Age Grades, Indigenous Socialisation and Sustainable Development in Igala Communities

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Abstract

This paper is focused on age grade system as agent of indigenous socialisation and sustainable development in Igala communities. The paper examines the roles of age grades as agents of indigenous socialisation and sustainable development in Nigeria. It investigates the cultural influence of Anambra West of the South East, Nigeria and Ibaji Local Government Area of Igala Extraction as a result of proximity. The problem of the study is seeking solutions to the problems of youth restiveness, which is very prevalent in the society today in order to achieve SDGs goal by 2030. The study relies on both primary and secondary sources to justify the arguments on the role of age grade. Oral interview was conducted and the results as seen in the table show that age grade system helps, in improving socio -cultural, sociological and philosophical ideology of communities, by expanding the synergy of various members and mobilising them for socialisation in different forms for sustainable development goal. The paper recommends among others that: government should use age grade as platform for socialisation in most programmes in rural communities since there is already an established modus operandi to implement indigenous curriculum.

Keywords: Age Grade, Indigenous Socialisation and Sustainable development.

Introduction

In a traditional society, age grade plays a vital role in rural development. In the context of this paper, age grade is defined as a social institution where the people who are born within the same age bracket come together in an indigenous community to form a formidable association where the value system and social activities of the community are sustained and maintained

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for sustainable development. The basic role of age grade is to facilitate economic and social activities of the community with the aim of identifying and solving the problem bothering the community.

According to Esekpe et al., (2022), age grade is a social peer group that carries out rural development within Africa. Age grade is one of the most robust surviving indigenous and cultural institutions that are concerned with socialisation of its members, especially for sustainable development right from the pre-colonial time till the present day.

The people's culture is connected to their overall spiritual and secular lives. However, every ethnic group has their own peculiar guiding principles, and ethno-cultural philosophy that distinguish from another. One of those famous ethno-cultural groups that are saddled with rural development is age grade.

Age grade as an agent of indigenous socialisation for sustainable development enhances cultural, economic, political and traditional policies and programs that help in infrastructural development in terms of roads construction/rehabilitation, electricity, pipe-born water, education, employment opportunity, and industrial development which is the center of sustainable development in Nigeria (Esekpe et al., 2022).

In the words of Forded and Jones (2005), the primary role of age grade includes community development, provision of welfare services among members, community policing, community safe-guiding during war, social control agent, provision of mutual support and forest tree cutting etc. In Nigeria, the formation of age grade varies from one tribe to another based on cultural arrangement of the people from the ancient tradition which today serves as agents of socialisation for sustainable development.

Wikipedia (2014) defines age grade as a form of social institutional organisation based on age, within a series of such categories, through which an individual or group of individuals pass over the course of their lives. (Erim et al, 2011, Okpa el at 2018) defines age grade as a traditional institution constituted by an essential system in which the social structures of Nigerian societies develop. It can also be seen as an association of people who were born within a period of time and whose ideology is centered on attainment of goal and setting values which regulate their conducts. These values of age grade, when achieved, will facilitate the attainment of SDGs by the year 2030.

In most traditional society, age grades fall between one to two years age. In the age grade formation, any new member who wants to join must identify a member who was born within the same period, who must give consent before that member can be accommodated. In the village setting, every member between the ages of fifteen and above must identify themselves with a particular age grade in order to participate in the traditional/communal activities which are bound on everybody.

Age grade further helps in organising fund raising activities which are for rural developmental purposes and give avenues for the payment of levies. Other duties performed include maintenance of law and order, peacemaking during crises, decision making, encouragement

among themselves, such as encouraging educational activities by contributing toward educational project, promoting tourism centers, building of market centers, and promotion of transport service through the purchase of buses for transportation purposes (Esekpe etal 2022)

Studies have established that age grade is more formidable in the Eastern part of Nigeria. The decentralised system of administration mostly practised from the ancient precolonial period gives room for communal participation among various institutions as agents of socialisation such as: age grade, council of elders, chiefs, parental, maternal formative which aid in administrative system and implementation of major policies and projects such as clearing of foot paths, maintenance of streams, maintenance of government projects : pipe-born-water, electricity, health centers, schools and markets .

