

Is the Age Grade System Still Relevant in Nigeria? Lessons from Ero Festival of Iyere Kingdom, Owo Local Government Area of Ondo State, Nigeria

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Abstract

The paper looked at the relevance of age grade systems in Nigeria using the ero festival as our point of focus. Ero festival is basically a communal celebration more like a ritual where persons who have attained a certain age retires from active service and this is symbolic because you see the celebrants carrying their work tools. The study relied on the functionalist and interactionist theories to buttress our point. It is a purely qualitative study and data were gathered using Key Informant Interview (KII) and In-depth Interview (IDI). The study concluded that ero festival is still relevant in today's Nigeria as it promotes development in the community, foster unity and as serves as a means of tourism amongst other things. The study therefore recommended that there should be enough publicity about the festival and awareness as it will attract global patronage. Also it should be celebrated and acknowledged by government at all levels in the state (Ondo State) as this will generate revenue for the state by attracting tourists and promoting our cultural heritage.

Keywords: *Ero, Age grade, Relevance, Iyere, Ondo State*

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Background to the Study

Festivals are celebrations of events that are undeniably distinctive due to the dynamic practices and activities that are usually displayed, which in reality is educative and entertaining thereby bonding diverse class of people. Traditionally, a festival spurs the people to display and demonstrate pertinent cultural activities that are symbolic and translates the beliefs, values and shared norms of a particular group of people over time (Nigerian Festivals, *OnlineNigeria.com*. Retrieved 24 November 2011).

The practice of celebrating festivals is not restricted to one community, country or society alone. As a result, festivals are part of a global culture even though their nature and content may differ according to the peculiar culture of a people as well as the purpose that they serve. For instance, within the continent of Asia, Indians are regarded as the ones that celebrates festival more than any other country given the massive variety of cultural practices that the country is associated with. As a result, India is known to have scores of festivals unlike any other country of the world because of her diverse culture. They celebrate virtually everything like nature, colour, friendship, love, religion, emancipation among others. (Malhotra, 2007).

Within the African continent, Ghana seems to equate India as a festival rich society. In fact, a peculiar festival that celebrates hunger brings to mind the potency of the all-round nature of the Ghanaian society with regard to such celebrations. The *Homowo-festival* which is translated to mean Making-Fun-of-Hunger, is celebrated by the “Ga” people of Accra in thanksgiving of a period in their history when rain stopped and the sea gates closed, thereby, leading to a deadly famine that spread throughout the Southern Accra plains. In the end, when the rain eventually returned and harvest finally arrived, the people were so happy that they instituted a festival to commemorate their transition from famine as a way of ridiculing hunger (Mbamalu, 2018).

Similarly, in Nigeria, adherents of certain traditional religions mark festivals taking into cognizance several important socio-cultural and socio-spiritual records of the peoples' lives. This is often reflected in the series of rites, rituals, performances, and entertainments (Aluko, 2002) that are associated with such festivals. This is perhaps why Akintan (2013), is of the opinion that festivals are celebrated with respect to the cultures of the society, contributions of heroes, heroines and legends among other factors.

In the opinion of experts, festivals are generally organized in order to answer the specific needs of a community (Popescu & Corboş, 2012) which may be social, cultural, financial, spiritual, and marital and the likes. Falasi (1987), described a festival as a sacred or profane period of celebration marked by special observances for highlighting its importance as a special event with the purpose of celebrating community values, ideologies, identity and continuity. Getz (2005) sees festivals as “themed public celebrations” to avoid wrong typification which may bring about exclusion of some typologies. Whether the purpose is for socio-cultural, socio-economical or socio-spiritual intention, a festival can be seen as a tool of development in a society.

