day, and men were living in great fears and trepidation, Amuzi people depended on the young members of their various age grades for their survival and preservation.

In those days, inter-village wars were rampant, the elderly age grade members served as advisers to the young age members on the crafts of soldiering and defence of the village. Selection of potential soldiers and leaders in the village army was done by the older members who had observed the younger ones perform during inter-village wrestling bouts. Intelligent members were made generals and war leaders, while the mediocres served as soldiers and auxiliaries. Their training took the form of archery where the best were selected as marksmen. During our research, we were told by the oldest man in Amuzi, Da Anyanwu, that he was once the best marksman in the village for using bow and arrow with precision.

It has been the custom in Amuzi village to bury the daughters married into other villages in Amuzi. At such burials, age grades played and are still playing significant roles. They marched in files of three in order of seniority to the deceased daughter's home singing war songs such as "Mgbe anyi na abia, iwe ekwe anyi biaduo, iwe". (Since we started our journey to our deceased daughter's house, we could not come in time to carry her corpse back to the village due to deep sorrow.) The presence of a large number of age grade groupings at such a funeral accorded respect to the deceased daughter before the kinsmen of her husband. Some of these customs have been undergoing a gradual evolution since the advent of christianity in Amuzi and Nigeria in general. Added to this factor is the mass exodus of young people who have left the village for the cities in search of employment. But the age grade has survived this evolution.

Administration of Justice under the Age Grade

The age grade served and is still serving as a medium of administration of justice among the members and beyond. Each age grade had defined obligations in community service (Isichei, 1976). At the time when there were no courts, people depended on various age grades for the settlements of quarrels and disputes. Each age grade was jealous of its good name; consequently,

it controlled and disciplined its members (Isichei, 1976 : 22). The judges among them were not legally trained as they had no formal education but depended on their intellect for the dispensation of natural justice. They treated such matters as stealing, adultery, land boundary disputes etc. There were offences punishable by banishment or ostracism, such as murdering one's blood relation, having sexual intercourse with a relation, one's father's wife, while his father was still alive, a free-born (diala) having intercourse with a cult-slave (osu) or one found guilty of playing double role during an inter-village war against Amuzi village.

A member of Amuzi community who is offended by a villager sues the person first to the court of his age grade. The court of the age grade is constituted by the "Enze" (king) as the Chairman and his cabinet who would sit to look into the case, but when they could not arrive at a settlement, the matter would be referred to the chief of the village.

One of the latest cases was that of a member of the ninth age grade involved in stealing within the Amuzi village during the Nigerian-Biafran war. The man was ostracized the offence being serious because it was committed at home. A member of the same age grade stole outside Amuzi village but was allowed to retain his membership. Although stealing is viewed with all seriousness everywhere as an offence against natural justice, Amuzi people temper justice with mercy, when the same offence is committed outside the village.

Social and Political Activities of the Age Grade

It has become the order of the day in Amuzi for age groups to complete in various economic, political, educational and social roles. "Male age groups constituted in many places by the children born within a three-year period and larger grouping formed by co-operation among several age groups, performed much of the communal work especially among the Northern Igbos" (Smock, 1971).

Economic Role

Nowadays, developmental activities are not left to government alone. Age groups of different levels contribute to build market stalls, constitute co-operative societies and form themselves into social clubs for economic and social development. They lend

money to members to start their own businesses. They form limited liability companies, especially if there are wealthy members within the group. Some of these social clubs formed by these age groupings act as an insurance scheme to members. They render financial assistance to deceased member's families, bear funeral expenses of members' families and rehabilitate the families of the deceased members; this idea correlates with the "Okazie Age Set of Abiriba which built a town hall to commemorate its Ekpe festival and handed it to the whole town" (Smock, 1971).

Political Role

A strong age grade can form a formidable group for purposes of lobbying the government to provide various amenities to the village. They can even sponsor a member as a potential candidate to contest an election in the local, state and federal houses of assembly.

Educational Roles

Age grades award scholarships to intelligent sons and daughters of members and beyond. Amuzi Community Secondary School was built by the efforts of the various age groups in the village. They sponsored a candidate to study law in Great Britain in 1954. Amuzi village has two primary schools and a central church which were built through communal efforts.