Age Grade System among the Igala People

In the pre-colonial era, traditional rulers, especially, among the Hausa/Fulani, were of paramount importance, and these rulers enjoyed the enormous loyalty of their subjects. At this stage, North Central Nigeria as we have today were classified under the Hausa/Fulani in terms of administration. But the Igala ethnic group was not directly under Hausa-Fulani. They had interaction and influences from the neighbouring ethnic groups. The Igala Kingdom was a powerful state in the pre-colonial period, with its own system of governance and administration. Because of the presence of the traditional rulers, it was therefore not difficult for the colonial masters to govern the people when they took over the mantle of governance of the country to establish continuum through indirect rule system using the established governments of the traditional rulers (Admin, 2018).

This administrative system of Hausa/Fulani from the precolonial period has direct influence on the Igala political and administrative system. That is why Adbdullahi (2016) states clearly that, before the advent of colonialism in Igala land, the Igala people were administered politically through various chains of administration; power radiates from the central authority under the control of the Attah. This control trickled down to the various districts that were manned or controlled by the various chiefs (Onuhs). The chiefs (Onuhs) received instructions from the Attah and reported back to him on a regular basis. This direct rule system made it impossible for the Igala extractions to have an established Age Grade System up till this present day.

The Igbo rejected the indirect rule system because they had no central traditional rulers. All that they had was age grade system, where every man was as equal as his neighbour. This forms the reason the Hausa/Fulani wields a very big political influence on the rest of the major ethnic groups in the country and decides the political fate of many Nigerians today (Admin, 2018).

It has been established that the indirect rule practised during precolonial period made it impossible for an established Age Grade in the Igala extraction of North Central Nigeria. It is worthy to note that the situation above is not peculiar to Ibaji Local Government Area because

of the proximity with South Eastern Nigeria. The decentralised system of administration in Ibaji LGA as a result of proximity with the Igbo, resulted in borrowed culture, which gave birth to communal participation among various institutions as agents of socialisation. This system aids administrative system and implementation of major policies and projects such as clearing of foot paths, maintenance of streams, maintenance of government projects (pipe-born-water, electricity, health centers, schools and markets) etc. in Ibaji which distinguishes Ibaji from other LGA in the zone.

Brief Background of the Igala People

Igala is an ethnic group native to the region south of the confluence of the Niger and Benue Rivers in the North Central Nigeria. The major occupations of the Igala people are farming and hunting. This could be as a result of the ecologically diverse region that is ideal for cultivation of crops. The Igala kingdom is ruled ceremonially and culturally by the Attah and has a long history of political warfare and campaigns with neighbouring groups along the Benue. Igala people traditionally worship the Supreme Being, Ojo, (gods) as well as their divine ancestral spirits. Masquerade is an important aspect of Igala arts and it is a prime example of the kingdom's cultural exchange with its neighbouring groups (Obaje et al., 2024).

The geographical location played an important role in the development of the Igala Kingdom because the kingdom is situated between the apex of the Niger River and Benue River, with the seat of power located at Idah, which become the capital of the Igala people. There is no doubt that the location of Igala around the major rivers in Nigeria brought an abundance of cultural influence from various communities such as Igbo, Yoruba, Edo, and Jukun. This fact can be connected to economic growth in trading in Igala kingdom. The Igala kingdom is ruled by the "Attah", and the most notable Attah that has ever ruled the Igala kingdom are Atta Ayegba Oma Idoko and Atta Ameh Oboni. Oma Idoko is said to have offered his beloved daughter by burying her alive to ensure that Igala won a war of liberation from Jukun dominance. This sacrifice and commitment to sustain and uphold the Igala kingdom made him notable among the Attas that have ever ruled the Igala land. Attah Amen Oboni on the other hand is known for his bravery and resoluteness because of his stiff resistance against the British and struggle to uphold the ancient traditions of Igala land (Egbunu, 2009).

The Igala people believe in three divine beings: gods, ancestors, and diviners. Igala ancestors are called Ibegwu. Ibegwu have a direct connection with Ojo (gods), serving as his representatives and messengers. Ibegwu have the power to protect the wellbeing of humans in agricultural fertility. If the ancestors are not properly honoured, they also have the ability to punish humans. Every year, before the yam harvest, ancestors are honored at the Ibegwu festival. This is to praise them for their protection in the past year, in hopes for more blessings in the year to come.

The Igala people believe that there are three different realms the human spirit will occupy in their existence: life after birth, adult life, and life after death. The ancestral spirits are very

important to the people of the mortal world. It is the goal of the Igala people to maintain a balanced relationship with their ancestors by honouring them through rituals and offerings. If properly honoured, the ancestors will offer blessings and protection to the living. Ancestral spirits interact with the living in various ways. The spirits can be reincarnated as babies, or be called upon through masquerade (Ugboja, 2024).

