

West African Societies since the Pre-colonial Era: Studies in the Socio-Political Structures of the Agulu

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Abstract

This paper surveys a unique system of socio-political organisation among the Igbo of south eastern Nigeria, with a particular reference to the Agulu people. Described by various scholars as *stateless*, *non-centralised*, *village democracy*, etc., its conceptualisation sometimes presents fresh problems of interpretation requiring a closer look and deeper understanding of the cultural dynamics that sustains the socio-political system. The paper adopts interdisciplinary approach involving the use of both historical facts and ethnographic evidence in the reconstruction of the nature and significance of the traditional institutions in Agulu. It submits that the Agulu system is uniquely home grown around which the people organised to undertake a number of activities since the pre-colonial period. It typifies a resilient African culture system deserving further systematic studies.

Keywords: Society, Politics, Organisation, Agulu, Igbo.

1. Introduction

The people of Agulu who form the pivot around which this study revolves are part of the Igbo speaking peoples of the South Eastern Nigeria. According to an ethnographic classification (Forde and Jones 1950), Agulu belong to the Northern Igbo. Located in the present day Anaocha Local Government Area of Anambra State, Nigeria, the town shares boundaries with the ancient city of Nri and Nise in the North, Aguluzoigbo and Nanka in the South, Awgbu and Mbaukwu in the East, and Adazi and Obeledu in the West. The people of Agulu live in an area of approximately 92.25 square kilometres. Measuring about 1000 feet above sea level, it situates within Latitude 6.5⁰ North and Longitude 7⁰ East. Among other factors, the idea of common ancestry, history, culture and habitation in a definable territory are, for them, strong unifying factors.

This paper examines the distinctive approach of the Agulu cultural system to social organisation. It is divided into four sections. The introductory section gives a brief geographical description of the location and the thematic issues covered in the paper. The second section examines the socio-political organisation of Agulu since the pre-colonial period. Here, the paper explores the ethnographic structure of the area under study and contextualises its social system within the framework of one deeply rooted in Igbo traditions. The third section surveys the complementary socio-cultural institutions in the social fabric of Agulu relevant for their very crucial roles in the process of Agulu historical development. The fourth section is the conclusion.

2. Socio-Political organization of Agulu since the pre-colonial period

The nature of socio-political organization in Igbo land generally has been a subject of debate among scholars. While a renowned scholar would describe the Igbo system as *stateless* (Horton 1976), another is of the view that *a good number of Igbo states or kingdoms existed* (Okpoko, 1996). However, other studies have shown that the social systems and political organization across Igbo land varied, although some of their aspects are strikingly similar and comparable. Historians of Igbo political and culture history seem to present a convergent view on the nature of the socio-political organization in most parts of Igbo land. To them, the Igbo had a non-centralized system of political administration. In this system, the power and authority of government was not vested in the hands of one or a few individuals -as in the case of the centralized systems in some parts of what became known as modern Nigeria-, rather there was devolution of such powers across wider strata of the society. In other words, political powers were exercised by many in the society.

The socio-political organization in Agulu during the pre-colonial period can be likened to what existed in most parts of Igbo land generally, although some practices may have been peculiar. In the case of Agulu, politics were organised around the kindred, the village, and the town levels. These were not only typical political units, but also they equally reflect the order in which political and social hierarchy can be measured. A group of families make up the kindred, a group of which, in turns, constitute the village. Following the same mode of formation, a group of

villages form the town. The possession and exercise of political power is equally graduated along the outlined social formation in which the villages wielded the highest powers after the town, and are followed by the kindred. The least but very important unit remains the family; the basic unit of social organisation among the Agulu and indeed the Igbo, cultural studies on the Igbo has revealed that *Among the Northern and Southern Ibo (sic), the typical political unit is the village, and the largest unit capable of combining for permanent political action is a group of such villages referred to in administrative reports as a "town" or "village group" and averaging among the central Ibo about 5,000 people* (Jones 1961). While some of Jones submissions are to a large extent acceptable, the population figure provided (as average) is somewhat conservative, especially when compared with some known facts about Igbo village groups. Not only is the Igbo area one of a high population density zone (Afigbo 1981), but because the issue of population is very dynamic with increasing growth rate arising from births, labour migration and the environmental conditions that supported a robust demography. To deeply appreciate the peculiarities of the social system among the Agulu in the pre-colonial period and how these confer on them a distinct form of identity among other groups within the ethnic Igbo, a focus on the socio-political units of Agulu is necessary.

