

# The Role and Duties of the Age Grade System in Socio-Cultural and Community Development in the Auchi Kingdom in Nigeria

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Age grade system has played significant roles in the development of the communities in Nigeria before, during and after colonialism. The paper examines the role and duties of the age grade system in the Auchi Kingdom in Etsako West Local Government Area of Edo State in Nigeria. The paper argues that the cultural bond and unity of purpose of the members of the age grades makes them a veritable tool for transformation of their community, preservation of their culture and tackling security challenges. This is because the age grades know their community more than out-siders. There are quite several socio-cultural indigenous practices such as female circumcision, idol worshipping, slavery etc. that have been abolished. The study, therefore, concludes that age grade system among the Auchi people is a system that must not be disbanded for its contributions in economic and socio-cultural spheres of the Auchi Kingdom which has remained unquantifiable.

[Age Grade System; Community Development; Culture; Security and Tradition]

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## Introduction

Age grade is an association of people of equal or about the same age, operating within a given territory or area with the aim of individual, collective and societal transformation. The organization, structure, and activities of age grade practices in most Nigerian communities differ. But mainly, they serve as an organ of development, maintenance of peace, law

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and order depending on the community they operate.<sup>1</sup> Over the years, traditional and even contemporary Auchi Kingdom have recognized and respected the age grade system. This may not be unconnected to their roles in maintenance of peace, law, and community development. Age grade is a form of social organization based on age, within a series of such categories, through which individuals pass over the course of their lives. This is to say that it is people in the same age range. Age grade system is said to be an age long socio-cultural institution in the Auchi Kingdom, located in the south-south geopolitical zone of the present-day Nigeria.<sup>2</sup> Obomeghie explains that it is one of the oldest institutions used in administration before the advent of Colonialism and white missionaries in Africa. People of the same age born same year (grade) or within a two or three-year period identify themselves and come together to form an organization and because they are about the same age then democracy and equality becomes the order of the day as issues are raised and decisions taken by simple majority.<sup>3</sup>

The age grade in the Auchi Kingdom is the most important agent of socialization apart from the family. Each age grade has definite roles it performs for itself and the community. Generally, age grades functions in relation to services pertaining to security, sanitation, and general administration. Each of them is organized under a leader and some other officials and can answer different names depending on the purpose, time or circumstances surrounding their formation. The general activities and forms of the age grades provide the platforms for the training and orientation of young ones especially the males into adulthood and full membership in the Auchi Kingdom. It also leads to a form of initiation which is related to from maturity to manhood,<sup>4</sup> However, a review of the age grade system in the Auchi Kingdom and Nigeria as a whole, from pre-colonial to contemporary times, shows that it is a vital instrument

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1 C. NDUKWE, Changes and continuity in age grade practices in Nigeria: A study of the Igbo traditional and modern administrative system, in: *Journal of Policy and Development Studies*, 9, 3, 2015, p. 177; I. U. EZENWAJI, *Traditional Administrative system in Nigeria: A study of selected Nigerian societies*, Enugu 2002, p. 180; O. B. AKPOMUVIE, Age-Grades and Communitarian Values: The activities of Traditional Agencies in Rural Development in Nigeria, in: *Bassey Andah Journal*, 2, 215, 2009, p. 215.

2 Lawal Oseni (60), Businessman, he was born and lived all his life in the Auchi Kingdom, Edo State, Nigeria, Interviewed August 4, 2021.

3 Wajeed Obomeghie (52), Writer and Journalist, Abuja, Nigeria, interviewed April 4, 2021.

4 W. OBOMEGHIE, *Manhood Initiation Festival in Auchi Kingdom*, Benincity 2014, p. 86.

for fostering unity, good human relations and development among communities in Nigeria. The role of age grades has shifted from mere social organization to initiating and executing important social and economic projects in the Auchi Kingdom. Membership of age grades in the Auchi Kingdom is very compulsory for all males. The extent of change in the structure, organization and formation has always been influenced by emerging globalization and civilization but its role has continued to be a factor of community development.<sup>5</sup> It is therefore against the backdrop of the foregoing realities that this paper is aimed at examining the role and duties of the age grade system in socio-cultural and community development in the Auchi Kingdom in Nigeria.

### **Origin and Geographical Location of the Auchi Kingdom**

Auchi, which is today one of the five clans that make up Etsako West Local Government Area of Edo State, is located at latitude 7.6 N and longitude 6.13.<sup>6</sup> The Auchi Kingdom is in the Savanna Forest area. The tropical rain forest which covers most of Edo State of Nigeria begins from Auchi.<sup>7</sup> Over the years, the Kingdom has, at various times represented the headquarters of different divisional authorities such as Kukuruku vassalage under the Bida emirate (1860–1897), the Afenmai division (formerly known as the Kukuruku division until 1954) at the dawn of British colonial rule, and as headquarters of Etsako Local Government Area upon the creation of the Mid-Western Region in 1963. Following the return to civilian rule in 1979, the Kingdom became the headquarters of the Bendel North Senatorial District. Today, the Auchi Kingdom is the headquarters of the Etsako West Local Government Area following the creation of new States and Local Government Councils in Nigeria on August 27, 1991. Despite this, it still retains a senatorial district position, but now of Edo north. This Kingdom is bounded in the north by the Uzairue Clan, South Ibie Clan in the east, the Aviele clan in the south and the Ivbe-Adaobi clans in the west; all in Edo state. Thus, the Auchi Kingdom among other Afenmai towns is situated in the northern area of the present-day Edo State of Nigeria and its inhabitants speak the Etsako dialect of Edo language. Auchi's vegetation is a Guinea Savannah, and therefore the area is reputed

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<sup>5</sup> Akim O. Amedu (65), Civil Servant, Auchi, Edo State, Nigeria, interviewed March 23, 2021.

