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The Role of Age Grade System in Peace Building in Ohafia

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Abstract:

Traditionally, conflict is seen as a threat to peace and social harmony. As a result, every effort is made to ensure peace and unity through institutions such as the age grades. The age grade system in Igboland is a well-structured, time-proven social system geared towards conflict resolution, reconciliation, maintenance and improvement of inter-personal and inter-group relationships. With specific reference to the Ohafia people, the age-grade system (uke) was the foundation of Ohafia political administration before the 20th century. The age grades in Ohafia played a historic role in the provision of security through the mobilization of male warriors for territorial defense. The emergence of the uke as a social welfare and self-help developmental agency since the 20th century underscores its continued relevance and has positioned it as the matrix of socialization, resource mobilization, self-actualization and community development.

1. Introduction

The gregarious nature of man predisposes him to conflict. This inevitable part of his existence has led to the adoption of various measures of dousing the tension inherent in conflict and fashioning out ways of ensuring peaceful co-existence with his fellow men. Every society, literate and pre-literate, has its own methods, procedures, or mechanisms for dealing with or resolving disputes. In Africa, indigenous mechanisms use both local socio-political actors and traditional community-based judicial and control structures to manage and resolve conflicts within or between communities without resorting to state institutions or other external structures (Zartman, 2000). Traditionally, therefore, a dispute is seen as a threat to human and social harmony; disputes disrupt and violate accepted norms and values recognized for the protection and promotion of human relationship in the community. Even more prominent is the belief that disharmony sparks famine, drought and death - a proof of the gods' disapproval. As a result, every effort is made to ensure society's peace and unity through negotiation, mediation, arbitration and adjudication often involving community members and institutions.

Cross-cultural anthropological literature confirms the use of native forms of dispute settlement and peace building in several societies in Africa (Ikechukwu, 1992; Otite and Ogionwu, 2001; Alemika, 2009). Literature on duelers, negotiations, mediations, arbitration, and adjudication, and reconciliation techniques in these works give a fair idea about the range of variations in patterns of formally recognized rules and institutions that relate to peace building in specific societies. In the same vein, traditional societies in Nigeria are reputed to hold secrets of peacemaking embedded in their culture which were practiced long before the advent of colonization. In many places, these traditions are often still in use, keeping the heart of society in harmony while imported overlays such as states and currencies are collapsing in conflict around them (Nwolise, 2004). Over the centuries, Igbo societies have built a wealth of experience as well as specific mechanisms and institutions to prevent conflict, peacefully resolve conflicts once they arise, and work through reconciliation processes. Such traditional processes, mechanisms and methods range from family heads, the council of elders/chiefs, religious leaders, age grades, kingship mechanisms, compensatory processes, and healing ceremonies. All these constitute what might be called "third party intervention" in conflict resolution. In Igbo traditional thought, philosophy and religion, the third party is expected to be neutral and possess the capability to diffuse tension, listen to all sides, restore peace and put social mechanisms in place for peace building.

Among the Ohafia, one of the prominent social mechanisms for peace building is the age grade system or "nde uke". Its role as a veritable tool for the continuity and stability of the Ohafia social system has been recognized by scholars (Mbah, 2013). Age grades in Ohafia have played and continue to play vital roles in fostering "peace and social harmony" (Ifemesia, 1979) through crime prevention, law enforcement and welfare development. Unlike other parts of Igboland where the socio-political system was based on lineage organization and village assemblies, among the Ohafia, the regulation of political relations in the village was the responsibility of the "uke". This unique role of the age grades in the socio-political hierarchy of Ohafia, which brought them to the fore in the management of conflict, prompted this study on their role in peace building.

1.1. The Age Grade System in Igboland

The age grade system is an age long socio-cultural institution in Igboland, South East of Nigeria. In order to understand the age grade system in Igboland, certain clarifications are necessary. Contrary to a literal meaning of the term, an age grade known as “otu ogbo”, “otu ebiri” or “uke” depending on the dialect of a specific area, comprises of people born within a range of years who come together to form an organization which represents not only their interests but that of the wider community. Therefore, it could be more appropriate to refer to age grades as organizations made up of people within the same “age set.” Ilogu (1984) corroborates this view and states that the members of an age grade could be those “born within a five years’ period [which] constitute one age set, such a group is drawn from all lineages (wing within a locality) like a village”. For Widjaja (2001), the age grade is made up of people within the same age (ogbo) bracket usually within three to five years from each other and is a means to create peer group, foster unity and responsibility, acting mainly as a socio-cultural institution.

This means that the ages of the members of one particular age grade are not the same. They are the people who were born within the age brackets of ten years. Between the ages of the oldest and the youngest, there could be a gap of ten years or more. In some cases, the oldest in an age grade can be older than some members of the immediate senior age grade. Surprisingly somebody can be in an age grade and his elder brother is in a junior age grade to his, probably the elder one did not think about becoming a member and when eventually he became interested he went to the age grade that is junior to his younger brother’s and they admitted him.

The members of an age grade are equal among themselves. Even though some are older than others, they treat themselves as equals. When one claims to be older than the other, he is normally advised to go to an elder age grade otherwise he should behave himself in spite of the age differences. They organize themselves by selecting their leaders who pilot the affairs of the age grade contestants for the office indicated. In modern times, officers for whom votes are cast for are the chairman, the vice chairman, the secretary, the assistant secretary, the financial secretary, the treasurer, and the provost. There are modifications in these posts from one age grade to another.

Nnaemeka (2014) highlights how age grades are formed in Igboland. For him, an age grade usually starts by the members deciding to come together for they are of age. In addition, the community demands that they should start organizing themselves when their immediate senior age grade had been named and started to pay levies. Screening of members and verification of the ages of prospective members also constitute part of the preparation process. The admissions of members are endless. Age grades admit new members from time to time even when they had done their outing ceremony. The difference is that as time goes on they add to the requirements for the admissions of new members. The requirements are mostly dues and levies already paid by the members. When an age grade has taken a name and done its outing ceremony it begins to add other requirements.