Age grade is another important aspect of Igala culture, aimed at social development, economic development and environment protection. This primary aim of MDGs is the major interest of age grades system of Ibaji LGA, in the Igala extraction of the North Central Nigeria

Concept of Socialisation

Socialisation as an agent can been seen as a group/institution that influences beliefs, behaviours, and values of people using social programmes. According to Nickerson, (2024), Agents of socialisation are the people, groups, and social institutions that affect one's self concept, attitudes, and behaviours. For example, parents, teachers, priests, television personalities, rock stars, etc. Agents of socialisation teach people what society expects of them and shapes their behaviours. Through socialisation people learn what is right and wrong, and the skills they need to function as members of their culture.

Certain agencies are basic in the evolution of human societies. These agencies become overtly visible as soon as societies take shape. They are therefore, referred to as traditional agencies because they are fundamental to the existence of the societies. According to Akude (in Akpomuvie, 2016), in Nigeria and in most parts of black Africa, certain social groups characterise the rural communities. Commonest of such social groups are the age grade and village assemblies which have in recent times mobilised themselves to form larger town unions.

These traditional agencies have all through the history of human societies played significant roles in bringing development nearest to the door steps of our rural communities. Each has contributed immensely to the educational, economic and social development of the countryside. The major concern of this paper however, is to bring about the insight of the activities of age-grade as a traditional agent of socialisation for sustainable development in Nigeria. This study becomes necessary at this point because of the dearth of values and morals among youths and to restore peace and unity and discourage social vices among the youths to achieve SGD objectives in 2030

Theoretical Framework

Theory of poverty by Williams (1980) and Sampson, Robert J., John H. Laub and age grade theory of informal and social control (1998) are used to form background for this study. This study will be anchored on the version argued by Bradshaw, 2007. The major tenet of the theory is that limited resources and opportunities are driven by economic, social and political factors. According to the structural theorists, poverty is due to the structure of the larger socioeconomic order (Abdulai & Shirmshiry, 2014). The proponents of this theory attribute

the source of poverty to economic, political, and social system which causes people to have limited opportunities and resources with which to achieve income and well-being (Bradshaw, 2006). The tenet of the Age-Graded Theory of Informal Social Control by Robert J. Sampson and John H. Laub is that social bonds and informal social controls influence criminal behaviour throughout an individual's entire life, with key life events (called "turning points") having the potential to either lead to or deter from a life of crime.

The theories are relevant to the study because they hold that poverty is caused by structure of social, political and economic system. These are the issues that SDGs must address through age grade as an agent of indigenous socialisation. Age grade theory also argues that social bond can control criminal behaviour, therefore through social programmes by age grade as agents of socialisation youth restiveness can be controlled leading to the actualisation of MDGs. This study also asserts that if adequate information is given through the right channel, ignorance will be minimised, which will reduce poverty and improve humanity. One major factor that causes poverty is ignorance. This paper therefore advocates that age grade system be used to socialise people, especially in the rural area where poverty is being weaponised by politicians in order to achieve sustainable development goals objectives by the year 2030.

Sustainable Development Goals in Nigeria
Sustainable development, according to the United Nations (UN), is the organising principle for meeting human development goals while at the same time sustaining the ability of natural systems to provide the natural resources and ecosystems services upon which the economy and society depend. The desirable end result of this is a state of society where living conditions and resource use continue to meet human needs without undermining the integrity and stability of the natural systems (Alamu, 2017).

Ojo (2014), contends that efforts at ensuring stable peace, which is the bedrock of sustainable development, can only yield the desired fruition if holistic approach is designed for addressing the menace of poverty afflicting the continent and its people. In the final analysis, the study offers recommendations towards ensuring peace and development with a view to preventing endemic poverty confronting the continent and its citizenry. This study states that peace is the gate way to achieving sustainable development goal and age when adopted in the rural community can help sustainable peace and sustainable goal.

Sustainable development is that development that meets the present needs without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs. According to the United Nations, the components that work together to produce sustainable development are economic development, social development and environmental projection (UN General Assembly, 2005). These three must be conceptualised together, planned together and implemented together by a government to achieve the desired results.