<sup>6</sup> E. A. BOATENG, *West African Secondary School Atlas New Edition*, Lagos 1974, p. 22.

<sup>7</sup> Kassim, M. SEGOSIMHE, *Origin and development of Auchi*, Auchi 2011, p. 1.

with wave-like landscape and physical features which includes hills and valleys (Oseni, 2020).<sup>8</sup>

The soil in Auchi is rich for the growth of grains such as millet, beans, rice, maize, among others as well as a variety of fruits. One important river that flows across Auchi is the river Orle which has its starting point in a spring in a cave around the suburb of Dangbala, a small town, in the Akoko-Edo Local Government Area of Edo state and flows to Aviele clan where it is joined by river Edio as a tributary. Still bearing the name, Orle, the river flows directly to Anegbete Clan, now in Etsako East Local Government Area, where it joins River Niger, the widest and longest river in West Africa. The central position of Auchi Kingdom as well as her easy accessibility to most parts of other Afenmai land gave her an advantage, allowing her to serve as a divisional and local administrative headquarters from the earliest times, especially since 1920 when it was made District Headquarters by the British. Apart from the fact that the town has good roads which link it with other Edo State communities, it is also linked with neighbouring states like Kogi State in the north and Ondo State in the West and North-West. Perhaps, this strategic location of Auchi and its administrative status from primordial times is responsible for her growing population, which in turn welcomes buoyant commercial activities.<sup>9</sup>

The indigenous society of the Kingdom was founded between 1481 and 1500 by a man from the Benin Kingdom known as Uchi, the progenitor.<sup>10</sup> Uchi was a warrior prince who migrated from Udo in the present-day Ovia Local Government Area of Edo State. His migration was triggered by a dispute with his brother, the Oba of Benin, over the right to keep a leopard's skin.<sup>11</sup> The leopard was regarded a royal beast and political totem. It was customary at that time that anybody that killed a leopard was to surrender the skin of the animal to the Oba. Uchi killed a leopard and refused to surrender the skin to the Oba. He felt the law regarding the surrendering of leopard skins to the Oba did not apply to him because he was a prince, and the rule was meant for only commoners. The Oba,

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<sup>8</sup> Oseni, Zakariyah Idrees-Obob (72), Retired University Professor, Auchi, Edo State, Nigeria, interviewed April 23, 2021.

<sup>9</sup> Wajeed Obomeghie (52), Writer and Journalist, Abuja, Nigeria, interviewed April 4, 2021.

<sup>10</sup> A. O. IKHARO, *The founding and origin of Auchi*. Unpublished manuscript, 1976, p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> Till date the leopard is still the political totem of the Benin Kingdom. The current Oba of the Benin kingdom used the skin of leopards to decorate the interior of his palace where he receives visitors.

very angry, relieved Uchi of his command of the Western defenses of the Benin Kingdom. Relieved of his duties, Uchi was recalled to Benin city where he stayed at Ogbe Quarters with his family members.<sup>12</sup> Uchi feared for his life because he felt the plot by the Oba against him had thickened. He decided to flee the Benin Kingdom for safety reasons. Uchi and his followers hatched a plan to flee from the Benin Kingdom. The secret code amongst the people that agreed to flee with him was “UNA EGBIA, UNA LE” meaning “EARLY MORNING, IT IS RUNNING”. Whenever Uchi’s emissary entered a compound on the appointed day and called out “Una Egbia” people in the compound who were faithful to the escape plan responded “Una le”. This was how Auchi got its good morning greetings “UNA GBBIA, UNA LE” and this has remained our early morning greeting till date.<sup>13</sup>

Emigration from the Benin Kingdom took place in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. After a very long trek and search for a suitable place to settle, Uchi and his followers settled at a place about 130 kilometres away from the Benin Kingdom on the top of a hill just behind the present-day Guarantee Trust Bank (GTB). A market developed in and around the location that Uchi and his followers settled. The market is known as “Aku-Uchi” (Uchi Market). The market is still in existence and remains the biggest market in Auchi.<sup>14</sup> Over the years after the demise of Uchi, he was deified, and a shrine was built on his first place of settlement at Uchi Market. Worshipers of the Uchi deity go to the shrine with native chalk and salt and made requests believing strongly in the potency of the Uchi diety. The shrine was eventually destroyed and uprooted in an upsurge of the spread of the Islamic religion in 1914.<sup>15</sup>

Essentially, the prevalent tradition of origin among the people of present-day Auchi Kingdom is emigration from the Benin Kingdom. Although, their society was an off shoot of the Benin Kingdom but over time they developed distinctive cultural features that set them apart. These features are noticeable in their language, system of government, traditional religion, and the title system. The most outstanding of these

<sup>12</sup> R. MOMOH, *New perspectives on the history and politics of Nigeria: The Etsako, Experience*, Edo 2016, p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> A. O. ABDULRAHMAN, *A history of Auchi Kingdom*, Ilorin 2010, p. 35.

<sup>14</sup> People from far and wide brought articles of trade to do business in the market. This was one of the first means through which the Auchi Kingdom started intergroup relations with neighboring communities before Nupe imperialism and British colonialism.