The Iyere Kingdom situated in Owo Local Government Area of Ondo State in Nigeria and like every other society share their sentiments for cultural practices through certain festivals. One of such is the *Ero Festival* which is symbolic of a distinctive rite of passage from workmanship to retirement. What would have seemed like a jejune social transition in most parts of the developed societies where people work and retire without any sense of community interest, is largely ritualized by the Iyere people through the Ero festival. This is indeed a major academic attraction that has attracted scholars from various disciplines especially sociologists and cultural anthropologists. Against the foregoing backdrop, this study examined the relevance and prospects of the age grade system focusing on Ero Festival of the Iyere Kingdom in Ondo State, Nigeria.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to examine the relevance and prospects of the age grade system focusing on the Ero festival of Iyere Kingdom in Owo Local Government Area of Ondo State, Nigeria. Also, the study examines the place of the age grade system in Iyere Kingdom as well as highlights the relevance to the people and society in general. Following this introductory section, the rest of the paper is organized as follows: section 2 is on conceptual clarification and literature review. In section 3, we give the theoretical framework. Section 4 gives the methodology, section 5 deals with results and discussion of finding, while section 6 concludes the paper.

Conceptual Clarification & Literature Review

In order to have a solid understanding of the contextual argument in this paper, there is need to clarify the concept of age grade and festival. *Age Grade* can be defined as a class of people within a particular age range. Age grade is a group of folks, who according to societal customs and values are viewed as people of the same age range. According to Ugiagbe and Uguagbe (2015), the Igbo of Eastern Nigeria, have a culture of segmenting into different age grades which can be likened to teams in management and platoons in war games. The age grade serves as paths for societal interface among members and more importantly as proxies of community development. They are social organizations based on age through which people pass-over in the course of their lifetime based on the distinctiveness of the age-bracket that they fall into during this period. The plate below shows a cross-section of members of an age grade processing during the Ero festival.

Plate 1: A cross section of members of an age grade processing during the Ero Festival



Source: Field Work, 2018

In Africa and by extension Nigeria, the practice of age grade system has long been appreciated as a significant part of the culture of the people and this serves the sole purpose of social, cultural, political, and economic advancement of the community. Age grade varies from community to community with unique and specific a name that identifies a particular age grade and gender peculiarity (some comprises both gender, male and female while others are gender specific.). In light of this, this paper conceptualizes age grade system as a collection of people or group of people (irrespective of gender) within same age range or bracket of 5 years' difference (plus or minus) that are knitted together by socio-cultural values, norms and shared belief by virtue of the age they share. Oluabunwa (2015), opined that each age grade is given a special name that helps define its position in the community, relative to other age grades. Members of each age grade are meant to know one another fairly well, to choose leaders among their members, to meet regularly to discuss issues of mutual or communal interest, and should be willing to help one another and defend the community when the need arises."

Candy (2014), defined festival as a periodically reoccurring social occasion in which a multiplicity of forms and a series of coordinated events participate directly or indirectly and to various degrees of all members of community united by ethnic, linguistic, religious historic bonds and sharing a common world view. In the same vein, Falasi (1987), described festival as a sacred or profane period of celebration marked by special observances for highlighting the importance of this special event in celebrating community values, ideologies, identity and continuity. Lending his own ideas to the subject matter of festival, Getz (2005), sees it as public celebrations to avoid wrong typification which may bring about exclusion of some typologies. Either for socio-cultural, socio-economil or socio-spiritual intention, festival can be seen as a tool of development in a society. However, in Iyere kingdom, the age grade system is one cultural value amongst others that is taken seriously and cannot be divorced from their socio-cultural heritage considering the fact that their society falls within two categories namely the elders and youths.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopted the functionalist and symbolic interactionist perspectives as the guiding theoretical framework. This is due mostly to the relevance of both theories in terms of providing the analytical link that describes functionality and symbolism of the age grade system within the context of Ero festival of the Iyere people.

Functionalist Perspective: This theory looks at both social structures and the functions that such structures perform in the general matrix of the whole system or society. This perspective is influenced by the works of, among others, Emile Durkheim, Talcott Parsons, and Robert King Merton. The crux of this perspective rests on the fundamental premise that if given structures exist and are functional, they should be retained and preserved. According to Merton (1949), one central concept of structural functionalism is the idea of 'Functions'. These are the observable, positive consequences of a structure that help it survive, adapt, and adjust. For example, the age grade system can be viewed in light of its functionality with respect to the various societies in Nigeria. It is believed that the age grade system has played significant role in terms of its contribution towards community development and peace

building. Thus celebration of festivals is one unique way of showcasing and identifying the various age groups, their level of organization, what they stand for, belief and contributions made to the growth of their community which is important and serves as a legacy for others.