Sustainable development in a way has a moral dimension that demands a great sense of responsibility from the leader (government) and the follower (citizen). The SDGs came into

effect in January, 2016 and it is a (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) policy guideline and funding programme for the next fifteen years. The goals are to be accomplished by all member nations (189 countries) by 2030. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) also known as the Global Goals (GGs) are structured to end poverty, protect the environment and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity. The goals, 17 in number, are fashioned out from the earlier Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and are presented in the diagram below:

Figure i. Source: conceptual framework on age grade and SDGs relationship (Ugboja, 2025)

In September 2015, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals. This includes 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This 17 SDGs as seen in the diagram above are explained below:

1. End poverty in all its forms 2. Zero hunger and promote sustainable agriculture 3. Ensuring healthy lives for all citizens 4. Equitable and quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunity for all 5. Achieve gender equality and empower all women 6. Ensuring clean water and sanitation 7. Ensuring affordable, reliable and sustainable modern energy for all citizens 8. Promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth, productive and decent work for all citizens 9. Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialisation and foster innovation 10. Reduce inequality within and among countries 11. Make cities and

human settlements inclusive, safe resilient and sustainable 12. Ensure sustainable consumption and production pattern 13. Combat climate change and its impact 14. Conserve and sustainably use oceans, seas, and marine resources for sustainable development 15. Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss 16. Build peace and justice, strong institution, inclusive institutions at all levels for all citizens 17. Partnership to achieve the goal; strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development.

The above SDGs will be achieved if indigenous communities are given social, political and economic opportunity that can eradicate poverty and security. This paper therefore asserts that if age grade is used as agents of indigenous socialisation, the rural communities will be given adequate information that can reduce poverty and security to achieve SDG goals in 2030. Table below shows the structure and administration of age in Ayah/Iteh community of Ibaji LGA, Kogi State.

Table1: The Structure and Administration of Age Grade in Ayah, Ibaji LGA, Kogi State, Nigeria

Age Grade	Age Range	Activities/Responsibilities
(Akoo Age Grade) Agbodi Olopu (Youth Adviser)	Within the ages of 72 to 75year	In charge of masquerade during burial and festivals, settle disputes, maintain law and order and so on and serve as heads of community development services, custodians of culture
Okpaka Next age grade to Agbodi Olopu	Within the ages of 69 to 72years	Next to Agbodi Olopu. They protect community against internal and external aggression and any other responsibility assigned to them by community leader
Nwodu	Within the ages of 66 to 69	Protect community against internal and external aggression and any other responsibility assigned to them by community leader.
Akwunechenyi	Within the ages of 63 to 66	Protect community against internal and external aggression and any other responsibility assigned to them by community leader.
Oganajo	Within the ages of 60 to 63	Protect community against internal and external aggression and any other responsibility assigned to them by community leader.
Odenigbo No2	Within the ages of 57 to 60	Protect community against internal and external aggression and any other responsibility assigned to them by community leader

Anuka No. 1	Within the ages of 54 to 57	Protect community against internal and external aggression and any other responsibility assigned to them by community leader
Ejegidigbo No 1	Within the ages of 51 to 54	Protect community against internal and external aggression and any other responsibility assigned to them by community leader
Ugana No1, Agbodi Okolobia (youth leader)	Within the ages of 48 to 51	Messenger of Agbodi Olopu, in terms of execution of community-development services, maintenance of law and order, settlement of disputes, protect community against internal and external aggression, construction and maintenance of major roads, town halls and mobilisation towards social development such as: education, economics, political awareness and ambassadors of the community.
Agaba No. 1	Within the ages of 45 to 48	They are called (Gubinna), responsible for maintenance of community roads, daily evening market, maintenance of play-ground, other public place within the community, clearing of bushes, building of shrine houses and bridges, protection of the community against attacks, maintenance of river ways/cleanliness of roads and mobilisation of youths for social development.
Osiligwe No1	Within the ages of 42 to 45	They are called (Oga) meaning messenger of Agbodi Okolobia (Youth leader)
Ijele No 2	Within the ages of 39 to 42	They are responsible for maintenance of farm roads within the community
Wasco	Within the ages of 36 to 39	Messagers of Ejele
Ugana No3	Within the ages of 33 to 36	Protect community against internal and external aggression
Efa No 1	Within the ages of 30 to 33	They in charge of minor community work that concerns only the youth
Erico No1	Within the ages of 27 to 30	The (Oga) serve the Efa age grade during community development
Akpaluba N1	Within the ages of 24 to 27	They are responsible for checking community work like road maintenance and project and file those who did not attend.

