



## **An Ethnographic Study of the Roles of Age Grade in South Ibie, Etsako West Local Government of Edo State, Nigeria**

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**Abstract.** The age grade institution, locally known among the people of South Ibie as "Otu," is a dynamic system deeply embedded in the cultural fabric, facilitating communal cohesion, governance, and development over centuries. This study is a field based sociological investigation of the multifaceted roles of age grade institution among the people of South Ibie, Etsako West Local Government, Edo State. Drawing on fieldwork conducted between 2023 and 2025, the research examines how the age grades have functioned as mechanisms for cultural preservation, social cohesion, conflict resolution and community development. Sociological theoretical insights of structural-functionalism and conflict theory were applied for the study. Qualitative ethnographic instrument using participant observation, in-depth unstructured interviews, and analysis of historical and archival records were used to gather data. Findings indicate that age grades in South Ibie have achieved institutional adaptability in the face of modernization and has contributed to South Ibie societal cohesion and community development, though challenges like urbanization and youth migration were observed to be threatening its sustainability. Recommendations include policy support for integrating age grades into contemporary governance structures for policy makers seeking to leverage indigenous systems for sustainable rural development in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Ethnographic Study, Roles of Age Grade, South Ibie, Etsako West Edo State, Nigeria.

### **1. Introduction**

The age grade institution is a cornerstone of traditional social organization in many African societies, particularly in Nigeria, where it serves as a robust mechanism for structuring communities by grouping

individuals into age-based cohorts tasked with specific social, economic, and political responsibilities. Among the South Ibie people of Etsako West Local Government Area of Edo State, Nigeria, this institution, locally known as "Otu," is a dynamic system deeply embedded in the cultural fabric, facilitating communal cohesion, governance, and development over centuries. SouthIbie, a clan within the broader Etsako ethnic group, traces its historical and cultural roots to the ancient Benin Kingdom, sharing linguistic and socio-cultural ties that shape its age grade practices (Bradbury, 1957). The Etsako people, including the South Ibie, are renowned for their rich heritage, encompassing vibrant festivals, chieftaincy systems, and collective labor practices intricately linked to age grades (Orieso & Ohikhokhai, 2001).

Historically, age grades in Nigerian societies served as pre-colonial instruments for socialization, defense, and governance, organizing young men into cohorts for tasks like warfare, farming, and ritual activities. In South Ibie, age grade system locally known as "Otu" has its origins in migratory influences from the Benin Empire, where age grades were critical for mobilizing labor and maintaining social order. Despite disruptions from colonial rule, which undermined many traditional institutions, age grades in South Ibie demonstrated resilience, adapting to post-independence realities while continuing to drive community initiatives such as building infrastructure and mediating conflicts (Nwagbara, 2019). For example, in the neighboring Auchi and Uzairue clans, age grades have spearheaded socio-cultural development by constructing roads and maintaining markets (Yakubu, 2023a), a practice now known in South Ibie.

Ethnographic research on age grades in Nigeria has often focused on Igbo communities in the South-east, where they are pivotal in rural development and social control (Otu, 2016; Uzoh, 2024). However, recent studies in Edo State reveal comparable dynamics, with age grades in clans like Auchu and Uzairue contributing significantly to economic and social cohesion through collective projects (Obijuru et al., 2023). In South-Ibie, the age grade system is marked by elaborate initiation rites, notably an annual festival known as “Ukpe”, a vibrant festival celebration where young men are inducted into adulthood through ritual initiation involving communal feasts, dances, and oaths of loyalty to community norms and values. This festival not only reinforces social hierarchies but also serves as a cultural anchor, preserving traditions in the face of modernization (Borgatti, 2005)

The functional roles of age grades in South Ibie extend far beyond cultural preservation. The institution is structured into three tiers—junior, intermediate, and senior—each with distinct responsibilities. Junior grades undertake physical tasks like clearing farmlands or maintaining communal spaces, intermediate grades focus on security and dispute resolution, and senior grades provide advisory roles in governance and decision-making (Ebbonu, 1995). This stratification ensures a seamless transfer of knowledge, skills norms and values across generations, fostering social stability. Recent research highlights how age grades curb youth restiveness by engaging young people in productive activities, particularly in agrarian communities like South Ibie, where farming remains the economic mainstay (Okafor, 2022). Furthermore, age grades have adapted to contemporary challenges, such as climate change and economic shifts, by incorporating modern initiatives like vocational training for youth, demonstrating their flexibility (Mbah, 2020).