<sup>15</sup> MOMOH, p. 68.

features was the absence of a rigid centralized authority and allegiance to one venerated ruler, which was the hallmark of the Benin traditional polity. Some traditional features of the Auchi Kingdom underwent considerable alternations because of “foreign contact”. The main external impetus for change was the Nupe invasion in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century before the eventual imperialism of the British in 1897.<sup>16</sup>

### **Origin of the Age Grade System and Stratification in the Auchi Kingdom**

Age grade system in Nigeria could be traced to pre-colonial Nigeria that lacked a uniformed modern-day kind of governmental body. During the precolonial era, in the present-day region known as Nigeria, existed a gerontocratic type of government where the oldest man in a community ruled assisted by the council of elders. In the Western region, while the Oba stayed at the top, and the town Chiefs assisted him, the oldest males headed the clans and sub-clans. In the northern section dominated by the Hausa/Fulani people, the Emirs and town heads ruled the people. During this same period, in traditional Nigerian societies, community development was based purely on the voluntary efforts of the people. Age grades played significant roles in many Nigerian communities during this period. They saw that local institutions were not abused and that the habit of self-help was developed.<sup>17</sup>

In ancient times, Auchi Kingdom was primarily agrarian, where the most common source of livelihood was farming and hunting. The people were also involved in community services and defence of their community against enemies and external intrusion. The general organization of this kind of integrated communal life was moulded from the establishment of the Age Grade System into groups to stratify various segments which are childhood, youths, adults, and elders.<sup>18</sup> Segosimhe also stated that the Otu (Age classification or age grade) in the local language, was used to mark and demarcate the various stages segmented. Ever before the Islamization of the Auchi Kingdom, and the Nupe invasion in 1860, the Manhood Initiation was no longer a new practice. It was already a part and parcel

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<sup>16</sup> E. O. ERHAGBE, *Etsakoland in Transition, 1860–1948: An Analysis of Change in an Indigenous Nigerian Society*. MA Dissertation submitted to the Department of History, University of Benin, Nigeria, 1982, pp. 3–4.

<sup>17</sup> O. M. IJERE, *The Development of the African Social Security System*, Lagos 1978, p. 17.

<sup>18</sup> OBOMEGHIE, pp. 83–84.

of the people and was integrated into the cultural life of the people.<sup>19</sup>

Irua'a in the Auchi dialect means "initiation into manhood". The Irua'a tradition dates back to the time when the people that occupy the present day Auchi Kingdom migrated from the Benin Kingdom.<sup>20</sup> Obomeghie explained that due to the manner the Auchi people migrated from the Benin Kingdom and series of wars igodomigodo<sup>21</sup> that engulfed the Benin kingdom. The head of the Auchi community found it very necessary to establish an army of virile young and able-bodied men that could be called upon because war and invasion of the Auchi community was imminent and they were also expected to also carry out communal activities.<sup>22</sup> This army of young men became so indispensable in the community that they assumed the role of community warriors. They also played the role of repelling the frequent slave raiding activities which was very rampant at the time before the colonization of Nigeria as well as being the custodian of law and order throughout the community.<sup>23</sup>

Amedu explained that as the community developed, and most of the young men had grown into matured adults with personal responsibilities, it became necessary to introduce a system of stratification where they could be graded regiments according to their ages. To further develop this tradition the head of the community found it practical to establish a system of initiation into the revered age-grade system vested with responsibilities of protecting lives and properties. Thus, every young man of 20–23 years of age was initiated into manhood. This practice later became a cultural practice and celebration that was performed in the market square once in every two years. With the introduction of the Islamic religion as the state religion in 1914, the Irua'a celebration was held during the Islamic feast known as Eid-el-Kabir once in two years. During the Manhood Initiation celebration, the king was always present to give the newly initiated young men a name and offer spiritual blessings.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>19</sup> SEGOSIMHE, p. 218.

<sup>20</sup> M. TONY, *Each man, his time: The biography of an era*, Lagos 1995, p. 117.

<sup>21</sup> This was a period that the Benin kingdom was in crisis for many decades due to the absence of a king. This period is also known as the interregnum in the history of the Benin Kingdom See. *The history of Benin*.

<sup>22</sup> Wajeed Obomeghie (52), Writer and Journalist, Abuja, Nigeria, interviewed April 4, 2021.

<sup>23</sup> Momoh Tony (85), Writer, lawyer, Journalist and former Federal Minister, Lagos State, Nigeria, interviewed June 4, 2020.

<sup>24</sup> Akim O. Amedu (65), Civil Servant, Auchi, Edo State, Nigeria, interviewed March 23, 2021.

There are basically three stages that every young man in the Auchi kingdom must pass through. There are Itsebaa, Isoigbama and Omorhua'arogbomi. The Itsebaa group is open to the boys of 15 to 17 years of age. These group of boys closely follows the footsteps of the Isoigbama group. This is the group where a young boy begins to identify with his peer group and contemporaries to form a loose association in readiness to be moved to the next stage. The next stage, which is the Isoigbama, is made of boys of between 18 to 20 years of age. These group of boys believe that they can handle any situation with positive results. This adolescent stage was from where most of the of the warriors of the Kingdom were drawn from during the precolonial period in Nigeria.<sup>25</sup> Garba stated that members of this group were always high spirited, brave, fearless and were in a hurry to step into the shoes of the Irua'a.<sup>26</sup>

Oseni explained that the first two stages, that is Itsebaa and Isoigbama were more like preparatory stages for the final initiation. Here, members were subjected to various assignments in the Kingdom. Some of these assignments were manual labour of various kinds, such as clearing of the prayer ground, clearing of the cemetery, boundary demarcation, communal farm labour etc. The members of these two stages were also under the watchful eyes of the of the entire community for character moulding and guidance. The third stage, Omorhua'arogbomi, is the last stage that a young man that is over twenty years of age passes through before he is finally initiated into manhood, but this stage starts from the Isoigbama stage. The last stage is a signal that the boys are ready to be initiated into manhood after going through series of communal activities and participating in other events in the community.<sup>27</sup> The three stages enabled the community to have a track record of the progressive development of the forthcoming intending initiates. Below is a table showing the different segments in order of seniority.

