

CULTURAL PLATFORMS OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION: A STUDY OF AGE-GRADE SYSTEM OF THE TIV OF CENTRAL NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

It has been observed that most conflicts in Africa are deeply rooted in her cultural endowment. This is mostly to be found in her cultural diversity. The near inevitability of conflict in Africa has become a constant reference point. Nigeria's plural diversity is a notable potential source of latent and manifest causes and triggers of the conflicts. The real and fundamental issue has been the management of these conflicts. While various strategies and models have been canvassed for their resolution, very little effort has so far seen input from indigenous knowledge systems. The paper undertakes a close study of the age-grades system among the Tiv of Central Nigeria as a conflict resolution model. The objective is to document, explore and examine the values, structures and functions of key aspects of indigenous social systems that present a tangible study in the management of conflicts. The target is to refine a potential model of conflict resolution that is indigenous and relevant to the African social reality. The study employs survey methodology using focus group discussions, key informants, (community leaders, family heads, chiefs, traditional healers, civil servants, politicians) semi-structured (community based age-grades, youth) interviews across gender generational samples. The data is collated and analyzed using simple percentages, ratios presented through pie-graphs, charts, tables, histograms techniques. Descriptive presentation is the preferred mode of analysis. It looks at the dynamics, function and efficacy of cultural values in the management of conflict in a specific African society and looks at the potential of adaptability on a limited scale. The conclusion of the paper is a distinct attempt at proffering a home-grown remedy for Arica's plural conflicts in a dynamic new context. On a positive note, it also invites careful and studied recommendations for further study of what has proven to be a most intractable issue in African societies and beyond.

Keywords: Age-grade system, Cultural platforms, Conflicts, Conflict Resolution, Tiv Society.

Introduction

Conflict in Africa especially the ethnic type has been somewhat over celebrated for its obvious negative woes and hues. No deliberate effort is been made to down play this but it must also be said that so little is said about the positive stories that are also part of this social malaise in Africa. Not much noise is made of the monumental success of the reconciliation of the inter ethnic and racial killing fields of Natal and South Africa in 1991; the healing of the genocide of Rwanda in 1994; the closure of the ethnic cleansing in the Liberian and Sierra Leonean Civil Wars. In contrast, not much is perhaps made of the six million Jews that Hitler killed in Germany and the horrendous barbarity of ethnic cleansing in the Balkans in former Yugoslavia.

As observed by Nnoli (1998.7), emphasis in this regard placed on the negative and that of the positive dimensions are neglected. The cultural fabric of Africa is far more variegated but ethnic division remains too vilified to be closely examined to see its positive components. It is in this regard that we see the issue of conflict management. To be precise, Africa has shown a perhaps unmatched capacity to heal deep social wounds through tested conflict resolution mechanisms and models. In Rwanda 22,000 Gacaca traditional courts were able to treat successfully, millions of genocide and related cases which European modern courts would not have been able to even attempt treating and in a record time of just months.

This is why we proceed to examine a vital component of the cultural reality of Africa – the age-grade system. We specially take a close look at its conflict resolution functions. Age grades have been documented by several scholars but this quality was been neglected. Among the Tiv of central Nigeria, this aspect of age grades is tested, successful and quite phenomenal.

Age reads are a form of social organization that is based on age. The typology differs from one society to another depending on the tradition found there. These grades progressively move from one grade to others more senior. The members however, belong to an age set that is more or less permanent throughout their lives. The general pattern is that this is found in so-called tribal societies. The age sets are arranged for males only from the nursery stage to adulthood and to that of the elders. It is through age grades that socialization and education takes place and features skills acquisition and transfer of knowledge and secrets. This is normally done through elaborate initiation rites.