2.1 The Family

To an appreciable extent, the Agulu operates a social system which conforms to what is obtainable among other groups of the ethnic Igbo, although aspects of identifiable variations still exist. Amongst the Agulu, patrilineality defines the social order. In other words, it was a social system that was built around a family structure under the authority of the father. Family relationship was highly valued. A typical household in Agulu consisted of a man and his wife or wives, his children, married sons, their wives and children. The man is the head of the family, and every household, as well as its dependents recognized the authority of the family head. Being the prime decision maker, he sanctioned every important decision taken in the family by other recognized authorities in it such as the first wife or the adult first son. Besides taking responsibilities for the welfare of his household, he names his children based on some cultural norms, functions as family representative in dealings with other social groups, mediates in matrimonial and intra family crisis. Respect, obedience, love, gifts, etc are given back to him as demonstration of goodwill (Okpoko 1996). A man's position did not confer on him any crude authoritarian powers, rather it is predicated on the philosophy of being the pillar on which his family rests. Each responsible Agulu man knew the limits of his powers as a family head and worked hard to raise his family along the same path of social system that respected the rights and privileges of each member, male or female. A man's first son, *okpala*, has a special place in the family hierarchy being the next in importance after the father. He performed or inherited the tasks and responsibilities of his father in the man's absence or in case of death. He represented the family interest in the kindred meetings, and held the *ofo* the symbol of the family's authority. The first son, *okpala*, succeeded his father in the family through the symbolic inheritance of the father's compound, the *Obi*. His other brothers were expected to move to virgin family lands where their father must have allocated to them, to build houses and develop their own families. The last son, *odudu*, is equally expected to inherit the part of his father's compound where the man had built a detached house for his wife or wives, an apartment known in Agulu parlance as the *mkpuke*.

One important element of this social system was that in spite of its heavy dependency on patrilinealism, an Agulu child is still recognized in his mother's patrilineages, although such a person was not expected to share equal rights and privileges with his maternal uncles and their immediate family relations known in the traditional parlance as *ndi ikwunne* or *ndi nna ochie*. To some extent, one's grandfather or maternal uncle(s) mediated in times of crisis and equally accepted their daughter's or sister's child, *nwadiana*, when s/he experienced oppression (Okpoko 1996). The significance of this is that the social system, though patrilineally based, possesses the flexibility that accommodates matrilineal influence which is very healthy for the maintenance of the social system as well as the development of the child. Therefore, an Agulu child grew within the ambits of his paternal and maternal influence, although the former is essentially the main.

The female folk were also very important parts and parcel of the family system. In this case the female folk include the unmarried female children of a man, *umuada*, and the wives of his male children (daughters-in-law), *ndi anuanu*. In some cases, the *umuada* recommended wives for the men, intervened in intra-familial and inter-familial disputes, thus checking disputes that threatened the unity of the family (Okpoko 1996). Beyond these, they equally performed very vital and supportive roles during family functions such as child births, marriages, funerals, etc. The female folk were priceless and so were well protected from harm. This is often misunderstood by those foreign to the culture

who thought the practice to be that of inequality and in extreme views oppression. This is a gross misinterpretation of an important element of Agulu culture.

Beyond the family, the next level of social organization is kindred. It is as from the kindred level that elements of politics were clearly noticeable. Just like in many towns within Igbo land, the government of Agulu town fell within the ambits of three main institutions; the kindred, the village and the town. Although these institutions are subordinated in the contemporary period due to the post-colonial influences on socio-political organizations in Nigeria, the system still subsists as a very vital instrument of social organisation.