Social Responsibilities of Members

Within the rank and file of the various age grades, there exists a spirit of give and take. Members render such social services to their immediate members as building dwelling houses for members at the latter's requests, assisting in the clearing of farmland, planting, harvesting, etc. Also, they render financial assistance without interest to members during wedding ceremonies and at child-births. They also render assistance to members taking "titles" like "Ozo" title. Members in grave financial needs can borrow money from their own age group — but with reasonable interest. When a member of any age grade dies, the age grade has certain obligations. It is their duty to buy the coffin, dig the grave, and keep an all-night vigil, with music. These immediate assistances rendered to members are usually within the framework of their constitution.

Social Responsibility to the Community

Some social status is attached to any outstanding age grade which makes a distinctive contribution to the social upliftment of the village through the building of roads, town halls, postal agencies, provision of water supply, rural electricity etc. Various age groups spearhead environmental sanitation through the sweeping of compounds, roads leading to the "Eke" Amuzi Market and the market itself. The twelfth age grade of Amuzi, after their initiation on the 23rd December, 1980, undertook to number all the streets in Amuzi at their own expense. (Minutes' Book Twelfth Age Grade 1980.)

Conclusion

The age grade is now undergoing a transition to meet the modern needs and changes. These changes were brought about by colonialism and christianity. Nonetheless, the ubiquity of age grade still remains intact. It renders assistance to members, upholds the tradition and customs and conforms with the norms of the society. In fact it is playing a role equal to none in the social, economic, political and educational life of the community. Even the Federal Government of Nigeria has come to recognize the vital roles played by the various age grades in the country in the development of the social life of the people generally. The age grade serves as a vehicle for socialization not only for the adults but also for the youth of the village. Age grade fulfils the function of formal and informal education and a way of transferring culture and tradition to the on-coming generation.

Explanatory Notes

Alligator Pepper

Hot spice of tiny seeds used in serving kolanuts.

Cassava

Manihot utilisima, staple food of tropical countries. Used for "gari" production, tapioca, put in use usually after fermentation.

Chukwuemeka

Typical Igbo name meaning "God has been very kind". A person given this name signifies the joy of the parents who have lost a child before he was born.

Da or Dida

A prefix added to the name of an elder denoting sign of respect.

Diala

A free-born

Egusi

Melon seeds. Usually dried and pounded into powder and used for making soup. It is oily and could be extracted for other purposes, e. g. cooking oil etc.

Eke Amuzi

Name of the main market in Amuzi. It comes once every eight days.

Ekwe

Wooden pipe of three types: the father — "Nna Ekwe", the mother — "Nne Ekwe" and "Uhie" made from a very large trunk; it has a very high volume and the sound can be heard very far.

Eze

A traditional ruler, noble man.

Fufu

Staple food of Igbos made of a mixture of yam and cassava usually boiled and pounded.

Igbasinkasi

The folding of the armchair used by member in "Omugwo" ceremonies.

Ihebiri Isi Nwannunu

Infant age grade celebrated with the head of a bird.

Izi Oji

Kolanut exhibition conducted in ceremonies in Igboland, showing solidarity and love.

Ogene

Metal gong in conical shape, with a hollow centre and an open end. It has a very high frequency.

Olubi

Bitter leaf used for making soup with "egusi". The bitterness could be reduced when olubi is squeezed in fresh water for a long time. It is regarded as a medicament by the Igbos.

Omugwo or Ihebiri

Adulthood childbirth age grade celebrated when the members' wives start bearing children.

- Osu* A cult-slave, system as old as man among the Igbos of Nigeria. It is equivalent to the caste system in India. Marriage between an "osu" and a "diala" was very difficult to come by. Nowadays christianity has brought some modifications in the custom.
- Ozoemene* Typical Igbo name of a person, meaning "Let the misfortune not repeat". It is given by parents who have lost children in the past.
- Ozo* Title given to outstanding noble men for their achievement in the society. They form an advisory cabinet of the Eze.
- Palmwine* Whitish, alcoholic juice got by tapping young palm trees and raffia palm.
- Ugba* Large seeds of an oil bean tree. Seeds are boiled, sliced into very small pieces and left in water overnight, removed from water and left to ferment. Prepared for eating by mixing with oil, hot pepper, some pieces of potassium which produces foam. Can be eaten with dried fish, meat, boiled stock-fish etc.
- Yam* *Dioscorea elata*, staple food of all Nigerians. It grows in the southern part of Brazil, too. Used as "fufu".

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