Despite these contributions, age grades face significant challenges that threaten their sustainability. Urbanization and youth migration to urban centers like Benin City, Lagos and Abuja have reduced active participation, and thereby weakening the institution’s capacity to mobilize labor and resources (Imhonopi et al., 2013). Historically male-dominated, the age grade system in South Ibie has traditionally excluded women from full participation, though recent developments in some Edo communities like Auchu and Uzairue, indicate the emergence of female age grade focused on empowerment and primary health matters like family planning and immunization, signaling a shift toward inclusivity (Okwelume, 2010). These changes reflect broader societal transformations driven by education, globalization, and exposure to gender equality

movements, which challenge patriarchal norms within traditional structures (Nwagbara, 2019).

Conflict resolution is another vital function of age grades in South-Ibie. Senior age grade often serve as informal courts, mediating disputes over land, marriage, inheritance and resources using customary laws, thereby fostering peace and reducing reliance on formal legal systems (Nabofa, 2021). This role is particularly significant in Edo North, a multi-ethnic region with historical inter-clan tensions (Bello-Imam, 1995). In addition, age grades promote moral education, instilling values of respect, diligence, and community service, which contribute to lower crime rates in traditional settings (Taiwo, 2022). The institution’s integration into modern governance, such as through community policing initiatives, further underscores its potential to bridge gaps in service delivery, particularly in healthcare and education (Onwuka, 2024; PIND Foundation, 2020). However, challenges like corruption and political interference can hinder these efforts (Nwachi, 2021).

In conclusion, the age grade institution in South-Ibie remains a vital mechanism for social organization, cultural preservation, and community development, despite pressures from modernization. Its ability to adapt—by incorporating modern initiatives while maintaining traditional roles, positions it as a valuable asset for sustainable development in rural Nigeria (Nwagbara, 2019). Following this, the study aims to document the multifaceted roles of the age grade institution that will offer insights for academic discourse and practical interventions to strengthen the indigenous institutions.

### 1.1 Aims and Objectives

This study is a field based sociological investigation of multifaceted roles of age grade institution among the people of South Ibie of Etsako West Local Government, Edo State. Over and above this, the primary aim of this study is to ethnographically examine the sociological multifaceted roles of the age grade institution among the South-Ibie people, highlights its contributions to social cohesion and community development in the context of contemporary Nigeria.

However, the specific objectives include:

- To explore the ethnographic history of South Ibie.
- To examine the multifaceted functions of age grades in cultural preservation, conflict