The outing/naming ceremony of an age grade is done with pomp and pageantry. On the day of the naming ceremony, the new age grade that is doing its outing ceremony entertains each of the older age grades after which the sponsoring age grade names the new age grade. This is done by the leader (chairman) of the sponsoring age grade pronouncing the chosen name that brings the occasion to an end. In naming an age grade, the members come together very well in advance to determine the name they will take. The decision on the name is considered on the bases of various episodes, issues or events in society.

From time immemorial, age grades in Igboland serve as a formal mechanism through which male and female members of each Igbo community pass through the different stages of life. It is in vein that right from childhood; every boy aspires to belong to an age grade. Belonging to an age grade provides the umbrella under which the core identities of Igbo men are formed. Mitchell (1968) agrees that the age grade unions are the bases for the growths of adolescents into lives of later ages thus:

- Age grades form the structural framework through which specific age-sets pass through clusters of rights, duties, obligation and privileges are associated with the different statuses in the age grade divisions in society.

The conduct of the members of an age grade is regulated by the constitution of that age grade. Basically, an age grade’s constitution contains various rules and regulations that encourage conviviality, solidarity, personal and collective development, and prohibit the members from indulging in various misconducts like stealing, fighting, taking the wife of a fellow member to bed, rapping, and disobedience to the directives of the executive officers, non-attendance of funeral ceremonies of members or relatives of members. When any member contravenes any of the provisions of his age grade’s constitution, the members try him and punish him accordingly. In some cases, the constitution makes a provision for a fine, a suspension, a termination of membership etc.

Apart from the above, the Igbo age grade system has been one of the oldest institutions used in the administration of communities before the advent of the white missionaries and Western systems of government. Fafunwa (1974) has highlighted the social, political and economic functions of age grades in this regard. It is also a mechanism for development because they embark on projects like road construction, building of bridges, erection of public buildings and clearing of villages’ paths and markets. Nsugbe (1974) has also talked about the rivalry among age-sets in Ohafia with respect to the inception of community development projects. Ujoatuony (1985) identified the main objectives of the Nwannebuife age grade in Nsugbe as promoting peace, unity and providing moral and financial support to members and promoting community developmental projects.

1.2. Age Grade System in Ohafia

The age-grade system (*uke*) was the foundation of Ohafia political administration before the 20th century. In contrast to most Igbo communities whereas Green (1947) observed, “age groups were largely social and convivial in their activities, and concerned with the interests of their own members” in Ohafia and other neighboring Cross-River Igbo societies such as Abiriba, Abam, Afikpo, and Nkporo, the *uke* was highly developed, and associated with elaborate initiation rituals. In the words of Ohafia oral historian, Uma Eleazu, the *uke* was “a basic institutional form as far as the continuity and stability of the social system was concerned” (Mbah, 2013).

The *uke* had emerged as the major basis of Ohafia socio-political organization by the 18th century (Azuonye, 1990). Hence, Njoku (2000) describes the institution as “Ohafia’s way of life, as old as the community.” The Ohafia arrived at their present location with what Afigbo (1984) described as a “loosely-integrated age-grade system” characteristic of most Igbo societies, but they found it militarily and politically expedient to adopt the well-integrated and “most-purposively and effectively organized” age-grade system of their non-Igbo Cross-River neighbors.

The twin principles undergirding the *uke* were seniority and personal achievement. With regard to the first principle, Uchendu observed that the age-grade served as a basic means of differentiating seniors from juniors “irrespective of sex,” 578 in Igbo societies where seniority was of great importance. Among the Ohafia people, before the 20th century, boys and girls born within a three-year age bracket were grouped into the same *uke* (age grade), and this grouping was repeated every three years for each new set of three-year olds in each village.

As children, boys and girls within an *uke* lacked clearly defined gender categories (Uduma, 1972). Recalling his childhood in the early 20th century, Nna Agbai Ndukwe stated that boys and girls within an *uke* played as equals, hunted animals together, and made “no distinction between male and female” (Uduma, 1972). Within the *uke*, boys and girls enjoyed equal rights and complementary responsibilities, and girls often expressed this equanimity. Another Ohafia male elder, Mr. Arunsi Kalu avers, “*mgbe ichin* [in olden times] within the *uke*, a girl always asserted her right as your equal. She would call you a small boy, because you were of the same *uke*. If you felt angered, she would challenge you to a wrestling bout” (Mbah, 2013). This joking relationship was based on a philosophy of gendered equality and camaraderie within the age-grades, whereas Meek observed, “each age-grade was a *censor morum* for its own members” (Meek, 1950). The gender-equal philosophy of the *uke* defined the organization of communal work, the assignment of levies, and the logic of interpersonal relations such as the distribution of kola nuts, food, and drinks, at home and in public.

In spite of the gender-inclusive socialization within the *uke*, boys and girls tended to distinguish themselves from each other. This distinction began informally during play. Thus, while the girls cooked, and pretended to be mothers, using dolls made out of plantain stem or carved wooden dolls, boys often occupied themselves with erecting play houses using twigs, and engaging in mock gun-battles (*egbe too-too*). It was in this respect that Rattray (1929) noted in the case of the Asante that young children were daily “undergoing unconscious instruction, mostly perhaps by a process of imitation of their elders.” However, it was not until the age of 10-16 years that the social distinction between boys and girls was actualized, through the respective performance of *igba nnunu* (to shoot and kill a bird) and *ino nhiha* (menstruation-seclusion).