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<sup>25</sup> Lawal Oseni (60), Businessman, He was born and lived all his life in the Auchi Kingdom, Edo State, Nigeria, Interviewed August 4, 2021.

<sup>26</sup> Zibril. S. Garba (62), Businessman and Politician, Auchi, Edo State, Nigeria, interviewed March 29, 2021.

<sup>27</sup> Wajeed Obomeghie (52), Writer and Journalist, Abuja, Nigeria, interviewed April 4, 2021.



s/n	STAGE	NAME	AGE BRACKET
1	First	Itsebaa	15 to 17 years
2	Second	Iso-igbama	18 to 20 years
3	Third (Final)	Omorhua'arogbomi	21 to 23 years

Source: W. OBOMEGHIE, *Manhood Initiation Festival in Auchi Kingdom*, Benincity, Wadorn Communications 2014, p. 87.

### **The Age Grade Ceremony/Festival in the Auchi Kingdom**

The age grade ceremony, which has become a major cultural festival, is a great moment for tourist attraction as it provides excellent opportunities for indigenes, visitors, foreigners etc. to enjoy the marvellous rich cultural heritage, fun and entertainment of the Kingdom.<sup>28</sup> In the pre-Islamic period, the Chief Priest of the Orle deity<sup>29</sup> was responsible for the proclamation of the time of the commencement of the festival which was always during the harvest of new crops. At that time there was little or no farm work to be done and there was the availability of variety of food crops in the houses of the people for feasting and merriment. With the introduction of Islam, as the only recognized religion, the festival was permanently fixed to be held during the Eid Kabir, the Islamic festivity period once in every two years.<sup>30</sup>

Obomeghie explained that the celebration of the age grade set is usually under the supervision and support of senior age sets, parents, and elders. The celebration and merriment last for one week where there is cultural display, fashion show and busy commercial activities. Before the commencement of the celebrations, the intending initiates and their parents usually send out kola nuts<sup>31</sup> to close relatives, family, friends,

<sup>28</sup> Jafaru Mohammed (79), Local Chief, Auchi, Edo State, Nigeria, interviewed April 29, 2021.

<sup>29</sup> The Orle deity is one of the most revered deities in the history of the Auchi Kingdom. It is believed that the Orle deity is a woman. She is also the goddess of fertility. See Arunah.

<sup>30</sup> Momoh Mahmud (40), Prince and Businessman, Auchi, Edo State, Nigeria, interviewed April 1, 2021.

<sup>31</sup> In a typical African traditional setting, kola nut is very important. It is seen a symbol of peace and friendship. It is always presented to visitors and friends during marriages, funerals, naming ceremonies and festivals. It is a general belief in Africa that the bringer of kola nuts is the bringer of life.

in-laws, and well-wishers inviting them to witness the manhood ceremony of their children. However, current trends have changed this item from kola nuts to other western commodities such as biscuits, sweets, and sometimes formal invitation cards.<sup>32</sup>

There are various rites that an initiate is expected to undergo before he becomes a fully recognized man. These rites are performed one after the other as celebration progresses. Arunah stated that on the eve of the beginning of the age group celebration, all the initiates assemble at the town hall from early in the morning till late in the evening. Their duty is to put final touches at the venue before the rites begins to ensure a smooth take off the rites. Meetings are held to ensure that everything goes on as planned.<sup>33</sup> The booming of fireworks is heard all over the place to announce to everyone that tomorrow was the beginning of the celebration. This was really a period of jubilation and merriment for parents and families that had children that were being initiated into fully grown men of the Kingdom. People are treated to several traditional dance and shows at the market square. Sometimes, individual celebrants could invite some dance groups to entertain audience at their homes if they had the means to host the dance group.<sup>34</sup>

The first rites to be performed on the first day of the manhood celebration is the procession of all the initiates from the prayer ground on the day of Eid-el-Kabir, that is the Islamic celebration day, to the Otaru (King)'s palace. This was a time of great pride for the initiates.<sup>35</sup> The initiates would line up in a several lines spread across the road, and they are all uniformly dressed in the same clothes and lots of coral beads for the occasion. They walk slowly towards the Otaru's palace amidst chants and songs of praises by friends, family, and well-wishers. When they get close to the Otaru's palace they are carried shoulder high into the palace. The Otaru welcomes and congratulates them for crossing the first hurdle and also encourages them to be gallant and upright. The initiates then depart the palace for their various homes carried shoulder high amidst songs and chants of praises.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> OBOMEGHIE, p. 99.

<sup>33</sup> ABDULRAHMAN, p. 192.

<sup>34</sup> SEGOSIMHE, p. 223.

<sup>35</sup> IKHARO, pp. 14–15.

<sup>36</sup> ARUNAH, p. 193.