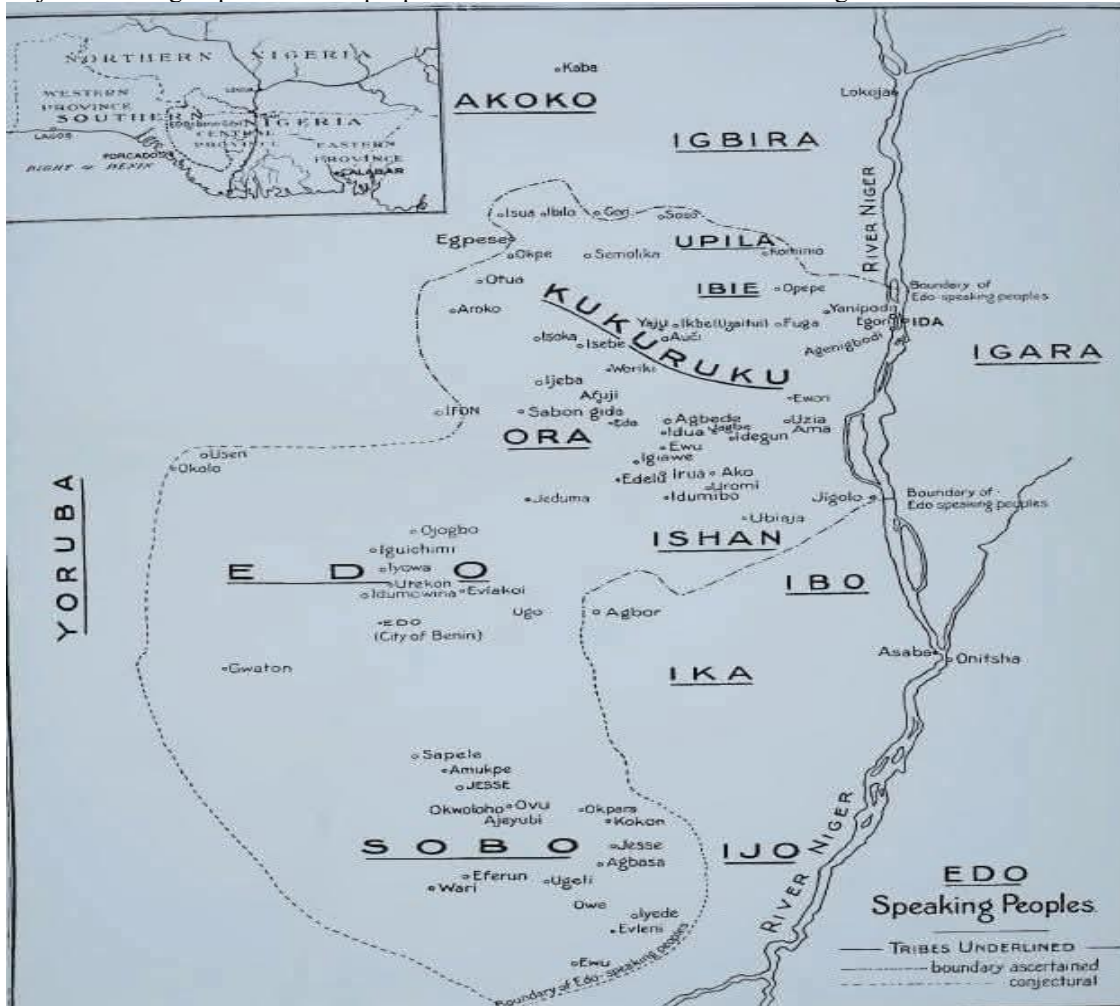
resolution, and community development of South Ibie.

- To assess the challenges facing the institution, such as urbanization and gender exclusion, and their impacts on sustainability.
- To provide recommendations for integrating age grades into modern governance for social cohesion, unity and rural development.

**2. Ethno-Historical Profile of South Ibie**

In his ethnographic monograph, Bello-Imam (1995) provides the history and social life of South Ibie. The South Ibie clan, located in Etsako West Local Government Area of Edo State, Nigeria, is part of the larger Etsako ethnic group, which forms one of the major ethnic subgroups of the Edo people. South Ibie is

one of the six clans that make up Etsako West Local Government Area of Edo State. Other clans include Uzairue, Auchi, Anwain, Jagbe, and Aviele. The oral history, colonial map and ethnographic records indicates that the people of South-Ibie are part of the larger Ibie people whose ancestors migrated from Benin kingdom into the area several centuries ago. The oral traditions and ethnographic accounts tracing the migration of Ibie people from Benin kingdom during the 14th to 17th centuries historically linked the present day North Ibie and South Ibie together as one, with common ancestral leader or a figure often described as the progenitor of the Ibie people. But the post-independence local government Creation divided the Ibie kingdom into North Ibie and South Ibie and made the North Ibie and South Ibie distinct clans under different local government administration.



**Fig.1:** Archival records and colonial map by the British anthropologist, Thomas Northcote showing Ibie, prior to its post-independence division into North Ibie and South Ibie, and later recognized as distinct clans under separate local government jurisdictions. Source: Etsako West Local Government secretariat, Auchi, Edo State Nigeria.