Hence, within the context of this paper, the functionalist theory allows a healthy understanding of the place of the age grade system in terms of its contribution to the survival of the whole system. As a result, the age grade amongst the Iyere people provides a platform through which several social, cultural and economic as well as traditional political services are delivered for the betterment and survival of Iyere kingdom.

Symbolic Interactionist Perspective: This perspective is concerned with the interaction of two or more people through the use of symbols (Kotarba, Salvini, & Merrill, 2012). Human beings have a great capacity for thought hence the invention of cultural practices and celebration of various age groups. However, the innate capacity for thought is greatly shaped by social interaction. It is during social interaction that people acquire the symbolic meanings that allow them to exercise their distinctive ability to think and ascribe meanings to things.

Following this strand of thought it follows that the age grade system emerged out of human social interaction woven around the symbolic essence it has for the people and society in general. Hence, for the purpose of this paper, the symbolic interactionist perspective provides a useful theoretical parameter for analyzing the symbolic relevance of the age grade system within the context of the Ero Festival and the general worldview of the Iyere people.

Drawing from the above, the functionalist and symbolic interactionist perspective combine to provide a very useful theoretical direction for this study especially because of the fact that the symbolic nature and or the cultural relevance of the age grade system within the context of Ero Festival has been long sustained due to its function for the Iyere Kingdom. This function takes several forms all of which have been very useful to the overall development of the Iyere Kingdom.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design which involves studies done in natural settings that produce in-depth, descriptive information about the social world (Denzin & Lincoln 2011, Silverman, 2016). Primary data used for this study were sourced through participant observation, In-Depth Interviews (IDIs) and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs). The interview participants were selected through a purposive sampling technique. A cultural expert was selected to ease the entrance into the study areas. A total of twelve (12) IDIs and three (3) KIIs (with the most senior chief, one of the celebrant and the king) were conducted. The results were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis technique.

Results and Discussion

As stated above, the results are presented and discussed in this section under themes that reflect the key objectives of this study.

The Place of the Age Grade System in the Ero Festival of the Iyere Kingdom

Age grades are group of people of the same age, they have a common goal and shared belief pattern. Age grade differs from one community to another and goes with a name for identification, recognition and socialization. Members of age grade system are usually initiated by certain traditional rites which are collectively acceptable and approved by the community. Plate 2 below captures some of the preliminary rituals that form the build-up to the age grade activities during Ero Festival of the Iyere people.

Plate 2: Erinmi



Source: Field Work, 2018

Osho (2002), was of the view that in tracing the history of the people, it was discovered that the name “IYERE” was coined by the early neighbours of Urogho, who described them as people under Ayere tree while their leader was referred to as man under Ayere tree or the owner of Ayere (Olu-Ayere or Alayere). The Iyere people are known for their diverse cultural activities that culminate in their socio-economic development and communal unity. Among such cultural activities is the Ero Festival. The festival is believed to be a traditional leap from community labour to retirement. It is a symbolic period whereby the Olori-Ugbamas who graduate into elders' category successfully transfer their working tools (for instance, hoes, cutlass, trowels, also modern tools such as computers, survey pegs etc.) to their successors. This strongly justifies the symbolism of moving from one age to another within the context of the world of work. It is a system that reflects the organization of male citizens from the age of thirty years into age groups for the purpose of effective communal labour. However, due to modernity women now also partake in Ero Festival. The age groups are made up of seven units and each unit flows a ladder system of promotion. The youngest unit moves to the second, while the second moves to the third and so on until the seventh unit is attained where they are qualified to celebrate the “Ero” festival and they are called Abioros (Osho, 2002). The Ero festival been celebrated by all age group does not demand any special initiation or ritual rites the celebrants of retirement age often referred to as the OLORI- UGBAMAS(elders) whose age brackets ranges between 60- 65 are ushered into retirement. The movement or promotion of age group takes place every six (6) calendar year or seven (7) lunar year (s).