2.2 The Kindred

After the nuclear family, the kindred is the smallest unit of social organization in Agulu. It is made up of a group of related families whose ancestry is traceable to a common forefather. According to Olisa (2002), *the Igbo colloquially refers to any member of his kindred as 'Nwannem' (Lit. "My brother, child of my mother") or Nwannam (Lit. "child of my father")*. This is also true of the Agulu and the reason for this is not far fetched; it is a practice that validates the belief that they all share the same blood relationship. Linkage to a common ancestor serves as a strong unifying factor among the families that make up every kindred in Agulu. It is therefore a taboo for second or even distant cousins to engage in sexual or marital relationships as this is considered incestuous. It must be noted that some African ethnic groups, particularly those with strong Islamic influence, such as the Fulani, the Hausa and the like, does not place the same limits on relationships with cousins as marriage between cousins is normal, acceptable and even preferred. Among the Agulu, blood relationship carries even more taboos. For instance, no one should sell a kinsman, give false witness against him, or abandon him in times of trouble. The observance of these ensures social stability and strengthens kinship ties. On other hand, when these are violated, it is believed that the offender would be punished by the spirit of the ancestors, except when urgent steps were taken to pacify the spirit of the ancestors through the performance of purification or atonement rituals (Olisa 2002). In the pre-colonial period, the Nri priests were very popular in the performance of such rituals, although priests of Agulu deities equally rendered such ritualized services.

Apart from the bond of common ancestral origin, the strongest bond of unity within the kindred is the *ofo* of the kindred. In the words of Horton (1956), the *ofo* is *a sort of official stamp which validates the existence of the cult, the social group or individual with whom it is associated by linking it with Chukwu the ultimate source of all life*. Although each family head in Agulu holds his *ofo*, the kindred *ofo* supersedes in importance because it is the one to which all families of the kindred collectively own and accord highest respect. The kindred *ofo* symbolises a higher authority and confers unquestionable legitimacy on the rightful bearer. As a staff of office, the *ofo* is a prerequisite in establishing a link with the Supreme Being through the ancestors, even as it is very vital in the course of dispensing justice. This is because sometimes disputing parties could be meant to swear upon the *ofo* (Olisa 2002). Furthermore, after arriving at a consensus, enactment of a new law is usually followed by the final sanction of, *isu ofo*; knocking the *ofo* on the ground, a semblance of the use of gavel in modern parliaments. Writing on the cultural value of *ofo* among the Igbo, Olisa (2002) has it that *The 'ofo' is therefore believed to keep men or even shrines 'straight'. It is a symbol of truth and uprightness. It is the ritual potency of the 'ofo' which assists the (kindred) leadership to discharge his leadership roles and achieve a high level of compliance from kindred members in spite of his not possessing any coercive or real authority.*

At the kindred level, age is accorded a lot of respect. This explains why the oldest male in in a given Agulu lineage (who also holds the highest title) functions as the head. He is seen as the intermediary between his kindred and the supernatural through the ancestors. This practice is a reflection of the belief among the Igbo that, the living, the dead and the Divine all commune. This belief system doubles as a very powerful instrument of social control. In communicating with the ancestors in Agulu, the kindred head, *okpala*, breaks the kola nut and pours libations as he prays. This is an important role exclusive to the first son who holds the *ofo*; the staff of office and authority. The responsibilities of the *okpala* are not limited to the above. He presides over kindred meetings and also ensures the maintenance of law and order. However, although he exercises the highest authority in the kindred, the *okpala* in Agulu does not reserve the right to interfere in the internal affairs of the families that make up the kindred, except in cases where some issues are referred to him for arbitration. What this signifies is that his powers are limited, and that the system does not confer absolute power on any individual. Powers and authority of government is indeed not

centralized in the hands of any one or a few individuals but rather uniquely devolved across the broad spectrum of the Agulu social strata. Quite correctly, Olisa (2002), shares the view that *sometimes the effective leadership of the kindred is wielded by a man of affluence or influence or of both, who may not hold "ofo" but to whom the kindred turns, to at critical times*. Such influential person/s however do/es not interfere with the ritual functions of the head. This shows clearly that apart from the established traditions which recognize the prime place of the first son, the eldest, etc, the system equally recognizes other leadership potentials as well as contributions that may be made by other members of the kindred who naturally possess leadership and charismatic qualities.