South Ibie has a number of contiguous indigenous settlement communities like Ibie Iyakpi, Ibie Nafe, Iyereku, Ughieda and Ughiekha that formed the present day South Ibie clan. Ibie-Iyakpi was the initial ancestral settlement point of all the South Ibie people. This is why these five contiguous indigenous settlement communities, are known to have descended from a common ancestral and patriarchal leader, fostering strong kinship ties among them. The people of South Ibie maintain strong ties with Edo traditions, including culture, festivals, kinship systems, taboos and age grade institution. Today, South Ibie contributes to the vibrant cultural mosaic of northern Edo with ongoing pride in their Benin roots as seen in their language and aged-long institution of age grade (Blench, 2020).

Historically, during the 19th and early 20th centuries, South Ibie, along with other neighbouring Etsako communities, experienced inter-communal raids and the expansion of Hausa-Fulani and Nupe jihadists and this brought Islam to South Ibie and many parts of Etsako and northern Edo communities. Linguistically, in the pre-colonial-era, South Ibie was among the subgroups that were known as Kukuruku. The word Kukuruku evolved from the people common language of alerting their neighbourhood of danger of war and raid of the Hausa-Fulani and Nupe jihad expansionist campaign. Politically, the pre-colonial South Ibie society was organized along kinship, and village-lineage, age-grade and Magajia institutions. Local chiefs and elders often draw authority from lineage heads, age-grade leaders and the Magajia institutions to judge customary matters like land disputes, inheritance and conflict resolution. Much later, the British colonial administrative reorganization, colonial maps, ethnographic histories and the post-independence local government creation recognized South-Ibie as a distinct clan within Etsako West. However, post-independence developments of South Ibie have recorded steady population growth and urban encroachment because of its association and contiguous to Auchu, where the local government secretariat is located. Etsako West itself is composed of six clans: South Ibie, Uzairue, Auchu, Anwain, Jagbe, and Aviele, with Auchu as the administrative headquarters.

### 3. Theoretical Orientation

This study adopts a dual sociological theoretical framework, combining structural-functionalism and conflict theory, to capture and analyze the multifaceted roles of the age grade institution in South Ibie. Structural-functionalism, as articulated by Emile Durkheim and Talcott Parsons, views society as a

complex system composed of interdependent parts that work together to promote stability and social cohesion (Haralambus, et.al., 2013). Within this framework, age grades serve as critical subsystems that maintain social equilibrium by allocating specific roles to different age cohorts, enforcing cultural norms, and facilitating intergenerational integration. For instance, the tiered structure of junior, intermediate, and senior grades in South Ibie ensures that each group contributes to communal goals (juniors with labor, intermediates with security, and seniors with governance) thereby fostering social order and continuity. This perspective highlights how age grades contribute to societal stability by providing structured pathways for socialization, resource mobilization, and conflict resolution, aligning with Durkheim's emphasis on collective conscience and Parsons' focus on functional prerequisites like adaptation and integration (Olayinka and Olutayo, 2013).

However, structural-functionalism alone may overlook power dynamics and inequalities inherent in social structures. To address this, the study incorporates conflict theory, drawing from Karl Marx's ideas (Morrison, 2006), to examine tensions within the age grade system, particularly around generational hierarchies and gender disparities. Conflict theory posits that social structures are shaped by struggles over power and resources, and in South Ibie, age grades reflect such dynamics through their male-dominated nature and the hierarchical authority of senior grades over juniors (Olayinka and Olutayo, 2013). Historically, women have been excluded from full participation in age grades, a practice rooted in patriarchal norms, though recent shifts toward female age sets indicate evolving power relations influenced by education and globalization (Okwelum, 2010). In addition, the control exerted by senior grades over decision-making processes can marginalize younger members, creating potential for intergenerational tension, particularly as youth migrate to urban areas and question traditional authority (Imhonopi et al., 2013). By integrating conflict theory, the study explores how age grades navigate these power imbalances while adapting to modern societal changes.

This dual theoretical approach provides a comprehensive lens for understanding the age grade institution's dual role as both a stabilizing force and a site of contestation. Structural-functionalism illuminates the institution's contributions to social cohesion, such as through communal labor and moral education, while conflict theory highlights challenges like gender exclusion and the impact of modernization

on traditional hierarchies (Nwagbara, 2019). Together, these frameworks enable a nuanced analysis of how age grades in South-Ibie balance tradition and adaptation, offering insights into their resilience and potential for integration into contemporary governance structures. By grounding the study in these theories, the research not only ethnographically explains the institution's enduring relevance but also critiques its limitations, paving the way for recommendations that address both its strengths and challenges in a rapidly changing social landscape and modernization.