When boys accomplished the feat of *igba nnunu*, they were socially constructed as having “cut their first head” (*igbu ishi mbu*), which signified overcoming *ujo* (coward) status. This accomplishment enabled a boy to transition from motherly care into the world of men. From this point onwards, boys were schooled in the art of warfare and secrecy. When a girl experienced her first menstruation (*ifu nso*), which was accompanied by ritual seclusion (*ino nhiha*), she was said to have “cut the first head” or “killed an antelope” (*igbu ele*). In this case, a girl was distinguished by the women-folk as having taken the first step towards womanhood. According to an Ohafia female elder, Mary Ezera, the first menstruation is characterized as *igbu ishi* (to cut a head) because it was not an easy accomplishment (Mbah, 2013). Another female elder, Chief Mrs. Grace Ojiekwe said that women likened the first menstruation to a woman’s first birth, which they describe as *igbu ishi abuo* (to cut the second head) (Mbah, 2013). The phrase, *igbu ele* is used because upon a girl’s first menstruation, her father killed an antelope to commemorate the accomplishment.

Until they reached the age of 18 years, the *uke* remained informal associations, and the members were generally regarded as *umurima* (non-adult persons). Each *uke* up to 18 years did not have a name; rather, each was identified by the name of one of its members, usually the most outstanding. In most cases, the *uke* was known by the name of the first boy to perform *igba nnunu* or the first girl to accomplish *ifu nso* (menstruation). This is because leadership of an *uke* was not based on age but on personal achievement (Njoku, 2000). These groups of *uke* were assigned simple community tasks such as sanitation exercises and collection of minor contributions for communal festivals.

After the age of 18, the 3 years gap between the various *uke* becomes secondary to the principle of achievement. Thus, the first informal *uke* to accomplish a significant self-imposed community project launched itself into formal recognition, through a public parade and commemoration ceremony known as *ifiwe uke* (to establish an age grade). The *ifiwe uke* project could be the building of a community hall or the construction of a major road linking a village with its neighbors. Any *uke* between the ages of 18 and 24 (that is two *uke* ranges) might perform *ifiwe uke*. According to Azuonye (1990), the mutual competition among *uke* members for leadership, and between various *uke* for formal recognition, “emphasize[d] the need for individuals to make notable contributions to the glory and welfare of the community at various stages of their lives.”

A formally recognized *uke* was known as *uke ji ogo* (the *uke* that holds the community), and at any point in time, there might be four different age grades in this category (its age range was 25-36 years) (Nsugbe, 1974). The major responsibility of the *uke ji ogo* was to organize its junior informal counterpart for their *ifiwe uke* (in effect, to establish an *uke* that would take their place). The *uke ji ogo* gave a temporary name to its potential successor. It supervised the junior *uke* and ensured that the latter formally compiled the names of its members, held regular meetings, organized themselves for a second communal project, and from time to time, undertook certain self-imposed communal tasks, in the quest for popularity and name-making.

Both the newly established *uke* and the *uke ji ogo* were tasked with community vigilance (*inotu uche*). Between 1850 and 1900, they often organized themselves into two vigilante groups to guard the community against enemy attacks, especially on farm-days when most people were not at home. They also guarded the yam barns and community farms. It was these two age grades that provided the young ambitious warriors of the community; for it was primarily between the ages of 18 and 35 that a man must accomplish *ufiem* or remain *ujo* (Azuonye, 1990). The relationship between the newly established *uke* and the *uke ji ogo* was a competitive one. Nsugbe

(1976) described the newly established *uke* as “a stumbling block,” “an obstacle in one’s path,” “the opposition,” “the left hand,” and the “impetuous ones” because they were “poised, waiting to take over from the senior set, *uke ji ogo*.”

Membership of the *uke ji ogo* was a major turning point in the lives of Ohafia-Igbo men and women between; because it marked the beginning of formal political leadership. It was at the stage of *uke ji ogo* that for the first time, the sexes formed separate political groups. The female members of the *uke ji ogo* formed a political association known as *ikpirikpe ndi inyom*, while the male members constituted an equivalent organ called *akpan*. The life span of both political organizations ranged from 36 to 55 years, at the expiration of which the members retired into a distinguished class of honored elders (*nde ichin*).

In practice, the *akpan* worked under the leadership of the *ezie-ogo* (male ruler) to constitute a men’s court, while the *ikpirikpe*, under the leadership of the *ezie nwami* (female ruler), constituted the women’s court. To mark the transition from *uke ji ogo* to active governmental responsibility, the age-grade as a collective, males and females, would launch itself into community recognition by accomplishing a significant project. This ranged from the building of new bridges to embarking upon military expeditions. The *uke* must however, perform duties demanding physical prowess, endurance, and valor. This process is called *ifiwe uche* (to give political mandate to an age grade) (Oti, 2007).

At this stage, the female members of the *uke* were mostly married. Between raising their children and providing the bulk of their families’ subsistence through farming and trade, they made equal financial and material contributions to the *ifiwe uche*, undertaken by their *uke*. Upon this accomplishment, the *uke* relinquished its “temporary name” and was given a name by the elders of their village, commensurate with their accomplishments, in a ceremony called *iza afa* (“to answer a name”). The formal name of an age-grade served as a chronicle of its achievements, and was indeed a praise-name. Thus, various *uke* were given the names of founding ancestors or heroic warriors such as Uke Uduma Ezema (founding ancestor of Ohafia) and Uke Inyima Offia Ire (heroic son of the female founder of Ebem) (Mbah, 2013).

At the turn of the 20th century, when *ogaranya* (wealth) masculinity became popular, many age-grades lobbied to be called Uke Akajiuba (the age grade that possesses wealth) (Oti, 2007). Also, under British colonial rule, some *uke* lobbied to be named Uke London (in reference to the British metropolis), and Uke Agent (in reference to the representatives of the United African Company). Each *uke* lobbied their community for a name befitting their accomplishment, and the female members often fed the entire village in order to accomplish this objective. Thus, the responsibilities for the establishment of an *uke* were shared by its female and male members, such that it is inconceivable to speak of an *uke* without women at every stage of its development.