The Agulu kindred meeting -which is the main vehicle of political association-, is open to all free born males. It is at the meeting that issues of common interest are deliberated upon, openly and freely, although the eldest, the elders and the titled men can influence some decisions, sometimes deriving from their experience and knowledge of the culture of the community. On the other hand, issues that have no bearing with the culture, are generally debated and discussed, and the best acceptable idea would be adopted. During decision making, issues that the kindred may not generally agree upon, may be put to vote to determine the number of people who subscribe to each idea. Perhaps, this is the reason why Emeagwali (2007) refer to the Igbo system as *village democracies*.

2.3 The Village

Conventionally, Igbo villages are composed of groups of kindreds or in some cases quarters; *ogbe* (a sub village group larger than the kindred). This federation of kindreds is bound together by certain factors, on the basis of which unity and solidarity is sustained. The common attachment to land; *ani*, the village *ofo*, and the bond of common ancestry are the main unifying factors. In the village culture system of the Agulu, there is a common belief that every indigene shares descent from a common ancestor and one common *ani* (the earth) unites them all. Horton (1956) has argued that the bond of one *ani* is a stronger factor of communal unity and identity than that of a common ancestor, because all groups in some cases may not have descended from a common ancestor. This is plausible because migration has remained an important aspect of pre-colonial demographic dynamics. Be that as it may, in Agulu, the village *ofo* is usually in the custody of a freeborn who holds the highest title in the village usually known as *Ichie ukwu* (the high chief). Although he may not be the eldest as in the case of the kindred, but he occupies a recognized socio-political and cultural position.

The body of government at the village level is the village council. The council is made up of the head of the linages, titled men and some charismatic elders. The *Ichie ukwu* who holds the symbol of authority functions as the principal *Prime minister* at the village level, and exercises the traditional authority along with other titled men. Similarly, the elders, many of whom are titled men supply knowledge of the customs and traditions of the community during the process of its political administration. It is important to note that these political actors neither enforced their authorities in a way that is comparable to the officials of government in a centralized systems (such as the kingdoms and empires of central Sudan), nor those of the contemporary government, rather exercise of political power was carried out in a non-centralised fashion. This must have led Meek (1937) to observe that *they were a body of mediators and referees rather than of prosecutors and judges, and the community was a republic in the true sense of the word, i.e. a corporation in which government was the concern of all*. This is a unique system, sophisticated in its own rights and does not in any way indicate a low level of civilisation.

2.4 The Town Assembly

In the case of Agulu, the town represents the supreme decision making body or the highest political unit. Structurally, it is a confederation of villages which as already noted above are themselves made up of group of kindred. As in the village traditions, attachment to *ani* is an important factor of unity at the town level. Common ancestral origin, communal habitation and possession of one territory, market, religious beliefs and cultural practices are also very strong factors. Besides these, the celebration of Agulu festivals and other cultural events (such as the *new yam festival, izu afia nwa and iso ebe*, etc.) in which the sense of community was not only re-affirmed, but re-demonstrated in established rituals and cultural practices of the people confirms their mutual bond. In Agulu, all these factors appear to be working simultaneously as bonding factors of unity. For example, the attachment to one *ani* is very much at work because of what it signifies up till date. It is a cultural practice in Agulu to request people, who are laying claims over a particular disputed piece of land, to stand on the land barefooted while saying what (truth) they know about it. The essence being to establish a connection between the person and the *ani* or earth (on

which he stands barefooted). This practice is equal to oath taking, and carries with it -according to the belief system- enormous repercussions on the dishonest.