The second rite is carried out on the second day of the celebration. This is also the core aspect of the manhood initiation ceremony. All the initiates are expected to collectively take a solemn oath of shared responsibility. Some of the pledges are to be good ambassadors of the Auchi kingdom, to be men of good character in all their undertakings and endeavours, be ready to uphold an ideal society of peace, development and prosperity, to protect and defend the integrity of the Auchi kingdom, maintain a spirit of brotherhood amongst themselves and abide by all the spiritual obligations by not breaking the rules and regulations of their fidelity.<sup>37</sup> Obomeghie explained that an oath is always taken at the residence of the chairman of the age group who is also a member of the same age group and is elected by its members. The celebrants go back to their respective home and later re-assemble at the market square. All members are dressed in uniform flowing gowns and are made to sit in rows. The initiates then proceed to the Otaru's palace for yet another significant event. The Otaru welcomes them and charges them with the code of conduct of adulthood and entrusts them with various responsibilities of fully grown men. The Otaru further makes a pronouncement by giving the age group a befitting name to serve as their symbol of identity.<sup>38</sup> This action of the Otaru is always based on the recommendation of the chiefs and elders. From the day of the pronouncement of the Otaru onwards that particular age group are addressed in unity by their official name. All the initiates then depart for their various homes in preparation for another very important rite.<sup>39</sup>

The other very important rite performed on the second day of the celebration is the "Iriorirhua". It was a rite that was performed to free the initiates from sexual restrictions. All the initiates are dressed in flowing gowns "Buba" or "Babanriga"<sup>40</sup> without shorts or pants to conceal their nakedness. It is expected of the initiates to go into a room, one after the other, where there is a half-naked old woman from the waist upwards, that is beyond childbearing. The initiates are expected to walk over her outstretched legs after dropping some little money on the ground beside

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<sup>37</sup> Oseni Zakariyah Idrees-Oboh (72), Retired University Professor, Auchi, Edo State, Nigeria, interviewed April 23, 2021.

<sup>38</sup> Wajeed Obomeghie (52), Writer and Journalist, Abuja, Nigeria, interviewed April 4, 2021.

<sup>39</sup> Zibril S. Garba, Businessman and Politician, Auchi, Edo State, Nigeria, interviewed March 29, 2021.

<sup>40</sup> "Buba or Babanriga" is an Islamic attire worn by Muslims. It was introduced into the Auchi Kingdom by the Nupe People.

the old woman. The initiate would then run as fast as he can to his house without looking back. This symbolizes transformation from childhood to adulthood and the freedom of the new initiates to have sexual intercourse after they decide to get married. It is only in recent times that young boys have sexual intercourse before the manhood initiation ceremony. This is the price that the Auchi Kingdom must pay for modernity.<sup>41</sup>

On the third day of the festivity, there is usually a visitation by the chairman of the age grade to all the sub villages in the Auchi Kingdom. All in the arenas in the sub villages are colourfully decorated to welcome the chairman. Sits and chairs are arranged in a manner that all that would be present would have a nice view of the arena. There is usually a lot of merriment, dancing, feasting and an elaborate cultural display. The chairman visits all the various arenas carried shoulder high and he is well received and entertained with food and drinks. He addresses his fellow new initiates and give some advice to them on the journey into manhood. He repeats the same routine in all the sub villages in the Auchi Kingdom. The visitation is quite lengthy and after the visit to the last sub village, the chairman retires back to his sub village for more merriment which may continue all through the night.<sup>42</sup>

Obomeghie stated that on the fourth day, there is a family outing and entertainment. The day commences with merriment at the family and kindred level. Most age grades outing is celebrated by between two to ten members of the same kindred. The most senior by age is identified and they form a family age group where they have meetings, from time to time, to discuss on how to improve the wellbeing of their members. The family age group would discuss and deliberate on how to welcome and entertain other family age groups that may visit them. During this period the new initiates are flamboyantly dressed in beautiful outfits. Parents and family members express their love by offering gifts and some even present money in whatever amount that they can afford.<sup>43</sup> Sometimes, some families chose the day that they would invite and entertain their visitors. After this is done, the new initiates are recognized as matured men that can participate in any activity that concerns adults.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> OBOMEGHIE, pp. 131–132; ARUNAH, p. 195; SEGOSIMHE, p. 224.

<sup>42</sup> Oseni Zakariyah Idrees-Oboh (72), Retired University Professor, Auchi, Edo State, Nigeria, interviewed April 23, 2021.

<sup>43</sup> OBOMEGHIE, p. 134.

<sup>44</sup> SEGOSIMHE, p. 229.

### **Role and Duties of the Age Grades in the Auchi Kingdom**

Age grade is a social institution which constitutes a vital system in the social structures of any given society. The age brackets of the age grades may vary from one community to the other. In some communities, persons born within a specific period of three, four or five years usually form an age grade. But the most important thing is that each age grade is clearly distinguished from one another. It then means that a man can only belong to one age grade at a time, and each is usually associated with specific roles.<sup>45</sup> Age grade is a very vital organ of social structure especially in our traditional Nigerian communities. Age grade system in its social context disseminates egalitarian social principles of life, creating a sense of oneness and brotherhood within the rank and file of age grade members.<sup>46</sup> Members are bound together by common challenges such as marriages, burial of parents and loved ones, building of houses etc. Over the years, age grade in different communities have distinguished themselves in the performance of such roles that aims at enhancing the socio-economic life of the people.<sup>47</sup>

Age grades know their terrain, their desires and prospects better than strangers in their various communities. The social solidarity between and within age grades will spur them on to ensure that programmes and projects attain their set goals and protected from vandals. Age grade, had in the pre-colonial and colonial periods, concerned themselves with traditional functions such as the maintenance of law and order, settlement of disputes between warring members, construction and maintenance of roads and markets, maintaining the cleanliness of local streams and above all, protecting their communities from external aggression. In recent times, however, age grades have diversified their roles to include newer activities which aids development. They have contributed immensely to the educational, political, and socio-culture development of their various communities.<sup>48</sup>

Amedu stated that the role and duties of the age grade is very vital in the development of the Auchi kingdom. The Irhua'a ceremony qualifies

<sup>45</sup> O. B. AKPOMUVIE, Age-Grades and Communitarian Values: The activities of Traditional Agencies in Rural Development in Nigeria, in: *Bassey Andah Journal*, 2, 2009, p. 215.