All sons and daughters of Iyere kingdom both within and in the diaspora partake in the planning and execution of the Ero Festival despite their religious affiliation. It is a period where cultural beauty and splendor is displayed. The festival is celebrated for a week particularly on two main days usually Friday and Saturday of July that is the 'Anaye and Upele' market days. Although all age grades celebrate the Ero festival, those moving from Olori- Ugbama to Abiuro celebrate it with great pomp and pageantry.

Plate 3: Procession of Community Members during the Ero Festival



Source: Field Work, 2018

The “Olori Ugbamas” being the leader of the age group units during their younger days served as soldiers defending their community against external attack or aggression. Some will take part in the erection and maintenance of public buildings like the palace, halls and schools, while others participate in the construction and maintenance of roads to the farm and neighbouring towns and villages. The first preliminary ceremony leading to the Ero Festival proper is known as the “Didun” which is marked on a day set aside by celebrants for kolanut sharing and drinking of palm wine and serving of Didun (a special maize delicacy) solely for the chiefs in council of their various quarters. Whilst the merriment is on, the most senior chief will use his hand fan to pat the celebrant buttocks three times and say word of prayers for them, this act is repeated thrice on different days.

In addition, the “Akonwile” ceremony commences with a traditional procedure of celebrants according to their quarters beginning with the Urogbo quarter, followed by Ujima, then Ukiti. Sixteen (16) days after, the celebrants would visit the Ayero shrine with all age grade groups uniquely dressed in their various uniforms distinguishing one group from the other. The celebrants wear clothes (hand woven clothes) used for manual labour the cloth is usually tied round their waist and this stands for what the people refer to as 'Riro' and the rite performance is referred to as Ero. The Olotu-Egbe (i.e head of the age grades) from Urogbo who is the general Olotu- Egbe remains in the shrine to say prayers for good health, peace for the clan and prosperity for individuals, thereafter he hands over the working tools to their immediate juniors who automatically become the Olori- Ugbama (chairman of the Ugbamas). This act marks the climax of the celebration which further symbolizes the retirement of those handing over and supervision of the communal labour to the incoming age group. The most senior (New Abirios) of all age groups is led by those who celebrated the Ero six (6) years earlier in

procession that is styled with chants and songs such as “ Egbe wa ma ro" arogbo o koko" Odon Jo Odon Jo (Our age grade is the ero festival, may we live long).

Plate 4: Photograph of the Community King



Source: Field Work 2018

Each age group with their songs of victory and celebration. Plate 4 below captures the cultural display of indigenes during the Ero Festival.

Plate 5: Opa Aja- (Head ties on poles)



Source: Field Work, 2018

The return from Ayero shrine on Friday night usually ushers plenty of exciting activities to behold and enjoy, while eating and drinking is ongoing the 'Gbegbekutu' (contention of strength and prowess by youths) ceremony kicks off with music. All celebrants from all quarters beginning from Urogbo in their labour dresses would together dance to the battle

ground carrying their 'Opa-aja'. The various quarters would struggle with their 'Opa-aja' (Head ties on sticks usually 3feet long) claiming the right of way (road) without conceding to defeat. The contention represents a dramaturgical scenario which is usually so intense that only the intervention from elders would calm participants down. On getting to their destination, each group would return with a song 'A yi pada A re noli wa oloye, A yi pada ko, oloye o yi pada' (we are turning back, we are returning home, oh chief we are turning back) with this the first part ends. Nevertheless, the celebration continues with the climax of Usanso (traditional tying of clothes) rites, during which all the traditional clothes are taken to religious places (Church or Mosque) for blessing. Wrappers are then taken to the family houses of the various celebrants where an elder in the family does the tying with singing and eating.