Upon the completion of *ifiwe uche* project (to earn political mandate) and *iza afa* (“to answer a name”), the *uke ji ogo* became known as *uke n’ogo* (“the age-grade that is out in the village,” i.e., the ruling age grade). Thus, whereas Uke Anyafumba was the *uke n’ogo* in Ebem village between 1897 and 1907 (Oti, 2007), Uke London was the *uke n’ogo* in Nkwebi Village between 1914 and 1921 (Mbah, 2013). *Ifiwe uche* was the starting point of mandatory community service, and members of *uke n’ogo* served in daily governance as political leaders, judges, and orators (Azuonye, 1990). The *uke n’ogo* were the ruling age-grade, and they were held responsible for the peace of the community. According to Ohafia oral historian, Oti (2007), they constituted “the pulse, the active, the taxable and the major productive cream of the society.” Njoku (2000) described the male members of *uke n’ogo* as “the arrow-head of community defense,” the seasoned war leaders “so dreaded throughout most of southeastern Nigeria.” The female members regulated peace within the village, especially within the patrilineages, by superintending over the ethical and legal conducts of men and women, married and unmarried, and they constituted the dominant productive resources in the agro-based economy (Uma, 2002).

At about the age of 55-60 years, the *uke n’ogo* retired from active community service through an elaborate ceremony called *igba uche* (to celebrate the age-grade), after which they became *nde-ichin* (elders). Before this transition, the *uke n’ogo* must have accomplished a specified community project such as building the village *obu* or a hut to house the village’s *ikoro* (large wooden public address system), the construction of a major road, the reconstruction of a market, or the provision of recreational facilities. Since the 1920s, various *uke* have provided pipe borne water, school buildings, maternity homes, and electricity to their communities. Each *uke* sought to outshine its predecessor, such that today, over ninety percent of the social amenities in Ohafia were provided by various *uke* (Mbah, 2013). While some completed their projects in less than four years, others spent up to ten years. Whereas the age-grades had split up at the *uke ji ogo/uke n’ogo* stage for political administrative purposes along sex lines, they combined efforts to organize their *igba uche*, and both men and women made equal financial contributions to their assigned projects.

Upon satisfactory completion of the assigned project, the *uke* attained the status of *nde-nchin* (elders), which Azuonye (1990) has described as “the supreme goal of life,” when the individual was looked upon as a “living ancestor . . . [and] addressed by the title, *Nna* (ancestral father) or *Nne* (ancestral mother).” Njoku (2000) distinguishes two grades of *ndi ichin*: the junior set between sixty years and seventy years, and the senior set, seventy years and above. He noted that the former were sometimes called upon to serve as expert witnesses in the male and female courts between. The latter were *ndi ichin* in the fullest meaning of the concept. They were the ultimate repositories of indigenous wisdom and the embodiment of the people’s custom and history, and they were only consulted to resolve intractable issues in the community.

Nsugbe (1976), like most scholars of Ohafia history after him, provided an inconclusive account of the age-grades and their functioning relationship with other political bodies in the community. He links only the male governmental agencies of *akpan*, and *umuaka* to succession through the age-grade political system, as the age-based associations “controlling governmental powers in the village.” Analytically, he excludes the female political institution of *ikpirikpe*, as an equivalent political body. Amadiume (1999) observed that Nsugbe’s study of the matrilineal Ohafia was disappointing from a gender perspective, but she also missed the insight that the autonomous non-lineage-based *ikpirikpe* did in fact derive from the age grade 169 institution. Nsugbe describes *ndi-ichin* as “men” (1974). However, *ndi-ichin* includes both women and men (Njoku, 2000).

1.3. The Role of the “Uke” (Age Grades) in Peace Building

The methods of peace building carried out by the “uke” (age grades) in Ohafia were geared towards reconciliation, maintenance and improvement of social relationships and the survival of the entire Ohafia community. The methods are deeply founded in the customs and traditions that have gradually developed over a long period of time. The importance and utility of these methods lie in the fact that they strive to restore a balance, to settle conflict and eliminate disputes.

The age grades not only resolve conflicts but also to anticipate and stop/or intercept conflicts, thereby building sustainable peace. In doing this, group relationships and rights are as important as individual ones as emphasis is on restoring relationships and reconciling groups. The “uke” have always ensured peace through internal and external social controls. The internal social controls use processes of deterrence such as personal shame and fear of supernatural powers. External controls rely on sanctions associated with actions taken by others in relation to behaviors that may be approved or disapproved.

In Ohafia, elderly male representatives (*ndi ichin*) of various *umudi ezi* (patrilineage compounds) in each village, in addition to members of *akpan* age-grade, constituted a men’s court or assembly, headed by the *ezie-ogo* (male ruler) who was usually the head of the most senior compound in the village. This assembly is known as *amali*, and it usually held court at the home of the *ezie-ogo*. The *ezie-ogo* wielded considerable moral power, derived from his role as the customary custodian of the sacred symbols of the community’s ancestors, as well as the communal land of the patrilineages.

Amali made decrees relayed to the community by a village announcer. In consultation with *ikpirikpe ndi-iyom*, *amali* set the annual farming calendar, as well as dates for the celebration of important festivals. It made rules about the conduct of the citizens of the village and mediated relations with other villages. As a judicial body, *amali* settled disputes, which defied solution at lower levels of the political and administrative arrangement such as the patrilineage compounds (*umudi ezi*) (Njoku, 2000). *Amali* sometimes summoned a meeting of all free born adult males of the community (*oha ogo*), to deliberate on matters of grave importance such as an untraced murder, threat of external attack, mobilization for external attack, spread of dangerous epidemic, or ‘abomination of the Earth’ (*aru*). When such an *ad hoc* assembly was called, every person, irrespective of age, who had a contribution to make, was given a chance to do so, the crowd shouting down unpopular opinions while applauding popular ones. According to Njoku (2000), “young men with power of speech would easily sway the assembly,” and this “provided a forum where the young . . . could bring their influence to bear on the old and conservative.”