<sup>46</sup> W. N. ORDU, *The Application of brotherhood in Ahoada Religion*. Unpublished material, Port Harcourt 2011, p. 5.

<sup>47</sup> AKPOMUVIE, p. 216.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 218.

new initiates to participate in communal labour. Whenever a job is available for execution the Otaru would summon his council to discuss the issue. The duties to be carried out will be clearly outlined and the particular age grade that is required to carry out the duty would also be identified.<sup>49</sup> In the early times the decisions of meetings was announced by the town crier but in recent times the decisions are announced by mosques through the microphones and public address systems. The age grade concerned will be aware of their assigned duties and they would subsequently have a meeting and know when to execute the duty. Projects executed through this means includes the government reserved Area (GRA) and administrative during the British colonial period in 1920s. The buildings are still standing till the present day. There was also the construction of a Baily bridge over the River Orle in 1969.<sup>50</sup>

Secondly, long before the advent of organized and well-established administration and style or system of government in the Auchi Kingdom the various age grades were saddled with the responsibility and task of protecting and policing the indigenes and non-indigenes of the Kingdom.<sup>51</sup> They were also responsible for the repelling of other tribal encroachments. The various age groups functioned as village police or the local military who were responsible for the enforcement of laws and order. The defence of the state was part of the function of the age groups after their initiation to manhood. They were trained for military warfare before British colonization. Various age grades were called to the aid of the Umareghe and Umakpogho forces of the Auchi Kingdom. They stationed their bases on hill tops and hide-outs as vigilantes for the invading Nupe forces. The weapons used by the people were heavily shaped clubs, spears, short and long stabbing knives, poisonous arrows, and metal arrow heads. The bulk of these weapons were products of the indigenous blacksmiths and Uneme sojourners – a group of Afenmai people reputed with black smithing works. Auchi resistance to Nupe incursion received active participation amongst the people. This, perhaps, was since they were already familiar to military threat on the people since the 1830s which had resulted to the loss of young men and women to slavery and awakened the dire need to put up a fervent fight against the enemies. All

<sup>49</sup> Akim O. Amedu (65), Civil Servant, Auchi, Edo State, Nigeria, interviewed March 23, 2021.

<sup>50</sup> Shaibu, Saliu (53), Civil Servant, Auchi, Edo State, Nigeria, interviewed April 24, 2021.

<sup>51</sup> I. B. BELLO-IMAM, *An ethnographic survey of South Ibie Clan of Etsako West Local Government, Edo State, Nigeria*, Ibadan 1995, p. 113.

young men were militarily drilled and often adorned with local charms and amulets by magically and medicinally powerful men and women for their protection.<sup>52</sup>

In recent times the Otaru – in – Council, would from time to time, appoint a particular age grade to periodically, function as internal police known as Vigilante group, man the nook and crannies of the Kingdom to provide adequate security and prevent the Kingdom from being overran by enemies. When people are also accused of theft the Vigilante group intervenes and when unable to resolve the issue, it is referred to the Police Station for the police to handle.<sup>53</sup>

Thirdly, Obomeghie stated that the clearing of bushes around streams, cemeteries, bush paths, farmland paths, prayer ground etc. was coordinated by the various age grades as proclaimed by the Otaru – in – Council. Also, the maintenance of the various boundary points of the kingdom is also the duty of the various age grades in the Kingdom. Matters of civil defense and communal labour rests on the shoulders of the various age grades.<sup>54</sup> Oseni (interview, 2021) explained that in 1920, a particular age grade known as “Okeloya” constructed a road that linked the Kingdom to a town called Igarra. This was very beneficial to traders and visitors that visited the Auchi kingdom from other parts of Nigeria. Without waiting or seeking for assistance from the colonial government, the age grade known as “Umakhabamhai” built a Health Care Center in 1949. It was immediately used to take care of the health needs of the people of the Kingdom.<sup>55</sup>

Fourthly, Garba stated that age grades render social aids to the people of the Kingdom. For example, during the death of a member the social effect of age grades manifest more prominently. At this stage, age grade members would rally round the family of the deceased. If the death occurred outside the home base, age grade members see to it that the corpse is preserved and returned home. The age grade would see to it that the deceased member is given a befitting burial, and publicity given to his death. At times if the dead member had no befitting accommodation,

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<sup>52</sup> Momoh Tony (85), Writer, lawyer, Journalist and former Federal Minister, Lagos State, Nigeria, interviewed June 4, 2020.

<sup>53</sup> Oseni Zakariyah Idrees-Oboh (72), Retired University Professor, Auchi, Edo State, Nigeria, interviewed April 23, 2021.