According to Olisa (2002), *Government at the town level, as well as the village level, is the extension of what happens at the kindred level. The town is, like the village council, an informal body and not a regular constituted executive authority.* In Agulu, the town assembly is usually not for everybody, but rather was attended by only representatives of each village. Recognized titled chiefs, village heads, etc. play leading roles here. The town's internal issues as well as its external relations dominate discussions at the meeting. Organization of wars and reprisals, land and boundary disputes, development and maintenance of common property such as roads, markets, shrines, as well as general welfare of the people engaged the attention of the leadership. In Agulu town meetings, the process of law making is usually not easy. It is a process that was characterized by arguments, disagreements and critical analysis of all shades of opinion. Decisions that emanate from this process are in most cases unanimous, on the basis of which some bylaws are made. On the other hand, in a situation where issues and debates were not unanimously carried, groups with opposing views employ lobbying as a strategy to mobilise some more support against any opposing ideas. Sometimes, a group succeeded in lobbying its views through to the defeat of the other group's opinions. Olisa (2002) is of the view that *if they (some Igbo groups) do not succeed in this, they can break away and form new towns.* This is not exactly the case with Agulu and indeed many Igbo groups who are not new to managing controversies arising from conflict of opinions. In fact, several issues did not all end with unanimous agreement, yet the town has remained as one. Therefore much as that may describe the situation in very isolated extreme cases in Igbo speaking areas, it definitely does not reflect the case of Agulu.

Agulu town had neither a standing army, nor the police force, although in times of war, able bodied young men were recruited and trained to serve in the army. Again, the absence of police force in the traditional Igbo socio-political system did not in any way hamper the observance of the societal norms or in the enforcement of decisions, laws and order among the groups that constitute the town. Various communities in Igbo land operate various enforcement systems. In Agulu, enactments of laws are followed by *Isu ofo*, that is, affirmation by knocking the town *Ofo* on the ground. As will be examined, law enforcement in Agulu is mainly the duty of different sets of enforcement machinery such as the age grade, secret societies, etc. Depending on the purpose, adults may be made to swear to oath of secrecy and allegiance to the common agreed cause. However, Agulu people are generally known for their compliance to the town's rules and ordinances once unanimous declarations were made and agreed to in a town meeting.

Judicial functions are also part of the responsibilities that the town performs. This is true; in spite of the fact that the traditional system did not make room for courts, as in the case of both the centralized systems and the European model of judicial institution. Both administrative and judicial roles were spearheaded but not exclusively performed by the same body of persons. This is so because in some very difficult cases, disputes were settled through oath taking sometimes before a shrine under the administrative guidance of the chief priest. It is important to note that judicial decisions were hardly supported by organized material force. However, such decisions were accepted as a result of their relevance to established ritual beliefs and prevailing norms. For example, an intelligence report written by a colonial official Clark (1934) shows that

as in most primitive communities there was little or no distinction drawn between the Administrative and Judiciary both functions being performed by the same people and often at the same time and place. Except for certain serious crimes, all cases civil and criminal were if possible settled by the family or families of the parties concerned. If this was not successful, the matter was brought before the quarter council and finally before the town. The procedure was invariably the same, the president of the particular council announced the reason for meeting and after calling on all those concerned to speak the truth, kola was broken and meeting was considered opened. The plaintiff then gave his evidence followed by the defendant and lastly the witnesses of both parties, all gave their evidence unsworn. Doubtful cases were settled by one of the parties, usually the defendant,

being made to take an oath with other member of his family. If he died within a stated period, usually a year, or refused to take the oath, the other party was declared the winner. No fees were demanded from the parties other than palm wine and kola.

Although Clark's characterization of African societies as *primitive*, has been challenged and roundly defeated, he inadvertently brings out the unique qualities of the Nkwo Agu (Agulu) system, signifying that it is indeed a civilisation that evolved through time with its culturally defined means of social organisation and response to social problems. Further, according to Olisa (2002), *Green reported the Agbaja's -just like the Agulu's- attitude of independence in a common saying "ODIGHI NDI NWE ANYI" i.e. (no one owns us or we are slaves to no body).* Similarly, Meek has called the Igbo town *an independent republic*. Other attributes of the system is that it is sufficiently flexible in a way that rewards industry rather than indolence. This is so because the democratic and competitive nature of it allowed the talented and skilled, but lowly born citizens to attain very high positions within the society. In recognition of this fact, Meek (1959) has observed that *an enterprising young man who acquired wealth could attain political power over his elders*. The implication of this is that the system places much premium on hard work as a means to success instead of encouraging a cult following around individuals, regarded as wealthy or, due to the circumstances of their birth into influential backgrounds.