#### 4. Research Methodology

The ethnographic methodology of this study provides a deep sociological dive into age grade system, capturing the practices and live experiences of South Ibie residents through immersive fieldwork conducted between May, 2023 and June, 2025. By participating in age grade meetings, “Ukpe” festivals, and daily community interactions, the researcher gained insights into the institution's resilience and adaptability. Comparative analyses with other neighboring clans like Uzairue and Auchi, reveal both clan variations and shared themes, such as the emphasis on collective labor and conflict mediation (Obijuru, et al., 2021). In an era of rapid development, understanding the age grade institution is critical for policy makers seeking to leverage indigenous systems for sustainable rural development in Nigeria (Okafor, 2022).

##### 4.1 Research Instrument and Sampling Method

This study employs purposive sampling method using qualitative ethnographic approach to investigate the multifaceted roles of the age grade institution among the South Ibie people, aiming to sociologically capture the live experiences and cultural nuances of the age group in the community. Fieldwork was conducted over a two-year period, from May 2023 to June 2025, in the five village communities (Ibie Iyakpi, Ibie Nafe, Iyereku, Ughieda and Ughiekha) of South Ibie, Etsako West Local Government Area, Edo State, Nigeria. The primary methods included participant observation, in-depth unstructured interviews, and archival analysis of records and map, designed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the age grade system's structure, functions, and challenges. Participant observation involved the researchers immersing themselves in community life, attending age grade meetings, initiation ceremonies (known as Ukpe festival), and communal labor activities. This method allowed for firsthand insights into the initiation rituals, interactions, and roles of different age grades,

capturing the age grade institution's dynamic roles in daily life and special events.

In-depth unstructured interviews were conducted with 45 participants, purposively selected to represent a diverse or cross-section of the community. The sample included 15 individuals from each age grade category—junior (ages 18–33), intermediate (ages 34–49), and senior (ages 50 and above)—ensuring representation across age categories, occupation (e.g., farmers, traders, teachers and local politicians), and social status. Interviews were unstructured, allowing flexibility to probe and explore participants' perspectives on the historical evolution, current functions, and challenges facing the age grade system. Questions focused on personal experiences, perceived benefits, and the impact of modernization on participation. Interviews were conducted in the local Etsako language and pidgin-english, with translations verified for accuracy.

To provide historical and contextual depth, the study analyzed archival record and map from the local government office and the community archival records from the palace of the traditional ruler (Aidonogie), which include documents on age grade activities, land disputes, and the festival records. Oral histories were also collected from the senior age grades, the traditional ruler, the Magajia, the Red Cap Chief (Daudu) in each of the following contiguous indigenous village communities (Ibie Nafe, Iyereku, Ughieda and Ughiekha) that formed South Ibie, whose narratives provided insights into the institution's evolution since pre-colonial times. These sources were triangulated to validate findings from observations and unstructured interviews, ensuring a robust data. In all, the data gathered (such as the roles of the age grades, initiation, socialization, development, and conflict resolution, as well as challenges like youth migration and gender dynamics) were qualitatively analyzed

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with explanations provided in both pidgin-english and Etsako dialect to ensure understanding. Anonymity was maintained by assigning pseudonyms to participants in all records, and data was securely stored in compliance with sociological research standards. Community leaders were consulted prior to fieldwork to secure approval and foster trust, particularly given the cultural sensitivity of age grade initiation rituals. Limitations of the study include the likely potential researcher bias due to the immersive nature of ethnography participant observation research tool, but which was mitigated through triangulation of data sources and regular

reflection on gathering authentic data. In addition, the study's focus and findings on South-Ibie may have the limitation of generalization on other clans in Etsako West (like Uzairue, Auchi, Anwain, Jagbe, and Aviele) age grades, though comparisons with neighboring clans like Uzairue and Auchi age grades also enriched the methodological approach and contextual understanding of the age grade institution's multifaceted roles in South-Ibie.

