Age-Grades and Communitarian Values: The Activities Of Traditional Agencies in Rural Development in Nigeria

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Abstract

Rural development intervention in Nigeria has emphasized the role of governments and their statutory agencies in driving social and infrastructural development while disregarding the participation of the local people. This approach has led to the representation of rural communities as recipients rather than active movers of development. Despite the changes in the rural areas which have undermined self-help and communitarian philosophy of many communities, evidence of community participation in rural development abound in most parts of the country. This study, therefore, examined the activities of traditional agencies in rural development in Nigeria through an in-depth study of age-grade sets in some communities particularly in Urhoboland in Delta State. Active participation of various communities in rural development initiatives was widely reported. Communities were found to be practically involved in development projects which they considered relevant to their felt needs and aspirations. This was expressed through the activities of age-grade associations. Although these age-grade associations have been able to achieve much success within the limits of their resources, an active collaboration with government agencies is bound to take rural development in these communities to greater heights. In addition, the federal and state governments must begin a comprehensive capacity building initiative to enhance the resilience of the rural areas for sustainable development.

Key words: communities, development, distortions, dualism, participation, organisation, tasks

Introduction

During the colonial era, the abundant natural resources in the rural areas were exploited without any attempt to develop such areas. Development projects

were concentrated in the few urban centres and any extension of such development effort was to facilitate their administrative convenience. The rural areas served as sources of cheap and sometimes forced labour. Idike (1992) noted that through the Road and River Ordinance, the Warrant chiefs were empowered to order communities to provide unpaid compulsory labour for the construction and maintenance of access roads and other services. The different attempts at development culminated in the 1976 local government reforms which main proclaimed objective was to bring government nearer to the people. It was hoped then that with government operating at the grassroots, a development process that would improve the lot of the rural populace will be triggered off.

Jike (2005) however contended that although colonial development policies were plunderous and exploitative of indigenous human and material resources, post-colonial rural development plans and policies have mostly ignored fundamental development issues and inadvertently accentuated some of the problems especially socio-economic dualism and ancillary distortions which constitute the bad legacies of erstwhile colonial masters. The distortion of Nigeria's development pattern has been sufficiently highlighted in the relevant literatures. Aboyade (1980) specifically decried the profound dualism between the urban and rural areas and the proportionate costs and consequences of rural infrastructural lag behind urban modernism. Onimode (1982) has even gone much further to pinpoint the historical origin of the dualism in contemporary Nigeria between the rural and urban areas. According to Onimode (1982:63) some eighty percent of the population in rural areas either had no medical services or made do with rudimentary facilities scattered over wide distances.

Olatunbosun's volume, *Nigeria's Neglected Rural Majority*, is an indictment of both the colonial and post independent governments, not only for neglecting the majority who live in the rural areas but also for "milking them dry" for the benefits of the British metropolis and the urban minority in Nigeria. It is pertinent to highlight the dichotomy in the structure of rural and urban development and the accompanying differences in the levels of commitment to these structures in order to ascertain some of the crisis of rural development in Nigeria.

Rural Development in Perspective

In the rural sector in Nigeria, public policy has consistently emphasized "increased agricultural out-put and productivity" as the main instrument for rural development (Okpala 1980:161). Similarly, public policy makers also regard rural development as synonymous with agricultural development (Hall, 2000; Onokerhoraye and Okafor, 1994 and, Tom, 1991). The assumption was that increase in agricultural output would lead to increase in rural income and improvement in the livelihood of the people. However, Okpala (1980) disagrees and argues that the prevailing public policy emphasis on increased agricultural out-put and productivity as the main goal of rural development, is at variance with the communities' perception of what constitutes their development. It is obvious from the above positions that the rural dwellers do not share

government's enthusiasm for agricultural development. They frequently do not adopt the type of rural development proposals, programmes and projects that are espoused in the official national development programmes. The communities therefore, undertake other type of projects that they think are more relevant to their felt needs and aspirations.

As Olisa (1992) rightly observed, over 80% of the country's population live in the rural areas and are engaged in agriculture, yet the country's internal food supply relative to domestic demands, has been consistently on a steep decline, climaxing in the ongoing national food crisis associated with or aggravated by the ongoing World-Bank-Sponsored Structural Adjustment Progrmame. And yet in many parts of the country, evidence abound of abandoned agricultural projects originally sponsored by one Nigerian government or the other or foreign aid agencies. Another way of stating the Nigerian rural development dilemma, Olisa further stated, is that if all the agricultural and industrial projects started in all corners of Nigeria since the 1950s to the present were successful and in active production today, the country would be recording substantial food surplus and much of its rural areas would have undergone substantial transformation. Instead, the present general condition of the country's rural population is one of poverty, malnutrition, poor infrastructure, acute shortage of staple food items, poor medical facilities, persistence of local endemic diseases which reduce the quality of the labour force, dependent deprived rural women folk and unproductive subsistence agriculture.