Furthermore, among the characteristics that makes Agulu system unique is the diffused nature of political roles, and authority. This is quite evident where the council of elders, titled men, and other adults of the kindred, the village or the town are seen both as the governance council and judicial body dealing with a number of administrative and legal issues as it relates to the community (Nwosu 2002). Collaborating this view Olisa (2002), contends that *The okpara (first son) is at once the religious leader of his kindred or his village as well as their political and legal head...Diffusion also applies to the levels at which political decisions are taken in society. There are no special representatives for the village or kindred or town assembly, so that the same set of OFO holders, elders and other interested adults share in the government of the community at all levels. Government is the affair of all and everyone is his brother keeper.*

This diffused nature of political roles in Agulu strengthens the argument that there is no one person(s) at the central coordinating point, or even sovereign authority to which pressures were exerted, or which could over-rule others when necessary. Even, institutions such as the *ofo* holders, the village council, etc. that had some form of political relevance, had no absolute powers to enforce its decision on the led. Political decisions were made by consensus and executed mostly by voluntary actions, which most times is influenced by the established norms of the society through the agency of the pressure groups; the *ozo* titled men, medicine men; *Ndi dibia*, age grades; *Ogbo*, daughters of the kindred; *Umuada*, etc.

3. Complementary institutions in Agulu: roles and significance

In preceding discussions, the paper has examined the hierarchical order in the socio-political system in Agulu which corresponds to the family, the clan, the village and the town components. At this juncture, the paper discusses the roles and significance of some very important administrative institutions found in the social fabric of each kindred and village that constitutes Agulu. These institutions (titles societies, secret societies, age grade, etc.) complement the basic social structure in nurturing law and other necessary for social production and reproduction.

3.1 The Titled Societies

Igbo culture generally recognizes the prime place of the titled societies. It is an association of men of honour, integrity and sometimes wealth who have taken titles in their immediate locality. In Agulu, titled societies also exist and such titled men equally exercise enormous political and administrative influence. *Nze*, *Ozo*, *Ichie*, etc. are examples of the titles to which free born men of outstanding quality aspire. This is comparable to the practice of other Igbo groups such as the Aro and Ohafia where *membership of Ekpe and Ikkoro societies was open only to heroic people who had either distinguished themselves in management of men and materials or during wars* (Nwosu 2002). The view that acquisition of wealth was a strong factor for entry into the titled societies is true of the *ozo* and *ichie* titles in Agulu, because of the enormous material demands of cultural rites, which must be met before the traditional rites of investiture with the title are performed.

The titled societies functioned as recognized political and administrative body. They make some customary laws, influence their execution, adjudicate over disputes and equally punish offenders. Although their orders carry the force of law, they wielded more of soft power (Nye 2004) in which they command public obedience and loyalty on the basis of their moral authority and legitimacy. In deserving cases, the titled societies exercise prerogative of mercy or amnesty on erring individuals and or groups. They assessed and articulated public opinions, demands, rights and responsibilities in a way that has earned them more respect and acceptance. More importantly, they are the custodians of Agulu customs and traditions. The interpretation of these customs (such as those relating to land, crops, sacred animals, etc.) and the pronouncements of disciplinary sanctions against its violators rest squarely on the titled societies.

3.2 Secret Societies

As the name implies, secret societies refer to those that operate on the basis of restricted membership and secrecy. Perhaps every society has some forms of secret societies. Among the Agulu people, the commonest of these was the masquerade society otherwise known as *mmanwu*. Membership is open only to male children from about eighteen years who are usually initiated into the *mmanwu* cult through a rite of passage known as *emume mmanwu*. Usually, fathers present their children as candidates for the initiation which signifies a transition period from boyhood to manhood. For teenagers, early initiation was the preliminaries, as the rites were observed in stages. Initiated members were usually under oath not to reveal the secrets of the group to non members or the uninitiated. Women, children and non-indigenes are excluded.