At the center of the men’s court was the *akpan* age-grade. *Akpan* was a police organ, which enforced the decisions of the *amali*. Mayne (1934) writes,

- In ancient times [before 1910, when the warrant chiefs were appointed], each village of Ohafia possessed its AKPAN . . . [which was] appointed by a council of elders to investigate all matters both criminal and civil. Their duty was not only to investigate but to arrange for the appearance of both parties and their witnesses and carry into effect the decisions of the [men’s] court or council.

Some of the decisions which *akpan* enforced include prohibitions of fishing out of season or at night, collecting firewood from the forest when the ban prohibiting it was yet to be lifted, or the planting of yam before the ritual inauguration by *ndi-eze-ji* (yam priests). *Akpan* announced the days when specific age-grades would be required to perform certain tasks in the village, and they sometimes kept watch over the village and its farmland. In enforcing laws, *akpan* utilized two mediums: *nkwa akpan* (*akpan* drum) and *ekpe akpan* (*akpan* masquerade). The major means of law enforcement was the imposition of fines on violators, and these fines were often paid in the form of brass rods currency. According to Njoku (2000), during their fine imposition missions, the *akpan* “walk[ed] in a single file, speechless and no person dare[d] to cross their way.”

Akpan arrested offenders in their homes. When offenders were visited by *akpan*, they were first required to pay a “summons fee” known as *ima nzu* (Nsugbe, 1974). If an offender refused to comply or tried to argue with *akpan*, they, without uttering a word, hung the *nkwa akpan* at the entrance of the house of the head of the compound in which the offender resided. This signified that the offender had “carried *akpan* on his head — *buru akpan isi*.” This was a calamitous offense that incriminated both the offender and male members of his compound. The latter would pressurize the individual into appeasing the *akpan*, by paying his fine. Alternatively, *akpan* would seize the offender’s property, or any property of significant value in the immediate neighborhood. In the latter case, pressure from the real owners of the property forced the offender to meet *akpan*’s demands.

As an organ that enforced the resolutions of the male government, *akpan* was not to be disobeyed, and the penalty for disobedience was severe (Mbah, 2013). On special occasions, such as the burial of a member of *akpan*, or the celebration of the new yam festival, *ekpe akpan* (*akpan* masquerade), the organ’s secret society, was produced. In most Ohafia villages, only the most senior members of *akpan* participated in the masquerade performance, but in others, every male irrespective of age took part.⁶⁵² In order to dramatize its power, and elicit obeisance from penalized individuals, the *akpan* masquerade was hideous and frightful. The masquerade symbolized the emergence of the ancestors in corporeal form, and this reified the sacredness of *akpan* powers.

In some, the political prerogatives of the men’s court placed an emphasis on community defense, and the regulation of inter-group relations within and outside Ohafia. In the quest for communal defense, human heads and slaves, Ohafia warriors went to war as individuals, in small bands of a handful of men, and as huge armies levied by war chiefs of the twenty-six village groups, in the 18th and 19th centuries. These warriors were organized according to age-grades (*uke*) (Azuonye, 1990). Some of the battles they fought were interventionist attempts to restore law and order in troubled areas or to safe-guard major trade routes in southeastern Nigeria; and upon invitation, to defend militarily weaker communities from their more powerful neighbors (Uma, 1984) — roles which the British government came to fulfill in the region at the turn of the 20th century (Jones, 1963).

Inter-group relations in Ohafia were not only characterized by warfare in the 19th century. The Ohafia forged lasting diplomatic relationships with her immediate Igbo and non-Igbo neighbors through inter-group marriages which transformed the region into a

network of matrilineal kin-relationships. Thus, the Ikun, Urugbam and Biakpan have had chiefs of Ohafia maternal descent (Njoku, 2000). Other mechanisms for maintaining peace within Ohafia territory and with neighbors include the use of *nzu* (white chalk) instead of kola nuts to welcome visitors, blood covenants (*igbandu*) between neighbors in order to establish ritual kinship. *Igbandu* (blood covenant) was also adopted in order to avert homicide and military conflicts with her immediate Igbo neighbors, and individuals established similar blood covenants in various communities along the regional trade routes to ensure safe passage (Jones, 1963).

Nzu was a major symbol of peace in 19th century Ohafia, where travelers from one village to another was sometimes dangerous attacked due to heightened kidnapping occasioned by the domestic slave trade and human sacrifice, and hostilities in the Cross River area. Nsugbe (1974) writes,

- In welcoming one, [Ohafia did] not say, as most other Ibo communities would, *nno* ('welcome'), or *I biala?* ('have you come?'). Instead, they ask[ed], *Udo dikwa?* ('peace, is it there?'). Nor [did] the Ohafia offer the visitor the traditional kola first, as [did] most Ibo. Rather, they first offere[d] a wooden bowl (*okwa*) containing a ball of white chalk (*nzu*) which signifie[d] *obi ocha* ('whiteness of heart', 'pure heart' or 'good intentions') among the Ibo.