In Africa, most age grades systems are generally associated with patrilineal kinship systems. They serve a variety of functions from cradle to the grave and transmit vital information through the age layers in the society. Their roles also depends on specific designations whether as educators, counselors, warriors, civil defenders, public workers, spanning all the generations of the society. Several examples in all parts of Africa are still in existence. The Oromo (Ethiopia and Kenya), the Zulu (South Africa), the Nuer (South Sudan), the Maasai, Kikuyu, Nandi (Kenya), the Tiv, Yoruba, Ibo (Nigeria) are notable examples. However, age grade are not peculiar to Africa alone. There are also found among tribal societies in North America, Australia, and Taiwan among others. Among the Oromo, the age grade system is organized around what is called the *Gadaa* (Wikipedia)

A modern parallel of age grades are gender-based (though not mandatory) Boys Scouts, Girls Guides, Fraternities, Sororites and lodges. These are however, not formally institutionalized and are voluntary. They are also non-kinship based (Jeffrey, 1988).

For a longtime, European writers and scholars with structural – functionalist mindsets could not understand this vital structure and function in so-called “stateless” African societies. They failed to see age-grades as key to the functioning of many African societies. Age grades have been instrumental to the smooth running of these African societies from childhood to adulthood. There are several examples of African societies with age grade systems as noted earlier. Several scholars have examined this feature of the traditional social fabric of Africa such as Green (1948), Pritchard (1940)

Understanding how Age-Grades work among the Tiv

The Tiv nation of central Nigeria is grouped under the Bantu language family according to a notable study by Greenberg (1949). They are presently found in four of Nigeria’s thirty-six states. They are the fourth most populous ethnic group and number at least five million (NPC). They are mostly sedentary farmers of root crops like yams, cassava, sweet potatoes, grains such as corn, sorghum, rice and a lot of citrus such as oranges. According to Greenberg’s study, they have a remarkably high linguistic identity with the Bantu language speakers of south, east and central Africa and presently occupy stretches of territory in Nigeria and Northern Cameroun. This has kindled theories that they migrated Northwards from an original southern Africa homeland. One informed guess fingers Chaka the Zulu King’s marauding conquests across southern Africa’s ethnic groups that is said to have sparked a massive dispersal and migration of displaced nationalities referred to sometimes as the *mfecane*. What is also notable is that Tiv migration folklore and legends seem to agree with this theory of their origin. One such legend popularly claims that fleeing some unnamed enemy, the Tiv crossed a mighty river with the help of a huge green snake thought to perhaps have been the Congo River.

Scholars such as Abraham (1940), Bohannah (1968), have studied and described their chiefless, egalitarian mode of philosophy. They present a closely-knit society that shows a remarkably high nature of organization featuring age-grades as a structure and function of governance. The Tiv are republicans with a high level of patriarchal gerontocracy. How their government operates is to be seen in the role of the elders and the lineal social structure and age-grades. The level of operation of age-grades is very high and can be compared to a scenario which looks like a mafia structure with kindred units working in the place of the capo regimes. A notable feature of the Tiv mode of governance is that the egalitarian principle, called *Yana angbian*, is anchored on merit and equality and inclusiveness. Among the Tiv, you cannot cheat a man and hope to get away with it – his age grade set will come after you to defend his rights to get justice for him. So no person is so weak that he cannot get recompense for injuries inflicted on him. To get a close look at how age grades work, we examine the workings of a typical group. We examine the operations of the *Mbakume/Mbakaha* age set. This group belongs to the *Mbaivur* kindred from *Yonov* clan of the *Masev* lineal group.

A typical age-set has an *Orshuwa* – or chief spokesman who presides over the affairs of the group at their meetings. He acts like a chief executive but with no power other than decisions

taken on the floor of the meeting of all members present. He has no powers of his own but participates in and implements the decisions of the group. He also interacts with his peers (*Ator ashuwa*) chief spokespersons from other age sets.