The masquerades not only function as agents of social control, they also entertain. Research has revealed that sometimes the titled societies employed the masquerades to enforce the customary laws of the town. Anyone who the masquerade visited would quickly comply with the sanctions to avoid certain repercussions. Interestingly, they also play entertaining roles during festivities, burial rites and other important social functions using dance, songs, incantations and *messages from the ancestors*. In the cultural belief system of Agulu, the masquerades symbolise the physical representatives of the ancestors, hence the links between the present and the past generations. Through their songs, aspects of Agulu community history and traditions are preserved and transmitted. They appraise heroism and ridicule deviants. In line with this, Nwosu (2002) has noted that...*masquerades were used to maintain the linkage between the past and present. For through them, the community was reminded about heroic achievements of distinguished men (both the living and the dead). Masquerades always sang the praises of men of distinction. Equally, through their songs, they abused people who had wronged the society in one way or the other.* In essence, the secret society is an important instrument of government, discipline, as well as socialization.

3.3 Age Grades

The age grade system is a strong cultural practice among the Agulu. This is one aspect of the peoples' culture that has remained resilient in spite of colonialism and the consequent invasion of western civilization in the town. It refers to the organisation of people of different generations in a given village into stratified age group or sets in a way that produces a social hierarchy based strictly on age differences. This stratification into age-based or generational groupings is known in Agulu as *ogbo*. For instance, adult males of a given village born within a given period of say five years interval would belong to an age grade along with their wives. The idea is to instil in the age grade the spirit of brotherhood, unity and solidarity. An Agulu man is therefore expected to relate with his age mates as siblings, and offer assistance in times of need. Age grades associate through periodic meetings, organised cultural dances and through performance of social responsibility projects. Social responsibility projects include but not limited to security services, rehabilitation and construction of community roads, markets, footpaths, streams, etc. They also did co-operative services and philanthropy for the benefit of members and the community in general. Sometimes the age bodied were used as law enforcement agents, and for the maintenance of order in the society. The younger and able bodied males were usually recruited into the army in times of war for community service of maintaining the territorial integrity of the town. *To all intents and purposes, the members of the age grade were the 'carrier' servants of the traditional Igbo community* (Nwosu 2002). This is an apt summary of their social value in Agulu.

4. Conclusion

This paper has surveyed a unique system of social organisation among the Igbo of south eastern Nigeria, with a particular reference to the Agulu people. Described by various scholars as *stateless, non-centralised, village democracy*, etc., its conceptualisation presents fresh problems of interpretation requiring a closer look and deeper understanding of the cultural dynamics that sustains the socio-political system. The paper adopts interdisciplinary approach involving the use of both historical facts and ethnographic evidence in the reconstruction of the nature and significance of the traditional institutions in Agulu. The Agulu socio-political system is very unique. It is a home grown system, in which the people were organized to undertake a number of activities since the pre-colonial period. In it are the trappings of republicanism, non-centralization, as well as democratic norms and practices. Generally, it would appear that the Igbo organise their society to root out and prevent tyranny, because some neighbouring states perhaps possess an inherent authoritarian tendency that they find disgusting. It then follow that what they find compatible is organising their society around the principle that emphasises non-centralisation of authority and devolution of powers across the strata of the society. Besides, from the foregoing, two things are quite significant. One is the segmentary nature of the socio political structure, a feature that has led Afigbo (1981) to describe the Igbo as *ropes of sand*. The other is that, it is a system that preserves the individuality of the units of the social organisation (i.e. the family, the kindred, the village and the town), while creating the necessary linkages that systematize the units into a holistic community of people with a common ancestry and destiny. Till date, these structures remain vibrant at home and play a fundamental role as an instrument of mobilisation among the Agulu in diaspora, the effects of colonialism and globalisation notwithstanding.

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