The 1970s witnessed the formulation and application of various rural development approaches in a bid to achieve progress in the rural areas of Nigeria. These approaches were founded on the firm belief of notable economic strategists and administrators that rural development provides a more reliable springboard for national development (Onokerhoraye and Okafor, 1994; Tom, 1991; Diejomaoh, 1984 and Udo, 1984). Consequently, between 1973 and 2007, Nigeria launched successively national rural development programmes with supportive schemes. That these programmes have not generated infrastructural and human capital development in the rural areas is an indication of their weaknesses and ineffectiveness. The decay and worsening rural conditions and the attendant increasing rural-urban migration are evident in the long years of neglect of the rural areas.

Since the government was "far" from the rural areas in terms of development and with the realization that government alone cannot provide all their needs, the people had to learn to look inwards through community development activities. Despite the changes in the rural areas which have undermined self-help and communitarian philosophy of some communities, evidence of community participation in rural development abound in most communities in Nigeria.

Communitarian Values as Basis of Rural Development in Nigeria

Despite distortions communal feelings among rural people is still very much pervasive. Baker, 1974 for example in his study of political change in

Lagos concluded that one vital political resource of Lagos is group solidarity defined as the consciousness of a common identity among a given set of individuals. For instance, the guilds of carpenters, hunters and blacksmiths which engendered the spirit of cooperation during the era of communitarianism have also sprung up in diverse forms such as mutual help, thrift, credit or co-operative societies (Onokerkoraye, 1984). In his study of southeastern people of Nigeria, Lieber (1971:28) came up with a classification of co-operative societies. According to Lieber (1971.28), the young men's society, *Nka Nkparawa* is a type of loan and thrift society only open to males who are above the age of 40. This society involved itself in matters affecting the village as a whole. In addition, there is a co-operative loan society to help build houses, buy palm plots and educate their children.

Corroborating the survival of communitarian practice in Nigeria, Lieber (1971: 25) stated that:

> In the community of *Ikot Nsit* (in the southern eastern region of Nigeria) everyone belongs to some society or the other. This roughly approximates a form of age-group organizations. Children between nine and fifteen are members of a society responsible for wedding, clearing farm lands and doing other communal labour.

Substantiating the existence of some of the vital elements of communitarian ideology, Ifemesia (1979:81) noted that the age-grade organization is the institution by which traditional democratic *Igbo* communities co-operated for work, war, government etc. Although its political and executive authority has declined during the colonial and post-colonial periods, the social, cultural and economic functions of the organization have survived in various forms. Other writers, who have emphasized the significance of communal help among contemporary Africans, include Marris (1961) who noted that Africans who were employed in the modern sector gave a significant proportion of their salaries as gifts to extended family members. Similarly, in the area of socialization, Ifemesia (1979) noted that the upbringing of a child was communal rather than an individual responsibility. The collaborative tendency among Africans has been described by some scholars as African Humanism. According to *Aboyade* (1980:84), African humanism:

> Elevates the human factor of production to the level of participation in the development process by viewing production as an inseparable part of distributive relations. It seeks to achieve egalitarianism through a deep sense of man's responsibility to his community. Through the holistic approach to economic and social relations, it attempts to blend individual and social

morality as a basis for social consensus and social action.

The foremost institutional catalyst for rural development in traditional Nigeria was the extended family. The family played both an economically productive and a biologically re-productive role in addition to being the main fulcrum for the dissemination and inculcation of ideas relative to individual and community development. The extended family network is the pivot on which rural work organization revolved. An extended family network is made up of nuclear families, which are believed to have descended from a common ancestry. Members of an extended family are, thus, linked by consanguineal ties. Every able bodied member of the family has an equal share in the assets and liabilities of the family. A death in the family is a sorrowful event for everyone while a birth is a joyful event for all and sundry. Age was accorded high respect within the extended family network.