The meetings of the age set which operates as a parliament are of two kinds: the ordinary meeting, which members could absent themselves from if pressed by some other family matters. They can send other members to act as proxy for them on the floor of the meeting. They could send their own prescribed contributions for example. The other type of meeting is the extra-ordinary one. Invitations to this meeting come in the form of eleven grass stalks tied with a dried piece of pepper. Attendance to this meeting is mandatory and proxies are not allowed. The need for this meeting is dictated by the weight of the offence. One such problem is discussions concerning death, sorcery, adultery, fighting, and slander. At such meetings also, a guilty party could be fined according to the weight of the offence. Adultery is fined by a big pig which is determined by having a tall member sitting astride the animal without his feet touching the ground. Then an appropriate monetary fine to appease the husband (called dressing) because the guilty party has seen the nakedness of a woman he ought not to have seen. It is instructive here that rules regarding this type of offence are even more stringently applied if it involves members. So in essence, it is a taboo for an age-grade member to have any kind of affair with the wife of another.

All age-set members have a duty to comport themselves properly. First, irrespective of your status, calling or position, you must humble yourself. The members of a *Kwaw* always band together at all times. Decisions are normally taken by consensus. There is no voting like in the traditions of the west. During meetings, there must be a lighted wood brand, rather like the mace of authority at parliamentary sessions. Members at attendance at meetings must sit strictly in accordance with the rules – you cannot sleep (you will be fined if you do), you cannot cross your legs and be found guilty of noise making or disturbance of proceedings.

Membership is open to mature adults of the decided age range. This may vary in cases where a member from a family invites a much younger person to accompany him to his age set meeting, so that he could have company and not be a loner. In such a case, the age set may have some few members who are not strictly of the same age range with the rest. Women by marriage can also be members, either as wives or widows. They are called *Mtene*. Typical applications for fresh membership are accompanied by a chicken or goat and the rules of the group clearly spelt out. In the same way, deregistration entails provision of a chicken, goat, pig or cow to complete a process called *Sue Azu* depending on your status in life. Discussion with group members give a clear picture that it is easier joining the group than exiting it. The latter process is more cumbersome than the former. All types of membership are for life. You must not litigate with another member, speak English or write a letter a disciplinary master exists and must have on him, a set of ropes. The rules, principles and functions of age grades fall within a general pattern and may be summarized thus:

Functions of Age-Grades

- Punishment of erring members, code of conduct for community
- Assisting of members in need: Hospital bills, widow support
- Driving the achievement mode of society

- Defending the rights of members even within families
- Training and recruitment of leadership for society
- Serving as an important institution for social organization
- Enforcement of rules, decision making
- Execution of community labour – road maintenance, public wells, markets, favour labour, communal projects.

You must not litigate with another member speak English, write a letter. A disciplinary master must have ropes on his person.

The Dimensions and issues of Age-Grades

All issues in research entail a problematic that must be addressed in our discussion, a number of serious observations inform our interest. In the main these may be categorized as follows:

- What are the characteristics, dynamics and consequences of age-grade societies in Tivland.
- To what extent can age grades be modified and used as an alternative dispute (ADR) Resolution mechanism?
- What is the modus operandi of age grades in Tiv society and what is their impact?

We are therefore, informed by the problematic of the study to move our discussion in the following directions. We set the context and parameters of our exploration and discussion. Using the methodology of focus group discussions and key informant interviews we collect views of members.

- To document the characteristics ,dynamics and consequences of age-grades societies in Tiv
- To explore the extent to which age grade can be modified and used as an alternative dispute Resolution Mechanism.
- To explain the modus operandi of age grades in Tiv society and their impact.

Impact and Recommendations on Age-Grades for ADRM

Our fieldwork discussions and collection of data unveils a number of findings on their roles. Framing all of these is an informed observation of the following. Age grades among the Tiv represent an entity filling in the quite conspicuous spaces created by blatant mis-governance and neglect. This is particularly in one critical area – the dispensation of justice. The creation of the modern state in Africa it has been observed was a revolutionary development (Akpar in Okpaga, ed. 2015). This colonial state was an imposition that war arbitrary, predatory and anti-people. The state was created in the interests of imperialist colonial rule. The transition of this behemoth to the post-colonial epoch has been documented by various scholars, Ake (1993), Fanon (1970) Nkrumah (1965).

