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CONSPECTUS OF AGE- GRADES SYSTEM IN IKERE- EKITI

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Abstract

Age grade has been described as an important element in the life of an African. Extant literature and research has established Age- grades as embracing group of persons who according to societal norms and values, are regarded as people of the same age. It is a social institution that constitutes important system in the social structure of a given society. It is more prominent in Africa society because it cuts across socio- cultural, economic and political life activities of the people. The organizational structure of Age-grade system in traditional African society differs from one community to the other. Each of these age setsis clearly distinguished from one another and has a distinctive status or social, cultural, economic and political role which they perform in their various communities and even at individual levels. Ikere, as one of the major towns in Yorubaland generally and Ekiti in particular is equally noted for this system. Right from the pre- colonial era in Ikere, socio- cultural organizations were tied to age grade system. Hence our focus in this research work will be on the origin and growth of age grade, the classification, organizational structure, initiation, ritual rites and ceremonies of age grade system in Ikere-Ekiti. Historical and descriptive methods will be employed as tools for data analysis in the course of this research work.

Keywords: Age grade, Origin, Classification, Organizational structure, Initiation.

Introduction

Age-grade system is the grouping of all the members in a given community into class on the basis of age, purposely of keeping the community intact politically, economically and socio-culturally. In the submission of Fadipe (1970) on the membership of age grade in Ijebu, he affirmed that such started before the age of puberty and was compulsory, and strictly being on an age- basis. This submission was corroborated by July (1987) that;

> *An age grade association made up of individuals who had achieved manhood through commonly shared puberty rites. They performed communal duties such as road repair or bridge building, and clearing. Such labour performed in a game like manner and accompanied by spirited feasting and dancing.*

This system had become a convenient means of discerning a senior from a junior. In all over the Yoruba society, seniority is of great importance while reverence for elders is common feature. Therefore, Ogungbemi (2003) affirmed that Old age is taken into consideration in the Socio- cultural, economic and political life of the people, and more importantly in discharging of communal duties and in the sharing of things.

Right from the time immemorial, the practice of Age- grades system had been seeing as an important element in the life of the people for the fact that every activity in the community revolves round it. Also it is an effective mechanism for check mating social vices and for capacity building in the community. The Age-grades system were important to let individual know the significance of his age and its relevance in the society (Babalola, 2010). This system dictates when an individual in a given community is expected to undertake some socio-cultural and economic responsibility such as marriage, building of personal houses, contribution of levies and payment of dues, taking up of chieftaincy title as well as taking up to a skill that could serve as a means of livelihood such as farming, hunting, weaving, dye and tie, Trading, Bricklayer, Blacksmith etc. There is no way by which one could evade the membership of the age grade to which one falls therein, hence age-grade does not recognized on the basis of achievement, honour or status. This is the more reason while a man holding title in the community still falls into age grade within his age bracket though he may not perform any communal work but it is compulsory that he maintained his membership with a particular age grade.

Origin and Growth of Age-Grades system in Ikere-Ekiti

Ikere-Ekiti is one of the ancient towns in the Northeastern part of Yoruba kingdom. It situates at the southern part of the present day Ekiti State. Ikere- Ekiti is located $7^0\ 50^l$ latitude and $5^0\ 23^l$ longitude and it is situated at elevation of 381 meters above sea level.(World Atlas,2018) It landscape is generally undulating, dotted by rugged hills of relative height. These hills are round top ones otherwise known as inselbergs (Adetuberu, 1979). Prominent among these hills are; Olosunta, Orole, Agama, Utamorajerin, Agbosu, Ugele and Ajaribi hills. Most of these hills are as old as the town; they are historically and culturally famous. With these features Ikere-Ekiti shares common name with the Yoruba subgroups called Ekiti- meaning land of mountains.

Ikere-Ekiti is about 10 kilometer distance from Ado- Ekiti the present capital city of Ekiti State which it shares boundary with in the North (Ojomoyela, 2016). To the South, Ikere-Ekiti shares boundary with Iju- Itaogbolu which is the border town between Ondo State and Ekiti state. It is about 25 kilometers distance to Akure, the capital town of Ondo State. Hence Ikere-Ekiti serves as the gateway to Ekiti land in the Southern route. In the West, it has Igbara- Odo and Ilawe as her neighbours while Emure and Ise/ Orun are her Eastern neighbours.