## 5. Results and Discussion

The findings of this ethnographic study illuminate the multifaceted roles of the age grade institution in South Ibie, revealing its enduring significance as a mechanism for socialization, community development, cultural preservation, and conflict resolution. At its core, the age grade known as "Otu" institution serves as a primary agent of socialization, instilling communal values such as respect, cooperation, and responsibility in young members through initiation rites like the Ukpe festival. This annual event, hosted with communal feasts, dances, and oaths, not only marks the transition from childhood to adulthood but also reinforces collective identity and social hierarchies, ensuring that cultural norms are passed down across generations (Nabofa, 2021). The Ukpe festival's vibrancy, observed during fieldwork, underscores its role as a cultural anchor, uniting the community in a shared celebration of heritage despite pressures from modernization (Borgatti, 2005).

Economically, age grades in South Ibie are pivotal in driving the community development through collective labor and projects. Junior and intermediate grades undertake projects such as construction and renovation of schools' buildings and providing furniture for the students, and construction of roads, and boreholes, which are critical for self-reliance of the rural communities in South-Ibie. For instance, during fieldwork, the researcher observed a junior age grade clearing land for a new community health center, a project funded entirely through communal contributions. Such initiatives highlight the age grade institution's capacity to mobilize resources and labor, filling gaps left by limited government intervention in rural areas (Okafor, 2022). This aligns with findings from Uzairue, where age grades have similarly driven infrastructure development, suggesting a pattern of community-driven growth in Edo State (Yakubu, 2023a).

In terms of conflict resolution, age grades, particularly senior grades in South Ibie, function as parallel informal judicial bodies to Magajia institution,

mediating disputes over land, marriage, and inheritance using customary laws. Fieldwork revealed instances where senior age sets resolved land disputes between families, preventing escalation to police case or formal court case thereby fostering communal harmony and unity. This role is particularly significant in Edo North, a region with historical inter-clan tensions, where age grades serve as trusted mediators grounded in local knowledge (Bello-Imam, 1995). The institution's emphasis on moral education further complements this function, as initiation rites and ongoing mentorship instill norms and values of fairness and community service, thereby contributing to lower crime rates in South Ibie compared to urban areas (Taiwo, 2022).

However, the age grade system faces significant challenges that threaten its sustainability. Urbanization and youth migration to cities like Benin City, Lagos and Abuja have led to the declining membership, as young people increasingly view the traditional institution as outdated. Interviews with junior and intermediate grades revealed frustration of the age grade institution's capacity to mobilize resources and labor due to irregular coming home of members and economic situation in the country. This urban-migration, therefore weakens the institution's capacity to undertake large-scale projects, as observed during the 2024 community meeting and "Ukpe" festival where fewer than half of the expected junior members participated. In addition, the patriarchal structure of age grades in South Ibie has historically excluded women thereby limiting their contributions to community development. However, the emerging female age grade institution as observed in the neighboring clans like Uzairue and Auchi, has beginning to motivate the South Ibie women to form female age grades to address the issues like girl child education, gender empowerment, vocational training and primary healthcare immunization and vaccination initiatives, signaling a gradual shift toward gender inclusivity (Yakubu, 2021). These groups, though nascent, suggest potential for reform, driven by broader societal changes like education and exposure to global gender equality movements (Nwagbara, 2019).

Comparatively, South-Ibie's age grade system shares similarities with that of other Etsako West clans ( Uzairue and Auchi) age grades where collective labor and conflict mediation are central. The age grade in South Ibie is different from Igbo age grade, especially with emphasis on initiation rituals like the Ukpe festival (Otu2006). While Igbo age grades often prioritize economic contributions, South-Ibie's system integrates cultural preservation more prominently,

reflecting on Etsako people's deep historical connection to Benin Kingdom traditions (Bradbury, 1957). This regional variation underscores the cultural adaptation of age grades institution of South Ibie. Yet, the South Ibie age grade institution share the same challenges and experience of migration of their Junior, intermediate and senior grades to urban centers. In addition, the South Ibie age grade institution's efforts to incorporate programs such as youths empowerment and vocational training, observed during the fieldwork, demonstrates its resilience for community development, but sustaining this requires addressing structural challenges like the declining participation of members.