Osei-Kofi (1974:24), has vividly described how Africans perceive the extended family. The lineage emphasizes a common obligation to its members who are normally blood relatives. The lineage is a corporation in which the actions and thoughts of its members are considered corporate affairs. The individual is not supposed to act or to think in terms of himself alone but always in relation to his group. There were pervasive mutual assistance and co-operation within the kinship groups. This apparent communal ethos has also reverberated across the writings of *Ayandele* (1981:330) who aptly noted that Nigerian society was communal, perhaps more so than the Greek Polis (City States). Every member of the group or village from the highest to the lowest, was no more than a unit in an organic whole controlled by an iron-bound code of duties, taboos and rights on the faithful performance of which by every individual the cohesion, order and welfare of the group depended.

Traditional Agencies and Rural Development in Nigeria

Certain agencies are basic in the evolution of human societies. These agencies become overtly visible as soon as societies take shape. They are therefore, referred to as traditional agencies because they are fundamental to the existence of the societies. According to *Akude* (1992), in Nigeria and in most parts of black Africa, certain social groups characterize the rural communities. Commonest of such social groups are the age-grade and village assemblies which have in recent times mobilized themselves to form larger town unions. These traditional agencies have all through the history of human societies played significant roles in bringing development nearest to the door steps of our rural communities. Each has contributed immensely to the educational, economic and social development of the countryside (see *Akude* 1992). The major concern of this write-up however, are the activities of age-grade sets in the acceleration of the process of rural development in Nigeria.

Age grades and Rural Development in Nigeria

Age grade is a social institution which constitutes vital system in the social structures of any given society. An age grade is an association of persons who were born within a period of time. It may be two three or five years. However, the age brackets of the age grades may vary from one community to the other. In some communities, persons born within a specific period of three, four or five years usually form an age grade. But the most important thing is that each age grade is clearly distinguished from one another. It then means that a man can only belong to one age grade at a time and each is usually associated with specific roles.

According to Akude (1992), age grade is a very vital organ of social structure especially in our traditional Nigerian communities. For example, amongst the *Igbo* in Anambra, *Imo* and Bendel States, the *Tiv* in Benue State, the *Ibibio* in Cross River State and so on, the formation and membership of an age grade is a much revered.

He continued further that age grades, are characterized by the events that occurred during the period members were born or when each age grade becomes officially recognized in the community. In essence, the names of the various age grades in the different communities are often drawn from the historical events that took place when the age grade was initially formed, age or condition of members and their activities in the area. For example, in Onitsha Inland Town, all those who were born between 1960-1962, formed a group which they called 'independence' (in commemoration of the year 1960) when Nigeria gained her independence from the British.

In addition, *Onistsha* has about seventy-three recognized age grades, the oldest (represents people born between 1886 and 1888) known as '*Ekwueme*'. Similarly in *Njikoka* local government area in *Abagana*, there is an age grade known as *'Oganiru'*, meaning development or progress. This group represents all males born between 1945 and 1949. Historically, the period 1945-1949 marked the return of war veterans of the Second World War (1939-1945).

While in Urhoboland we have *Ekpako* age grade which consists of very old men, *Ivwraghwa* which is made up of the largest and the main working group. Imitete which consists of small children, Ekwokweya which consists of old women who have passed the child bearing age, *Eghweya* which is made up of married women, *Emete* which consists of unmarried and generally uncircumcised girls, *Emetogbe* which consists of widows and divorcees and so on.

More significantly, an age grade is an organized group of people born within a given period and whose activities are centered around a set of common goals and a set of code which regulate their conduct. Apart from a high degree of personal intimacy and informal conduct, members are bound together by common challenges such as marriages, burial of parents building of houses etc. Over the years, age grade in different communities have distinguished themselves in the performance of such roles that aim at enhancing the socio-economic life of the people.

They had in the pre-colonial and colonial periods concerned themselves with traditional functions such as the maintenance of law and order, settlement of disputes between warring members, construction and maintenance of roads and markets, maintaining the cleanliness of local streams and above all, protecting their communities from external aggression. In recent times, however, age grades have diversified their roles to include newer activities which aid development. They have contributed immensely to the educational, political and social development of their various communities.