Age-grades system is an aged long socio- cultural and economic institution in Ikere- Ekiti. This system is as old as the town and today nobody could actually say when the system came into being in the town. Information gathered through oral interview from the town affirmed that with the population explosion in the town through migration there was expansion that re-carved the geographical boundary of the town with this, the idea of Age-grade was unfolded while people of equal or about the same age identified themselves and came together to foster communal spirit that needed for the progress and development of the town.

Another informant orates that the strategic location of Ikere- Ekiti between two strong and powerful towns; Ado- Ekiti and Akure caused her to be always battle ready. In agreement with this, Ikere- Ekiti is a nodal town where many roads from different towns converge, this singular nature of Ikere town had actually subjected her to series of attacks from her neigbouring towns in those days of inter- community clashes. Among these towns were: Ise, Igbara-odo, Ilawe, Ijare, Ado and Akure which their roads linked the town.

To prevent this, the young ages of thirty years and there about among the local people were mainly used as the warriors for offensive and defensive battles; hence the military organization was based on age grades which played significant role in providing the needed able body men as army for their community security against the attacks from neighbouring communities and for stability of the town (Okodo, 2012). At the same time, many rituals and sacrifices were performed to appease the gods of the land against the attacks of the enemies; such assignments were performed by some particular age grade (Oluwafoise, 1988). For these reasons age–grade was more prominent in Ikere- Ekiti than any other towns in Ekiti in particular and Yoruba at large. Age-grade therefore, was the foundation through which one is being recognized as of age to be involved in communal activities.Consequently, Age-grades became part of Ikere- Ekiti socio-cultural and economic life which individual must belong to in the three major quarters occupied by the early migrants and the aborigines of the town (Uro, Odo- Oja and Oke'kere). This has ever been a unified factor in Ikere-Ekiti before the coming ofother late settlers' quarters (Afao, Are, Agbado, Ilu- Omoba and Oyo).

It is not clear who among the aborigines that came with this idea before it was later spread to other quarters in Ikere- Ekiti. But through investigation, it was gathered that at Ile-Ife where all the Yoruba towns laid claim to as their source today, the practice of Age-grades system was not common. This suggests that the people that migrated from Ile- Ife to settle at Ikere-Ekiti might not actually be the one that came with this practice. Likewise neither written records nor data collected from the informants have ever ascertained that the people from Benin came with this idea to Ikere-Ekiti. Even though investigation reveals that the practice was common to Benin. Hence where and how the system originated in Ikere- Ekiti is not yet established and remained insilence. But the fact still remains that the origin of the age-grades system in Ikere- Ekiti like any other towns where the system is being practiced is traceable to the protection and transmission of cultural values of the town, defense in times of war, welfare and mutual assistance in times of unforeseen circumstances to the members and the town. Also in joyous moment such as marriage, burial of old aged parent, progenitor and naming ceremony (Uche, 2012). This view was corroborated by Okafor as cited in the work of Okodo (2012) and states thus:

> *The age-grade also transmits moral values. In societies where the existence of age-grades are recognized and valued, members are socialized to value path of hard work and efforts in their performance of duties…..They give helping hand in the execution of community projects such as: building market, constructing bridge and roads and public building*

Adeyemi asserted that it is customary in Ikere-Ekiti from time immemorial that everybody belong to a group exclusively of his age range. With evolve of this system, individual in the

town was able to know the period or age with which one could be appointed as a chief or given any position of responsibility. In Ikere-Ekiti, both male and female of the same age belong to the age-grades exclusive of their age range. But the females are not as active as the males in the community activities that involve physical discharge such as defense during the war time, clearing and cutting grasses, road works as well as police and guards to the king. They are not involved in other physical trainings that met to determine the physical strength of the members in a particular age-grade. Rather the women folks preform some menial works such as sweeping and keeping clean of market square and other public places, clearing the rubbish hoed by their male counterparts. During the important communal rituals which are the most social and religious activities among the age-grades, and festivals that formed important aspect of traditional religion among the people of Ikere- Ekiti, women added quaint values through singing, dancing, worshiping and paying of reverential homage to the divine Beings and ancestors (Akinta, 2013).

The Classification of Age- grades in Ikere- Ekiti

In each of the quarters at Ikere- Ekiti, age is the basis and same prerequisite necessary for the classification into age-grades. Although the age of all the members of one particular age-grade are not the same but people that were born within the age brackets of about four to five years constituted themselves into a particular age-grades within their quarters (Ilogu, 1984). One of the essential aspects of this classification is that the age range is unpredictable. In some cases senior and junior brothers of the same parent can belong to the same age-grades. While in other way round, the oldest in an age-grade could be older than some members of the immediate senior age-grade.