Isichei noted that during the 19th century, Ohafia balanced warfare abroad with peaceful diplomacy at home (Isichei, 1976). McCall (1975) writes that the pre-colonial Ohafia man had two faces: the outward looking face was that of a rootless warrior, while the inward-looking face was that of a negotiator, peacemaker, husband, and father. With her immediate Igbo neighbors including the Aro, Ohafia established diplomatic contracts through a ritual called *ukwuji*. *Ukwuji* was a process whereby a more powerful deity, an individual or a group offered protection to another individual or group of persons, in return for favors (Achebe, 2010). In an *ukwuji* contract between a man and a woman especially a widow, the man provided shelter, protection and support in exchange for the woman's sexual favors, assistance in farm work, and food provisioning. A person could also invoke *ukwuji* with a powerful deity for a temporary period until the danger was over. It was in this fashion that criminals and slaves sought the protection of powerful deities such as the *obu nkwa* in Asaga village, Ohafia between the second half of the 19th century and first two decades of the 20th century, thereby becoming spiritual slaves (Mbah, 2013). Weak individuals also sought *ukwuji* with powerful persons, and land and other property could be secured through pledge to a more powerful person or group who establish *ukwuji* protection over such property.

Indeed, age was an important factor in the construction of personhood, identity and community in Ohafia, because at certain points in a man's life, he was expected to have fulfilled particular feats of masculinity. Thus, within the age-grade institution, hierarchies of *ufiem* were constituted. There was a distinction between adult, warrior, and senior (elder) masculinities. A man attained adult *ufiem* by marrying a wife, in a fashion his age-mates found satisfactory. It was in view of this sense of social fulfillment that Ohafia men express marriage as "*inyu amiri ishi ulue*" [to urinate behind the groom's house]. The idea was that the groom treated his age-mates with so much sumptuous meals and palm wine that they took turns going behind his house to empty their bowels and bladder, returning for more food and wine, over and over (Mbah, 2013). Thus, adult masculinity entailed a performance of wealth for members of one's age-grade. As was the case in Ovamboland studied by McKittrick (1999), it was customary for fathers to marry the first wife for their sons in Ohafia society, and fathers utilized this practice as a mechanism for exercising control over their sons.

Similarly, elders (*ndi ichin*) were accorded great respect for their age, because of the belief that they were living ancestors who embodied the wisdom of ages, and that they were the repositories of their communities' history. However, as Achebe (1958) aptly observed, age was respected in Igbo society but achievement was revered. In the Ohafia case, only men who had attained *ndi ikike* masculinity were given the honor of *idoru-nna* irrespective of age. *Ufiem* status, not elderhood, qualified a candidate for *idoru-nna*. Thus, the *ujo* even in old age remained a "boy" in the human and spiritual world. Uchendu (2001) noted that this was a most "frustrating" and "repugnant" status for the Igbo. By contrast, as Azuonye (1990) writes, *ndi ichin* (elders) who accomplished *ufiem* constituted the "highest rank in the hierarchy of spirits of the dead, and are known as *arunshi* (i.e. 'ancestral' as opposed to ordinary spirits)."

Peace building activities and mechanisms adopted by the "uke" also aimed at ensuring the full integration of parties into their societies again, and to adopt the virtue of co-operation. The objective of the methods, therefore, was to move away from accusations and counter accusations, to settle hurt feelings and to reach a compromise that may help improve future relationships. The effectiveness of the process and sustainability of the outcomes, generally, are attributed to such factors as simplicity, participatory nature, adaptable flexibility, complete relevance, and comprehensiveness (Oti, 2007).

Like its male counterpart, Ohafia female political organization encompassed all women and reflected the role of the "uke" (age grades) in peace building. A village council of female elders (*ndi ichin*), often representatives from the various *umudi ezi* (patrilineage compounds), in addition to *ikpirikpe ndi-iyom* constituted a women's court under the leadership of the *ezie-nwami*. While some female elders and *ikpirikpe* members were daughters of a village, others derived from both within and outside the village as wives. Thus, *ikpirikpe* comprised married, unmarried, divorced, and widowed daughters of a village, known in other Igbo communities as *umuada* (assembly of daughters); as well as village-driven and foreign wives, hence, *otu inyomdi* (assembly of wives), also found in the rest of Igboland. Both *umuada* and *otu inyomdi* are subjects of significant studies (Achebe, 2010; Amadiume, 1999; Okonjo, 2005). Achebe has described the former as a police force, the most powerful government organ in northern Igboland, a supreme court of appeal, a rotating credit union, the custodians of religious morality, the preserver of market peace, and a welfare organization. Achebe (2010) describes the latter as a lower court where cases involving women were initially brought, a self-help group, and the regulators of husbands' treatment of their wives.

However, unlike the rest of Igboland where these female organs existed independent of each other, and only merged to form a temporary Women's Assembly during emergencies, the Ohafia *ikpirikpe ndi-iyom* permanently comprised individuals, who could be classified as *umuada* and *inyomdi*. The powers and prerogatives of *ikpirikpe ndi-iyom* also encompassed those of these two

institutions. The Ohafia case was remarkably different, for *ikpirikpe* derived its members from the *uke* (age-grade), and included both select wives and daughters in profound group solidarity. The existence of women who were simultaneously wives and daughters in each Ohafia village was made possible by endogamous marriage practices within the patrilineage, since the dominant matrilineage was the only exogamous unit in the society. As Mbah (2013) indicates, this was different in the rest of patrilineal Igbo society, where village exogamy was practiced, and as a result, wives of a village came from a distance away, and remained essentially outsiders, even when they had children. The Ohafia case was different, because both wives and daughters could derive from the same patrilineage. Thus, the *ezie-nwami* as both daughter and wife of the village, led the women. It is in light of a women's council, combining the powers of *umuada*, *otu inyomdi*, and a female ruler that the Ohafia female court is to be seen.