<sup>54</sup> OBOMEGHIE, pp. 131–132,

<sup>55</sup> Oseni Zakariyah Idrees-Oboh (72), Retired University Professor, Auchi, Edo State, Nigeria, interviewed April 23, 2021.

members see to it that a good accommodation is provided for his family.<sup>56</sup> Arunah explained that this concern always continue for the children or wives left behind. It was a type of social security insurance.<sup>57</sup> Age grades also assist bereaved families bury their dead even if the deceased was not a member of their age grade. The graves are dug by members of the age grade and all the burial rites are carried out by the age grade under the supervision of the elders.<sup>58</sup>

Also, Age grades keeps the community lively with cultural dances and festivals with masquerades displays, especially during what could be regarded as National festivals. Oseni explained that they take care of the morality of their members by having several rules guiding the social conduct of their members. Age grades keep alive the cultural heritage of the community through participation, identification and association.<sup>59</sup> It defines the social privileges and social activities of members such as war making, ritual and other communal activities.<sup>60</sup>

Again, age grades in political deliberations help the leaders and the people to identify and evaluate the eligible elites and talented intelligent eloquent speakers.<sup>61</sup> This assertion indicate that age grade is a means of identifying talented and qualified ones. But despite this and the fact that the members of the age grade are political beings in the society, the age grades are not formed primarily for partisan politics. But as people awake in the community, they must dance the tune prevalent in their time. One such tune is politics. So, when age grades pull their weights effectively and collectively, they can influence political activities of the town and can reset the hand of the political clock.<sup>62</sup> Often through a type of remote control, age grade controls the political activities of their communities. The philosophy behind age grade politics is republicanism. In the republican philosophy of age grade, it becomes part of the decision-making process of the communities. Age grades no doubt are a political pressure group especially in deciding who goes for what posts in politics outside or

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<sup>56</sup> Zibril S. Garba, Businessman and Politician, Auchi, Edo State, Nigeria, interviewed March 29, 2021.

<sup>57</sup> ABDULRAHMAN, p. 35.

<sup>58</sup> W. U. MONDAY, *Funeral Rites and the Youths in African Religion*, Warri 2007, p. 57.

<sup>59</sup> Lawal Oseni (60), Businessman, He was born and lived all his life in the Auchi Kingdom, Edo State, Nigeria, Interviewed August 4, 2021.

<sup>60</sup> U. R. JOHNSON, *Traditional Age grade system in West African Religion*, Lagos 2011, p. 73.

<sup>61</sup> A. AFIGBO, *Ropes of Sand; studies in Igbo History and culture*, Nsukka 1981, p. 78.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.



within the communities.<sup>63</sup> In 2003 Hon. Zakawanu Garuba, an indigene of the Auchi Kingdom, was appointed a member of the House of Assembly in Edo State. In 2007, he was re-elected in 2007 and later appointed Speaker of the House of Assembly because he was massively supported by majority of the age grades in the Auchi Kingdom.

Oseni explained that in recent times age grades have diversified their roles to include newer activities which aid development. They have contributed immensely to the educational, political, and social development of their various communities.<sup>64</sup> In the Auchi Kingdom, age grades are the agents of modernization, industrialization, and urbanization. The roles of age grades remain very significant and impactful. New initiates task themselves to raise funds to build or construct infrastructures that they would be remembered for. Town halls, boreholes, renovation of schools and institute scholarship schemes, among other projects. Village halls, that have been built by various age groups, are found all over the Auchi Kingdom and this is where meetings at the village level are held.<sup>65</sup>

Another very significant role of the Age grade which could be regarded as one of the most important display of cultural practice and heritage in the Auchi Kingdom is the role that they play during the coronation of a new king. This significant role of the age grade would be clearly explained because of the level of its importance. A vivid picture is necessary at this point to show the relevance of the age grade in a rich cultural heritage. The coronation of a new king is known as the “Umogbai ceremony”. The word “Umogbai” means coronation in the local language. It is a ceremony or festival that was performed during the installation of a new king and the age grades that spearhead the coronation are known as the “Umaireghe”. It was celebrated just before the installation of a new king. It is basically different from all other festivals in the Auchi kingdom. There is no fixed time for this festival. It is celebrated when a new king is being installed. This kind of festival is celebrated a few times in one’s lifetime. The last time it was celebrated in the Auchi kingdom was in 1996 after the passing of the previous king.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>63</sup> P. N. JAMES, *Urbanization and self-employment in traditional societies*, Ikeja 2010, p. 57.

<sup>64</sup> Oseni, Zakariyah Idrees-Oboh (72), Retired University Professor, Auchi, Edo State, Nigeria, interviewed April 23, 2021.

<sup>65</sup> Wajeed Obomeghie (52), Writer and Journalist, Abuja, Nigeria, interviewed April 4, 2021.

<sup>66</sup> W. OBOMEGHIE, *Auchi Kingdom, Twenty Decades of Ikelebe Dynasty: 1845 Ad and Beyond*, Abuja 2019, p. 190.

The festival dates to the coronation of Chief Ikelebe, the first king of the Kingdom.<sup>67</sup> The Umogbai festival was done after the forty-days funeral rites of the deceased King, about seven days to the coronation day. When a king passes on the members of the Ikelebe Ruling House presents a candidate to the king makers who would then announce the king – to – be the people. The king – to – be does assume duties of king until his appointment is confirmed by the state government and then the Umogbai rites will be done. The Umogbai ceremony is spearheaded by the seventh age grade sets beginning with the latest celebrants. They are usually very powerful men who will take charge of security on the coronation day. This is the reason why they are drawn from the most agile groups because of the enormous tasks ahead of them. Men of this age are matured and capable of giving capable leadership to the age sets coming behind them in the execution of any communal project.<sup>68</sup> The ceremony commences with the declaration of a dusk to dawn curfew in the kingdom by the leaders of the seven age grades. During this period women and children are prohibited from night outings.<sup>69</sup>