In each of the age-grades, even though some are older than others all the members are equal among themselves and they treat themselves as equals. Movement from one age-grade to another is likened with the promotion in the school system where one needs to graduate from lower class and proceeds into the higher level. In line with this, every individual spends five years in each age-grade before proceeding into the next age- grade. For further clarification, these five years is equivalent to four calendar years.

There are about nine to ten age-grades among the three major quarters in Ikere- Ekiti. The variation discerns from the rank in which someone starts to name them. Ogunrinde contended that some list recognizes only the viable age- grades while in some, there are overlapping in the names. From the information gathered the starting point of age-grades in Ikere- Ekiti is *Yinmiyinmi.* This is the age when a child has grown up to the level that he could be only sent on an era by his parent within their compound; carrying chieftaincy hand fan (*Abebe-oye*) after his parent to the meetings or ceremonies, especially those that their parent were chiefs. But at this age a child is not yet grown to the level of carrying out some attention-grabbing duties in the community but only involve in singing around the quarters with his group for entertainment and social awareness during the festive season, hence they are being called *Mokoletiopon*. This is the reason while a times this age-grade name is not well pronounced in the list of the age-grades among the three major quarters in Ikere- Ekiti. However, the list of age-grade ends up at *Kolegbe or Ukoko*as claimed by Olofe. This is the age when one is old enough to carry out any physical community assignment.

Therefore the lists of the age-grades in Ikere with their approximate age are as follows:-

S/n	**Name**	**Approximate Age**
1.	Yinmiyinmi/ Mokoletiopon	12-15
2.	Mojayera	16-20
3.	Mojuara	21-24
4.	Monimusu	25- 28
5.	Monigbao	29- 32
6.	Ibedo	33- 36
7.	Egiri	37- 40
8.	Efa/ Igbakin	41- 44
9.	Osaka	45- 48
10.	Kolegbe/ Ukoko	49 and above

Each of these age-grades was given special name that helps to define their position in Ikere-Ekiti communities relative to other. Likewise these different age-grades encumbered with different roles which fit into their description by name and age grouping. As years pass by, the younger age-grades in this classification ascend the ladder and take over the roles of the older ones. Each of these classifications serves as avenues for social interaction among members.

From the above classification, the relevant age-grades which are liable to the duties and privileges of full grown up person in Ikere-Ekiti community are only four such include Ibedo, Egiri, Igbakin and Osaka, out of these four age-grades two of them could be reckoned with as the most useful and conspicuous in the area of socio-cultural and economic development in the town, these include Ibedo and Osaka. The participation of others age-grades (Yinmiyinmi, Mojayera, Mojuara, Monimusu and Molugbao) in the affairs of the town is very little because they are too young. The Kolegbe or Ukoko age-grade is the eldest and the last in the list of classification which any one could attain. They do not perform any Physical function in the town because of their old age. They were noted for tobacco smoking pipe that is why their name was coined to be called *Ukoko*. Nevertheless the town counts much on their wealth of experience and their advice which could be helpful for the progress and peaceful co-existence in the town. Nowadays the classification of these age-grades is not absolute for the fact that there are many people who are more than five years older than the age-grade they belong. Apart from this, the school system has also altered this classification while many classmates today regardless of the age differences see themselves as age mates and thereafter they belong to the same age- grades.

The Organizational Structure Of age-grades in Ikere-Ekiti

The structure of age-grades is the same in the three major quarters that make up Ikere- Ekiti. This structure is in line with political organization of the town whereby each quarters has two chiefs among the king makers which are often called *Iare-mefa.* From Oke-kere quarters we have*Sapetu* and *Edemo*, while in Uro quarters *Sao* and *Odunro* are the two chiefs belong to this category. At Odo-oja quarters, Ologotun and Saya belong to the category of *Iare.* Hence from each of the quarters the age-grades particularly Ibedo and Osaka has two leaders each who will lead their people for the period of five years. These leaders are chosen from the two sub-