The *ezie-nwami*, writes Nsugbe (1974), "combined the secular function of presiding over meetings, or speaking for the body (*ikpirikpe*), with the ritual one of initiating the planting of crops by women in the farms." Until this ritual called *ichu aja izu orie*, which involved the *ezie-nwami* touching the earth with hoe in blessing was performed, nobody planted anything in the community. According to Bassey (Mbah, 2013), anybody violating this taboo "must come and appease us (*ikpirikpe ndi inyom*) in a ritual of *ikwa ali* (to mourn the land), because the person would have accursed the soil and poisoned all crops with blight and insect-infection." Between 1850 and 1900, the female court set the calendar for planting and harvesting women's crops (and in concert with men, decided on the best time to begin yam planting), and maintained taboos, which forbade men from participating in economic ventures such as palm produce sale (Njoku, 2000).

The *ezie-nwami* was actively involved in the political organization of women. Her home was both a palace and a court where the female council held their meetings and heard cases. Because the *ezie-nwami* was usually much older than the members of *ikpirikpe ndi inyom*, she appointed a leader among the *ikpirikpe* members, responsible for carrying and beating *nkwa ndi inyom* (*ikpirikpe* drum), the group's instrument of authority. However, the *ezie-nwami* remained the custodian of this instrument. In practice, women between the ages of 45 and 60 years usually made up *ikpirikpe ndi-inyom*. The broader age-range of this organization resulted from the practice of selecting very active and politically conscious members from the various *uke* that had graduated from the *uke ji ogo* (an age-grade that had been formally recognized) stage (Mbah, 2013). Thus, *ikpirikpe* differed from the Igbo Women's Assembly (which combines the Assembly of Wives and the Assembly of Daughters) in the sense that it derived directly from Ohafia age-grade organizations, and it did not comprise all daughters and wives (rather, active representatives), but it was always able to summon all adult women and young girls, whenever it initiated a decision-enforcement strategy.

Beyond her village, the *ezie-nwami* maintained inter-village sisterhood with all the *ezie-nwami* in each Ohafia village, such that when her cabinet members and all female persons in her village abandoned their homes in protest against men and migrated to another village, the *ezie-nwami* of the refuge village became a hostess to her fleeing sisters. In such cases, all the so-called refugee women would be put up in the home of the *ezie-nwami* and the surrounding compounds. Here, the *ezie-nwami* provided the food, which the women of her village cooked and served to their visitors, amidst soul-lifting songs and dance performances. In some cases, the women spent the night under the care of the hostess *ezie-nwami*. According to the *ezie-nwami* of Eziafor village, Mmia Abali, the concentration of both human and material resources of the female members of one village in caring for women from another village, was often too unbearable for the men of either village. This often forced men into negotiating the return of women, and promising to meet any of their demands (Mbah, 2013). Thus, the *ezie-nwami* was cardinal to active female exercise of political power.

Unlike its male counterparts, *akpan*, which primary duty was law enforcement; and *umuaka*, which could only legislate but could not enforce, *ikpirikpe ndi-inyom* was both legislator and enforcer of its own laws (Nsugbe, 1974). This was a frightening reality, one that was constantly expressed especially by men, in the course of fieldwork for this study, namely, that the punitive measures of *ikpirikpe ndi-inyom* were fiercer than those of men, because, "*wo ji iwe ikpe wo kpee, a wara ndi ife*" — they vented the anger and bitterness of the cases which they had heard upon their offenders' arrest. In this vein, they made use of *nkwa ndi inyom* (*ikpirikpe* drum). The equation of the drum with women's vagina "*ikpu adighi ike eri aku mba!*" (the vagina which has no difficulty in consuming the wealth of others), evoked the sacredness of the female body and sexuality among the Ohafia-Igbo before colonial rule. Njoku (2000) writes,

- It was a grave offense for a man to make an obscene remark about a woman or female sexuality. Such an action attracted a swift and hostile reaction from the entire women-folk of the village. They would assemble at the residence of the offender, chanting bellicose songs, questioning the manhood of the offender and wondering if he ever had a mother. The women would demonstrate in front of the man's house in such bodily exposure that could not but embarrass and shame him, his wife, age grades and relatives. The offender would invariably sue for peace by meeting the fines imposed by the council of women elders.

So, when the women say "*ikpu adighi ike eri aku mba!*" they simultaneously made reference to both the drum and their genitals. Armed with this knowledge, that the sacred cannot be so openly named, it was with a great sense of trepidation that the researcher implored the women to interpret the name of this drum — a fear which the women relished, and one that positioned them in a more powerful position to define their subjective understanding of female power and authority in their society.

The role of the "uke" in peace building in Ohafia was conveyed through ritual stipulations. According to Madam Comfort Ukoha of *ikpirikpe ndi-inyom* of Akanu,

- If you abused a woman verbally in relation to her okpu or ike (vagina/buttocks), that was when our *ikpirikpe* came out. If you appeased us at that point, then our *ikpirikpe* had fulfilled its purpose. You could see a married woman in her husband's home and ask her to leave her home. If this was violated, our *ikpirikpe* came out. You could accuse your fellow woman of okpara (marital infidelity) — that she was married and was sleeping with another man. If this was violated, our *ikpirikpe* would come out.

She further noted that:

- You could tell a woman that she was smelly (*ishi ishi*). In this our land, if you violated this law, our *ikpirikpe* came out, and we the women, would come to you so that you could wash us clean. You would present us with soap, body lotion, *nzu* (white chalk/powder), cloths, perfume, and every sort of make-up we required; because when you said that a woman was smelly, you had abused all the women.

These were some of the functions of the *ikpirikpe* before colonial rule, and these were the laws that held the village together. In the words of Madam Ukoha:

- You could not snatch another woman's husband and edge her out of her marriage. We did not permit abortion, both for single and married women. If we learned of a violation of this, *ikpirikpe* would come out. The violators and their families would perform a funeral for this land. They would furnish us with a number of requirements. We adjudged it a murder. The violators would buy a coffin, a *jooji* cloth, chieftaincy regalia, *okpu agu* (warrior's cap), eagle plumes, yams, a goat, chicken, a pair of shoes, and a large sum of money. We would take that piece of *jooji* cloth with which our *nne* [the drum] had been appeased, and wrap it around her. Then, we would take her back to her house, where she lived.