Decolonization in its essential character has never redesigned the African state. Instead, what has been seen is one party and life dictatorship which has degraded the democratic space in Africa. In Nigeria, this space as noted by Ake (1993) is non-inclusive, looting of the common wealth and arbitrary. A lot of progress has been made no doubt, particularly since the transitions to civil rule but the gaping spaces of lawlessness, impunity and utter disregard for the rule of law continue to fester. These have been adequately captured by various reports by

Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, the Brookings Institute, African union peer-review mechanism since 1999. Age grades typify lack of government presence particularly in the dispensation of justice for rural, poor and economically disadvantaged groups. It is instructive here to note that recently, the Brookings Institute in Washington reported that as at 2017, Nigeria had overtaken India as having the highest numbers of the poorest of the poor in the world. Age-grade resurgence among the Tiv represent the spaces occupied by Non-Governmental Organisation occasioned by government neglect.

Their scope and mode of operations however, are highly restricted. They could be modified to fit into and form an alternative dispute resolution mechanism which has been accepted already by Nigeria's judicial system. They are highly effective particularly at the local level where they thrive. Their knowledge, modus operandi and philosophy exemplify the social reality of Africa in the modern epoch. In the contemporary era it is the perspective of some African scholars (Hountondji, September, 2009) that "the intellectual tradition of Africa now is part of an overall project of knowledge accumulation initiated and controlled by the west". This is what Alata calls Academic Dependency (February 2008). In the same vein, it is Hountondji's clarion call for "epistemologies du sud" to liberate African knowledge systems long held captive. This study therefore represents one such effort.

The closure of the Rwandan genocide of 1994 by the *gacaca* traditional court system is here very instructive. The *gacaca* courts using a healing philosophy instead of a punitive principle of jurisprudence from the west were able to dispose of over millions of cases in record time. Alternative Dispute Resolution Mechanisms from the African Indigenous Knowledge System is effective. Age grades as found among the Tiv, can be modified and fit into an (ADR) mechanism in the many societies in which they presently exist in Nigeria.

Conclusion

From the multiplicity of functions played by this age set in the study, we can evidently see a number of issues. They pay off the debts of bankrupt members, intervene even in private family affairs, foot burial bills and weddings loan money to themselves. In many societies as in this case, age grades mobilize members for development purposes. They provide a vital social security network. As development catalysts any serious government programmes can use age grades as agents of mobilization. This is both for development and political purposes. Most of the members interviewed positively affirmed satisfactions with the protective platform of the Kwav or age set. Some members even felt that government could use their platform for fertilizer distribution. In a country where health facilities and services are not easily accessible and in many communities, not even available, this kinship group provides a much needed anchor of comfort. The growing evidence of poverty in Nigeria leaves mostly rural uneducated people very vulnerable. This is clearly the gap being filled by the functions of this age set or the age grade system.

Age set members fend for each other and provide some social security network that fills in the huge gaps of lack of government presence. In Nigeria, even physical security has become dicey. Infact, there is no security anywhere. All members interviewed in this age set scoff at the mention of government in any form. They chorus that they know however that should anything happen to them, the age set will come to their aid. The two female members feel far

more protected than other widows who are not members of any age set. To be sure, belonging to an age set is motivating too because it is not advisable for any member to fail to pay his/her contributions/dues.

Therefore, apart from recommending the use of age-grades for the Alternative Dispute Resolution Mechanism (ADRM), it could also serve as a catalyst agent of development. It will also bridge the gap between government at the centre in urban areas and the rural areas, between the poor and the middle class.

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Appendix

Mbakume/Mbakaha Age set

1. Terna Usongo – Tor Shuwa
2. Thomas Anongo
3. Jimeshio Kacha
4. Dominic Nor
5. Tardaa Awuna
6. Titus Aviashima
7. Alfred Unongo
8. Alphonsus Hiaingya
9. Iornongo Tyohuna
10. Anom Antule
11. Mrs Thomas Chughkpe – Widow
12. Aye Buntu
13. Miande Kwaghmande