quarters in each of the major quarters. From Oke-kere quarters Ilapetu and Edemo will produce one person each who will lead the age-grades. Likewise at Odo-oja and Uro quarters where Ogbonjan and Odose will produced one person each, Oke-uro or Okeruku and Odo-uro will equally produce each person as the leader of the age-grades. The composition of the leaders of age-grades will be six (6) among the three major quarters in Ikere-Ekiti. The overall leader will be chosen from Odo-oja quarters. This position is being rotated among the two sub- leader from this quarters that is, Ogbojana and Odose. Among the Ibedo age-grades, there is an appointment of *Ibedo-omowa* which is being chosen among the royal family and this appointment is only peculiar to Uro quarters.*Onibedo* or *Ibedo-omowa* has been fondly called is the one in-charge of carrying Ogaga yam from the farm to the palace and during this process which term *Ijesu-oba* or *Idasu-oba* (new yam festival), he will lead the possession of his age-grades from the farm, holding yam in their hands to the king's palace where the yam will be gathered at *imorun*. During the possession, *Onibedo* will dress in traditional ceremonial regalia which will distinguish him from other members.

Initiation, Ritual and Ceremonies of the Age-grades in Ikere-Ekiti

The age-grade system which is vital in the socio- cultural and economic structure of Ikere-Ekiti undergo initiation and ritual processes before eventually ended it up with ceremonies. The initiation process which is the introduction into a new area of life begins at the admittance into any of the age- grades, and the promotion from one level into a new one. Whilst the ritual is posited by Mbiti (1991) as

> *an arm of religious practices of the African which serves as a platform which religious action or ceremonies are carried out. It is a means of communicating religious significance through word, symbol or action. Hence ritual is a concept that concerns the life of an individual in passage of life and provides continuity among those who perform or attend them. In other way round ritual can be either family based or community based and show a great deal of religious conduct which is transmitted from one generation to the other.*

Ritual, therefore among the age-grades in Ikere–Ekiti is the system of setting procedures and actions of the group begins with the selection of the leaders who will lead any of the age-grades for the period of five years. Some ritual rites are embedded in festival in forms of actions and practices which could be taking form of blessing, prayer and incantation. Ritual rites may not only exemplify certain features liberally but also in metaphorical traits some of the metaphorical expression of rituals includes joy, sorrow, supplication and gratitude which could be expressed during the important celebration and the burial of important personality (Ifemosu, 2014). Among the age- grades in Ikere-Ekiti the ritual rites are equally expressed during the annual sacrifices that precede the traditional festivals and ceremonies. Before the expiration of five years in any of the age-grade, the outgoing one needs to initiate the income one into the system.

This is being done by accommodating them into their group at the last year of their exit from that age-grade in order to observe their activities and equally mentoring them on how to carry out some specific responsibilities attach to that age-grade. At this period many traditional

songs that are essential during the traditional festivals like new yam festival, Ogunoye and Olosunta festival, as well as installation of king and chiefs and also, during the death of the king and some prominent chief in the community would be learnt. For instance, the yam festival which is very prominent in Ikere-Ekiti is being carried out by Ibedo age-grades. Different songs were to be sung at every stage before the yam eventually arrived at *imorun* where it will be stored at Ogoga's palace. The songs go thus;

In the morning when the Ibedo age-grades are going to the farm to convey the yams to the town, their songs resonate as follows:

Esunmirin o mo to okoodobo,irodoburodoesunmirin.
O mo to okoodobo, irodoburodoesunmirin

Meaning: new yam species is coming home from the farm. Hence the song will thereafter change as they are about to enter the town to different one that goes thus;

Eobeo re oleleisu aba ta abula (2x)
e!ee!eee! olele, e!ee!eee! olele. (2x)

Meaning, the yam of the father (king) yielded big tuber that worth so much. At the last stage when the Ibedo are about entering the palace where the yams would be gathered at *Imorun* their song will then change to;

Eekin mi ho mo ho gbogbora so awode me tuye.

Meaning: having look round the community it observed that several people appear in festive mood.

Likewise, Osaka age-grades who were in charge of presenting sacrificial cow called *Enila* to Olukere during the annual Olosunta festival have their own traditional ritual process that will take off from Ogoga palace. The Osaka age-grades will hand over the rope of the cow to Ogoga at his palace where he will use it to offer prayer to Olosunta and in turn hands over the rope back to Osaka with two pods of Kolanut. There may be a situation where the king a time adds a goat. From there they took the cow to Odo-oja where it will be handed over to Olukere at the site of Olosunta hill usually called *Arogbeje* for the annual sacrifice. During the process, the Osaka age-grades has ritual song which to be rendered. The song goes thus;

Eemogba ta po o, ee se kunagoke,
Enila re me yi o ee se kunagoke,
Oluaye we gbo o ee se kunagoke

As part of the rituals, the Osaka age-grades, having handed over the cow to Olukere would not taste from the cow after it has been slaughtered for sacrifice. Thus the popular saying among Ikere-Ekiti people concerning this age-grade, *Agbeenila Olosunta ma too*. meaning: the convyance of Olosunta sacrificial cow without having a taste of it.