Besides the regulation of all feminine matters (marriage, education, sexuality, divorce, and initiation ceremony for girls), the female court was solely responsible for administering justice in cases involving both men and women. Thus, Nsugbe (1974) noted, "In cases of adultery . . . *umuaka* could, if the matter came before it, punish the male culprit, but would be powerless over the female accomplice," because *ikpirikpe* "[was] the one and only body that [could] deal with the offenses committed by women." Mayne (1934), who as a British colonial officer, marginalized Ohafia women from his description of pre-colonial Ohafia-Igbo political organization also wrote that adultery was considered a serious crime, and while the male culprit was sold into slavery as punishment, "nothing was done to the woman." Yet, in ensuring justice for a female member of society, *ikpirikpe* did not let any man stand in her way. Thus, Nnenna Emeri said, "If men violated the laws upheld by *ndi inyom*, they were held to the same obligations and punishments . . . If a man abused his wife physically or verbally in relation to her sexuality, or accused her of sleeping with other men, once women learned of it, *ikpirikpe* went and showed him that there was a power above him . . . And once they came in, if the man was not co-operating, they may put him down and urinate upon him."

Urinating upon men was Ohafia-Igbo women's manifestation of what Mbah (2013) described as "sitting on a man," and what Ardener has described as African women's "sexual insult" upon men, employed to enforce women's political decisions (Mbah, 2013). This was a serious punishment against male offenders, and the ability of women to punish men, as individuals and as a group, distinguished *ikpirikpe* as more than a protest organization (like the Igbo women's assembly), and more of a formal political entity that constantly governed societal morals. It is plausible that the matrifocal principles of citizenship, inheritance, and political succession among the Ohafia encouraged an intense preservation of women's civil rights between 1850 and 1900, which often translated into regulating the conduct of both men and women. *Ikpirikpe* also employed similar aggressive strategies in securing the property of women from their ex-husbands' homes, after divorce, and in all cases of female domesticity. Thus, in cases of abortion, *ikpirikpe* exerted punishment on both the man and woman involved, through what is known as *ikpa mgbogho* (desecration and ostracism), which Njoku (2000) describes as "one of the most disgraceful and humiliating things that could happen to a young girl and a young man."

Also, while Ohafia men were preoccupied with the defense of the community, which shaped their socio-political prerogatives, women were indispensable in this process, both in the construction of the dominant *ufiem* (*ndi ikike* [warrior] masculinity), and in the prosecution of warfare. Nne Nnenna Uma Eke stated, "In this our land, anytime it was announced that *nde ikom* (men) would go to war, there was a traditional rite which *nde inyom* (women) must perform. We call it *ije akpaka*. If *nde-inyom* did not perform *ije akpaka*, *nde-ikom* could not go to war." Refusal to perform *ije akpaka* was a mechanism, which Ohafia-Igbo women used to denounce and prevent what they considered illegitimate war between Ohafia and their ritual kin, Ibeku and Abam (Oti, 2007). Achebe (2010) recorded a similar situation in Nsukka, where the women of Orba foiled an unjust war with Obukpa by sitting naked in front of their homes, to shame their men into submission (nudity as protest).

The difference is that whereas *ije akpaka* was a formally established practice that regulated prescriptive behavior (authorizing warfare), nudity as protest was an informal protest mechanism, which African women employed to engineer favorable political decisions. Moreover, accounts of distinguished Ohafia female warriors abound, and women played specific roles in welcoming a male warrior back from battle, and in ensuring his re-admission into society, through ritual purification. It is thus by balancing their obligations to their community and protecting their self-interests, that Ohafia women defined their socio-political significance through the formal political institution of *ikpirikpe*.

Ikpirikpe utilized these ritual ceremonies to socially and politically check the excesses of the male elders, stifle immorality in their society, and sanitize the land. Some rituals such as *idighi omara* (land purification rite) and *uzo-iyi* (virginity testing) were organized by the *ikpirikpe*, and were distinguished by significant age-role inversions. In both cases, young virgin girls assumed the role of a public court of critical opinion, primarily against the male elders of the society. Here, ritual ceremonies were transformed into political platforms for registering dissent and bringing to public ridicule male elders who had committed social ills in secret.

In the *idighi omara* ritual, performed in the course of the new yam festival, the women of the community cooked a sumptuous meal of *egusi* soup, chicken and pounded yam. This was dished into a calabash and given to a young virgin girl, who carried it around, serving it only to the male elders. Any married man who had committed adultery or taken a bribe to thwart the course of justice would be cursed with fatal diarrhea upon consuming the food. In the course of this ritual, all women in the society were socially perceived as sacred, and any man who beheld his wife embraced her and fired a gun salute in her honor. According to Chief Olua Iro Kalu and Nwannediya Mmonwu-Oti, this homage to women, similar to that performed during *omume iri uduma* ceremony served to honor women as breadwinners of their families, as well as an acknowledgment of their role in maintaining public morality. To mark the end

of the ceremony, the young virgin girl went to a river to perform a ritual bath, the belief being that she had embodied the male elders' sins, and through her purification, moral purity was restored in the community. After bathing and purifying herself, her age mates joined her in celebration. In effect, this ritual reinforced the social perception of women as the guardians of public morality, in the pre-colonial period.

2. Summary

In summary, it could be gleaned that peace building was an integral part of the age grade system in Ohafia. The "uke" existed to bring about social harmony, solidarity, a coherent identity and checks and balances which kept the scales of existence in equilibrium. Whether it be through upheld values, rituals, deterrent and reconciliatory mechanisms or outright war; it could be said, in view of the foregoing, that the age grade system was the lens through which the people of Ohafia viewed and ensured peace and stability.

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