All the members of the seven age grades get dressed like warriors and hunters and converge at the market square. They move around the kingdom sounding their drums and dancing and later reconverged at the market square again from when the initially took off from. While parading around the Kingdom, stray livestock are confiscated for consumption, and no one dare raises an eyebrow. The animals and livestock that are confiscated are used to prepare meals that they eat. Other ingredients that would be required to prepare their meals is provided by the prospective king. Sometimes their activities could be offensive because they sometimes use whips on people that flaunt the curfew. They are to keep surveillance for six days and nights preceding the seventh day which is the day of coronation. The aim of the curfew is to maintain orderliness, peace, and calm.<sup>70</sup>

The rounding off ritual takes place on the sixth day with a dance staged by at the market square and this marks the end of the curfew. They celebrate this day with a hot meal cooked and eaten the traditional way with bare hands. There is also the chanting of hunting expedition

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<sup>67</sup> Oseni, Zakariyah Idrees-Oboh (72), Retired University Professor, Auchi, Edo State, Nigeria, interviewed April 23, 2021.

<sup>68</sup> IKHARO, p. 13.

<sup>69</sup> SEGOSIMHE, p. 225.

<sup>70</sup> ABDULRAHMAN, p. 288.

songs by some of the members followed by loud ovations and praises from spectators. There is usually the display of act of prowess by seasoned hunters with the intermitted booming of guns. By midnight, the dancing is stopped and all the hunters amongst them go into the forest to hunt for animals in a contest to determine who was the bravest amongst them. This set the pace for the climax of activities before the coronation. The winner was the one who brought home the largest animal and this animal was used to prepare the new king's first meal. The significance of the Umogbai ceremony is that the people involved would display their prowess, about agility and power to justify the confidence in them.<sup>71</sup>

On the eve of the coronation rites, which begins at midnight, the proposed king is taken round the five villages that makes up the Auchi kingdom. Rituals are usually performed at the market square. The type and details of the rituals are known only to the king makers.<sup>72</sup> The proposed king then heads to Aibotse village where the first king was coronated. On getting to Aiboste village the king – to – be performs the Uge tree rites which the details is not known by anyone only the king makers but are regarded as customary rites to be observed in the process of enthroning a new king.<sup>73</sup>

On the day of the coronation, the king – to – be would be dressed in a kingly regalia of white robes knitted in golden threads. He and the council of elders would take a long walk round the kingdom then they would retire to the inner chambers of the king's palace to discuss and wait for the coronation to commence while spectators wait outside the palace. When it is time for the coronation proper, the king emerges from the inner chambers then all the spectators rise and sits after the king – to – be sits as a sign of respect. The king makers then proceed with the necessary rites before the king – to – be is turbaned. The eldest man in the Utsogun village is the person charged with the responsibility of installing a new king. The king – to – be is made sit on the throne seven times and he is turbaned after some prayers and recitation from the Holy Koran. He is then declared the King, Otaru of the Auchi Kingdom.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> OBOMEGHIE, *Auchi Kingdom*, p. 207.

<sup>72</sup> The details of this ritual remain a secret since the enthronement of the first Otaru. The secrecy of this kind of ritual is always a secret in most African societies.

<sup>73</sup> SEGOSIMHE, p. 223.

<sup>74</sup> Momoh Tony (85), Writer, lawyer, Journalist and former Federal Minister, Lagos State, Nigeria, Interviewed June 4, 2020.

The audience is led in prayers by the Chief Imam for the new King. This is normally after a representative of the State Governments must have handed him the Staff of Office. The event is usually well attended by friends, well-wishers, government officials from far and near. There is also lots of fun fare and activities lined up for the occasion. Different dance groups and musicians are invited to perform in the festival. The various dance groups bring the event to a close late in the night in the King's courtyard.<sup>75</sup>

### Conclusion

Age grade practices in the Auchi Kingdom is an age with slight changes following the transformation in the society and modernity. Despite the above, there is also continuity in the age grade practices in the Kingdom because it is considered as a strong factor and instrument of societal development, Thus, the study on the age grade practices have brought to fore that no matter the level of societal changes and civilization; age grade practice is a phenomenon that cannot be underrated because of the important role it performs.

The age grade system has survived extinction in contemporary Nigeria because of its important roles in the society. Age grade in the Auchi Kingdom could be seen as way of life among the people because it encapsulates every socio-political, economic, and religious activities of the people. Age grade is also seen as a makeup for human limitations, because through it the people of Auchi Kingdom help themselves in times of need and other developmental strides.<sup>76</sup> It is, therefore, on record that age grade has helped its members to complete their houses, set up businesses among other ventures. Age grades have also provided many social amenities and infrastructures for the development of the Auchi Kingdom. The age grade system is therefore worthy of encouragement; hence we are using this medium to call on the government of Nigeria to further ameliorate the system so that age grade institution could contribute more towards the development of the society. Sometimes there could be some short-coming with the age grade system. Some members of age grades could be overzealous because they sometimes take laws into their hands. With timely intervention of members of the same age or older age grades the

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<sup>75</sup> OBOMEGHIE, *Auchi Kingdom*, p. 209.

<sup>76</sup> Dickson Iluokhauno (55), Civilian Servant, Auchi, Edo State, Nigeria, Interviewed April 6, 2020.

issue could be resolved without it getting out of hand. It must also be said that the advantages of age grades overshadow the disadvantages. On the same note, age grades in other tribes should emulate the good works of age grade system in the Auchi Kingdom. In doing so we shall all be involved in building a better Nigeria for the future generations and the age grade system should not be disbanded but encouraged to carry on with the good works.