It is part of initiation process for one to involve in physical exercise like *Ijakadi (*wresting) *Opajija*. This is being used to prove how competent, brave and fit a person is before joining any of the age-grades. This kind of initiation is being undergone by the junior age-grades before the attainment of Ibedo.

The selection of the leaders among the age-grades were not guiding by any law since there were no written laws or code of conducts that back up the activities of the age-grades but several rituals and customs must be observed. Therefore whosoever that must be chosen as a leader must possess some qualities that distinguished him from others in many ways, such must has sound knowledge of the customs and tradition of the community, such person must be of a proven and unquestionable character, one that is brave and commanding personality, eloquent, industrious and affluence (Ndukwe, 2015). It is a conventional practice among the age-grades that there must be some foundational members who usually rally round to bring other people together at initial stage for the formation of such age-grade. Such people often referred to as *Agbe-egbe*. These are the set of people who will take up the ritual aspect of selecting the leader of such age grade. These people will make consultation with *Ifa* oracle from three or four different places to confirm the right choice in the list of those shortlisted to be the leader of such age grade. After the pronouncement of the right choice name by *Ifa* oracle the name will be given to the head of warrior chiefs in each quarters of the town such as Ekuasa Uro, Odooja and Oisa or Saruku Okekere, who will present such name publicly to the members of the age-grades in the night preceding Ogun festival. This marked the period when there would be a change of batting among the age grades in Ikere-Ekiti.

Any leader chosen by *Ifa* oracle and presented before the member publicly will lead that particular age-grade for the period of five years, and such must enter into covenant with the gods of the land and members of the age-grade. The covenant taking is essential in order to guarantee safety of the members from various attacks that may emanate from the members themselves. Hence age-grades are bound by covenant that they are not only one and take care of themselves but would also not harm one another in any way. At the same time covenant taking enable the leaders to keep secret things concerning the custom of the land in order to avert any evil. In doing this such leader would swear an oath in the shrine of some potent idol to protect the land and their members.

The pronouncement and presentation of the leader of any particular age-grades by the concern chiefs in each of the quarters particularly, the war chiefs such as Ekuasa at Iro and Odo-oja respectively and Oisa or Saruku at oke-kere, after the confirmation of *Ifa* oracle led to another stage of ritual process. Each member will contribute certain amount of money to buy hens; cocks or goats depending on the amount contributed, and converged at the house of the newly pronounced leader where it will be slaughtered. This ritual process has ever been a string that bound the members of age-grades together and enhances cooperation with their leaders. It is this ritual that would open door to other ceremonies that later involved such as feasting, wine and dying, joyous sacrifices, dancing and singing round the town in the special uniform, *Asoegbejoda.* This is very significant among the age-grades as an expression of gratitude to God that they have lived to enter the new or recognized age-grade.

Conclusion

This study has paid scholarly attention to the historical development and growth of Age grade system in Ikere-Ekiti. It also established the fact that Age-grades is part of Ikere- Ekiti socio-cultural and economic life which individual must belong to in the three major quarters occupied by the early migrants and the aborigines of the town (Uro, Odo- Oja and Oke'kere). This has ever been a unified factor in Ikere-Ekiti through its organization structure that cut across the three major quarters before the coming ofother late settlers' quarters.

The classification of age grade in Ikere-Ekiti also revealed that even though some are older than others all the members are equal among themselves and they treat themselves as equals. Every individual spends five years in each age-grade before proceeding into the next age-grade. The age-grades are classified by given special name that helps to define their position in Ikere-Ekiti communities relative to other. This serves as avenues for social interaction among male and female members.

The study also established the fact that the age- grade system in Ikere- Ekiti undergoes initiation and ritual processes as a measure of introduction into a new circle of life. It begins at the admittance into any of the age- grades, and the promotion from one level into a new one. This process also well pronounced during the selection of the leader(s) among the age grades. However,the study expands the frontiers of knowledge on age-grade system as a traditional mechanism for social order in Ikere-Ekiti.

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