Relevance and Prospects of Ero Festival

According to Parry (2005) major festivals held might not only provide social and economic impacts but can foster community cohesion and significantly alter the image of host environment in the long run especially for locations that might have endured a long period of economic decline or social drift. It is important to note that anything worth celebrating has significance either positive or negative. However, the Ero festival has a positive significance on the community and the people. These positive functions of the Ero Festival are discussed below:

Fostering of community development: It promotes community development as no one would invite a guest home without first ensuring his/her house is in order. The Iyere age grade system is primarily concerned with the sole purpose of community development. This they do and achieve through effective reciprocal communal labour. Different age groups are tasked with different responsibilities ranging from road maintenance, town hall cleaning, and security of territory to farm maintenance.

Display of cultural artefacts: It creates avenues for displaying our material and non-material cultural diversity. Ero festival celebration is a period whereby there is a huge display of the Iyere people's culture beginning from their songs, dance, food, drinks etc. These cultural artefacts are entertaining and symbolic to the people and the society at large.

Celebration of hard work and the elderly: It is celebrated with respect to the cultures of society, contributions of heroes, heroines and legends (Akintan, 2013). The Ero festival which is designed to celebrate age group, specifically dedicates two days to celebrate the elderly. It marks a celebration of traditional leap of the age group (60- 67) from community labour to retirement. A period of giving thanks and glory to God for longevity and long years of service. This is symbolic as it brings to the minds of celebrants and participants that the human body deserves rest and the elderly should be cared for. It is a period where every clan celebrate the elderly with gifts of clothes, cash and songs.

Promotion of Peace: The celebration of Ero Festival brings about solidarity, love and sense of belonging among all existing three units/quarters. Everyone from the quarters carries with

them a strong expectation for the next six or seven years in anticipation of the next festivity, during which proper planning and execution will be going on. It takes love and peace to put up such huge cultural activities and the Iyere people are lovers of themselves. During this celebration the people bond and even old folks from far and near reunite.

Promotion of tourism and economy: it serves as avenues for tourist to visit and be entertained. It boosts the economy of the community and calls for huge investment from government and non- governmental organizations if properly planned. Ero Festival attracts all sons and daughters from within and outside the Iyere Kingdom which demands them investing their resources in their land. Apart from this, visitors that are non-Iyere people also provide economic growth for the kingdom as hotels and restaurant business boom within this period.

Traditional Population Pyramid: It serves as an avenue to know the population structure of the community since those celebrating is of a particular age grade; as such it helps in knowing the pyramid of the population of persons in certain age bracket. This will facilitate planning in the community.

Plate 6: A cross section of the celebrant



Source: Field Work 2018

Conclusion

The study examined the relevance of age grade system as exemplified in Ero Festival of Iyere Kingdom in Owo Local Government Area of Ondo State, Nigeria. Based on the submissions and findings of this study, it is safe to conclude that festivals are an integral part of every known society in the world showcasing their rich cultures. For Africans, it is very dear to them as it goes beyond just aesthetics and celebrations but rather it is symbolic and has specific meanings with significant values for the people. The Ero Festival is very important to the people of Iyere in Owo Local Government Area of Ondo State in the western part of Nigeria, because it showcases the relevance of age grade system and the dignity of labour shown in the form of rites of passage from hard work to retirement by a distinct of age group. It also serves as a

rallying point since it brings back sons and daughters of the land from far and near every seven lunar years. In addition, the festival strengthens the bond among the people, foster development of the society as well as celebration and goes a long way to boost economic activities in the community during that period.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made.

- i. There should be more publicity and awareness through the means of print and electronic media so as to attract global patronage.
- ii. The Ero Festival should be celebrated and acknowledged by government at all levels in the state (Ondo State) this will generate revenue for the state by attracting tourists and promoting our cultural heritage.
- iii. The planning committee of each Ero festival should ensure the experience is documented either by gathering the pictures of each celebrants (photo book) and activities for that year and do an almanac which should be archived in the Kings Place to aid further research into the peculiarity of the festival.

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