In Urhoboland, however, men and women are organized separately. While the men have four age grades such as: *Ekpako, Ivwragha, Otuorere* and *Imitete*, the women are organized in three grades, namely: *Ekwokweya, Eghweya* and *Emete* as spelt out in (tables 1 and 2) and explained below:

Table 1: Age-grade Organisation in the area for men

Age grade	Age	Men	Activity
Ekpako	Above 60 years	Men	Ruling class, custodians of culture, settle disputes, maintain law and order and so on.
Ivwraghwa	30-60 years	Men	Largest group in terms of members, supervise the younger age grades, maintenance of law and order, settlement of disputes, protect community against aggression, construction and maintenance of roads, markets, town halls and mobilization towards development such as education, economic, political, social activities and ambassadors of the community.
Otuorere	15-20 and 30 years	Men	Provide much of the labour for development activities, execute hard tasks in wards and towns, clearing of bushes, building of shrine houses and bridges, protects the community against attacks, maintenance of river ways/cleanliness of roads and mobilization of younger ones.
Imitete	6-8 years and 15-20years	Men	Clean roads as well as sweep streets. Generally keep the town clean, go on errands and play vital roles in shrine worship.

Table 2: Age-grade Organisation in the area for women

Age grade	Age	Women	Activity
Ekwokweya	Above 40/50 years	Women	Mobilization of women towards development activities, settlement of disputes among women, provides information to the men folk and maintain law and order.
Eghweya	14-20 years and 40-50 years	Women	Duties concern mainly propitiation, rites for crop fertility, provide labour for development activities, mobilization by singing and ensuring that crops are not destroyed by domestic animals.
Emete	15-20 years	Women	Perform domestic duties, provide much of the labour for development activities, sweeping and go on errands.

After a critical appraisal of these institutions in relationship with other polities in Urhoboland, Otite (2003) observed that: first, the age-limit or indeed the ages of members of a group vary from town to town and from one Urhobo community to another. Second, the movement from one age-grade to another is gradual and such movements are based on how individuals mature in age or wisdom. Third, different age dimensions as well as specific names are maintained as a matter of detail by different Urhobo communities.

Fourth, although age-grade features in the social organisation, they also have political implications, because each grade or age group was organized and headed by an *Olotu* (*Onotu*). They are essentially political and make the structure, processes and functions of government to be diffused in the society. Fifth, although children do not features in government and politics, they have their place and relevance in the social organization. Apart from what they contribute to the economy and to their parents' social status, prestige, pride and psychic satisfaction, children play special role in shrine (*Orha*) religious worship.

Organisation of Rural Development Activities in Nigeria

The rural organizational format was relatively fluid as there was no rigid hierarchy of positions. Among the Urhobo of Delta State of Nigeria, leadership role in communal project was loosely based on age and was rotated. For these people, the indigenous political system was so designed that leadership was rotated among the several villages and communities that make-up the area.

In the area of work, leadership was equally rotational,. At the start of a typical communal task, the most elderly person in the group (because of the traditional reverence for age) picked a leader for that particular day. Normally, the most elderly person picked his immediate junior for the second day and so on until leadership was rotated among all members of the work team (Jike 2005). These transitory group leaders apportioned as well as co-ordinated the work of group members. During a hunting expedition, the leader showed the way to where he felt games might abound. The leader normally acted in line with suggestions from group members.

This form of collective decision-making has also been found to be true of the *Igbo* of *Enugu-Ukwu*. Okafor-Omali (1965:32) commenting on the democratic organizational pattern adopted by the *Igbo* of *Enugu-Ukwu*, noted that:

> When matters of village concern such as clearing of roads, land disputes and disagreement between sections of the village were raised, all persons were represented in the discussion. In councils, men of wealth and power as well as those with outstanding intelligence, even though young, exercised influence.

There were no rigid hierarchy of positions in rural organizations. Leadership positions were relatively fluid in the sense that the mantle of leadership was transitorily won by virtually every member of the work group. Thus, baring occasional government intervention, the communitarian ideology has remained the bedrock on which rural development activities are built.

Conclusion

The foregoing discussions have brought to light a pattern of dualism in development activities in Nigeria; a carryover from the colonial era. Perkins and Yusuf (1994:9) however observed that this might not be exclusive to Nigeria as many developing countries have dual economies. Sadly, most of our contemporary rural development plans are mere transplants of pre-colonial strategy of development, which has merely accentuated the infrastructural gap between the rural and urban centers. The prevailing tendency over these years has precariously pitted the indigenous rural economy against the urban sector represented by foreign monopoly interests. Nigerians however have been able to satisfy most of their basic needs within the communitarian framework, which is still prevalent among rural communities.

Finally, any worthwhile exercise on rural development must begin to understand that majority of Nigeria's rural dwellers are subsistent peasant farmers who still use obsolete farm equipment and tools. The federal and state governments must begin a comprehensive capacity building initiative to enhance the resilience of the rural areas for sustainable development.

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