Anoko	Within the ages of 21 to 24	They are to check Oda (sacred place where masquerades come from and return if it is well maintained or not
Erico No2	Within the ages of 18 to 21	Protect community against internal and external aggression
Ajakaja	Within the ages of 15 to 18	They are called (Ajakaja) meaning teenagers and they are second last age grade
Abinedo/Utudubi	Within the ages of 15 below	They are responsible for clearing (Oda), the sacred place where masquerades come out from and return during festival. Women do not go close to this sacred place.

Figure i: Structure and administration of age grade table in relation to SDGs objectives (Ugboja, 2025).

The age grade table above stipulates the roles played by community development according to different age grades. Those whose roles are specified are those who coordinate the affairs and all the heads of age grades are part and parcel of decision making for the smooth running of the affairs of the community. It is very important to note that protection of community against internal and external aggression is the responsibility that cuts across all the age grades as each age grade has a day they serve as security guards to the community.

It is also expedient to note that names of the age grades above change because each age grade uses the name of their first masquerade as the name of their age grade. Secondly, the movement from one age-grade to another is gradual and such movements are based on maturity. Each name is particular to age grade and they move along with it as they advance except Ajakaja and Utudubi which are constant because at this stage, they don't have masquerades. (Ugboja & Uhiene, 2025).

According to United Nations (UN), the components that work together, to produce sustainable development goals are: economic development, social development and environmental projection (UN General Assembly, 2005). These three must be conceptualised together, planned together and implemented together by a government to achieve the desired results.

In the administrative and activities of age grade as seen in table 1 above, the three critical areas of sustainable development goals as stipulated by the UN are part of the key objectives of the age grade in Ibaji Local Government Area of Kogi State. The three key areas are: economic development, social development and physical protection. The structure and functions of age grade are clearly stated in the table, the roles of socialisation are also identified in a clear form, and its impact on sustainable development is also explicit in the table. This is a justification that age grade as indigenous socialisation can facilitate sustainable development goals in Nigeria

Conclusion

From the foregoing, the paper concludes by saying that, there is poverty and social vices in the society and that there is urgent need to take a measure to curb these social vices in order to achieve the objective of SDG in the year 2030. Age grade as a traditional institution is seen as agent of indigenous socialisation which provides security, welfare services as well as community development services for sustainable development. This paper therefore advocates that if age grade is adopted and used as a social platform in most communities, most empowerment and social programmes by governments and NGOs can get to rural communities therefore making positive change towards achieving the SDGs objective by the year 2030.

The activities of age grade include but not limited to communal policing, mutual support, socio-economic strength of customs and tradition, entrenched institution as a unifying belief and a source of entertainment and societal development. Age grade further enhances primary activities such as animal rearing, subsistence farming, hunting, agricultural activities and fishing etc. With the core discipline of maintaining law and order and punishing members who violate their unwritten rules by indulging in moral act such as: criminality, laziness, and any activity that can dent the image of the group. This high level of moral standard maintained by age grade can help to reduce the social vices which are a challenge to achieving SDGs objective by 2030.

It is worthy to note that, in spite the potential benefit of age grade as agent of indigenous socialisation, it has not totally addressed the problem of environmental degradation, infrastructural development, poverty eradication, insecurity, unemployment and healthcare in Ibaji, but plays a great role towards reducing this menace. The federal and state governments must begin a comprehensive capacity building initiative to enhance the resilience of the rural areas for sustainable development goals SDGs in 2030 as proposed by UN. The paper therefore suggests among others that age grade be encouraged in our indigenous society in order to achieve sustainable development goals in Nigeria.

Suggestion

Because of the important role played by age grade as a traditional institution as discussed above. The paper therefore recommends the following:

1. Governments at all levels are encouraged to use age grade as platform for socialisation in most programmes in rural communities since there is already an established modus of operandi to implement indigenous curriculum.
2. Age grade should be established within the third tier of government to encourage indigenous participation in social programs for sustainable development goal in Nigeria.
3. Governments at all levels should encourage age grade registration by both Nigeria Corporate Affairs Commission (CAC) and Ministry of Local Government and Chieftaincy Affairs at the Local Government Area to extend establishment of age grade in local government areas in the Nigeria.

4. Communities, governments at all levels and international donor agencies are encouraged to support age grade programmes for sustainable development in Nigeria.
5. Governments should encourage other local governments and states who do not have established age grades to, as a matter of necessity, recognise the age grade as modus of operandi amongst peer groups in an indigenous community for sustainable development in Nigeria.
6. Local security and regulatory bodies should be trained and strengthened to work with age grade which is already an established indigenous institution to achieve sustainable development goals in Nigeria.

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