The interplay between age grades and modern governance further illustrates their potential. In Edo State, initiatives like community policing led by intermediate age grades against the increasing cases of insecurity, have enhanced local security, bridging the gaps in state-led policing (Onwuka, 2024). This role is particularly significant in Edo North, a region with increasing records of insecurity, where age grades serve as community police (Bello-Imam, 1995). However, corruption and political interference of local politicians noted during the interviews with senior age grade members, can undermine these efforts, as external actors (politicians) sometimes exploit age grades for political gain. Despite these challenges, the institution's role in mobilizing volunteers for primary healthcare immunization and vaccination drives observed in 2024, suggests a pathway for integration into formal governance structures (PIND Foundation, 2020). Overall, the age grade system's adaptability underscores its potential to contribute to modern Nigeria, but its long-term sustainability hinges on addressing migration, gender exclusion, and political challenges through targeted interventions. Over and above all, this study's ethnographic findings provide a foundation for both sociological understanding and practical action, highlighting the need to preserve and adapt this indigenous age grade institution into Nigeria modern governance institutional framework.

## 6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The age grade institution in South-Ibie remains a vital pillar of social organization, cultural preservation, and community development, demonstrating remarkable resilience in the face of modernization. Its roles in socialization, economic development, and conflict resolution affirm its enduring relevance in fostering social cohesion, unity and self-reliance in rural Nigeria. Through the Ukpe festival and other rituals and initiation, age grades in South Ibie preserve Etsako cultural heritage, while their contributions to community development, infrastructure and conflict

mediation address practical community needs (Nabofa, 2021). The age grade institution is tiered structure—junior, intermediate, and senior age grades—ensuring intergenerational continuity, with each group performing distinct roles that maintain social equilibrium (Ebbonu, 1995). Moreover, its adaptability, observed in the incorporation of vocational training, youths' empowerment and the recent emergence of female age grade, highlights its potential to evolve alongside societal changes (Mbah, 2020).

However, the age grade institution faces significant challenges that threaten its sustainability. Youth migration to urban centers like Benin City, Lagos and Abuja has led to declining participation of members, weakening the labor pool and resources mobilization for community projects (Imhonopi et al., 2013). This trend, observed during fieldwork, reflects a broader disconnect between younger generations and traditional institutions, exacerbated by urban opportunities and perceptions of age grades as outdated (Nwachi, 2021). Gender exclusion is another critical issue, with women historically marginalized in the male-dominated age grade "Otu" system, though the recent emergence of female age grade in South-Ibie and other neighboring clans like Uzairue and Auchì signals gradual progress toward inclusivity (Okwelume, 2010). The emergence of this female age group, though nascent, suggest potential for reform, driven by societal changes and exposure to global gender equality movements (Nwagbara, 2019). Political interference and corruption also pose risks, as external actors (especially the politicians) sometimes manipulate age grades for their political gains, undermining the age grade autonomy (Nwachi, 2021). These challenges underscore the need for strategic interventions to ensure the institution's continued relevance in the rapidly changing social landscape of South Ibie.

The integration of age grades into modern governance offers a promising avenue for revitalization. Their success in community policing and volunteer mobilization for community development, especially in the area of primary healthcare, education and youths' empowerment initiatives demonstrates their potential to complement government efforts to bring development to the people at the grass root (Onwuka, 2024; PIND Foundation, 2020). However, without support, the institution risks further erosion, particularly as urbanization accelerates. By leveraging the institutional capacity and cultural legitimacy, age grades can bridge gaps in rural service delivery, fostering sustainable development in areas previously neglected by the government (Okafor, 2022).

## 7. Recommendations

Government should:

- evolve policies to recognize and fund age grade projects for rural development
- Promote gender inclusivity by encouraging female age grade
- Integrate age grades into educational curricula to engage youths about its relevance.

Further research on comparative ethnography study of age grade institution across Nigeria is also advised.

These recommendations aim to strengthen the age grade institution's role in South Ibie and beyond, ensuring its legacy as a driver of social cohesion, unity and sustainable development.

By addressing current challenges and leveraging on its adaptability, the South Ibie age grade "Otu" system can continue to thrive in the modern socio-cultural landscape and development.

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