Continuance and Change in an Urhobo Age-Grade Organization in Nigeria.
Monsieur Onigu Otite
INTRODUCTION

In spite of 'external' influences on indigenous social systems, the relevance of age-grade organizations cannot even now be ignored. Past works on age-grade organizations by Schurtz (1902) through Lowie (1920), Driberg (1929) and others have laid great emphasis on the integrative and, less often, disintegrative aspects of age-grade organizations and on the continuity which these organizations give to their social systems mainly through the performance of essential public works and roles. Gulliver (1953, 1958, 1963) and Eisenstadt (1954, 1956, 1965) have presented some of, if not, the most useful works yet on age organization, particularly in Africa. At present, the main limitation of these and other studies is their near-exclusive concern with how age-grade systems were supposed to operate in the past prior to outside, mainly colonial, intervention, but put in the usual ethnographic present. The question which may be asked is whether with current world-wide modernization processes, these age-grade systems do, in fact, exist today and, if so, in what forms.

In traditional forms of societies, it is generally emphasized that an age-grade organization relies on family units for the supply of its manpower. On coming of age and becoming recruited into the age-grade organization, an individual is faced with roles and expectations having the whole town or indigenous state as reference group. Collective rites and ceremonials mark the initiation of age-groups or age-sets and a system of formal or informal education helps to establish traditional local law and custom and to consolidate the spirit of collective responsibility among members. Training to think beyond the immediate kinship units is a vital process of encouraging tolerance and friendship amongst people belonging to the same socio-territorial unit. Also the fact of belonging to one social system marks members of other systems as constituting out-groups. Thus, though cutting across family, kinship or clan brotherhood, the age-grade organization operates
only within the limits of the social system of which it is a vital part.

In this article, I present an analysis of the age organization in Okpe, an Urhobo kingdom in the Midwestern State of Nigeria, showing first Okpe socio-political system; second, the traditional age-grade organization; third, the changes resulting from the British and postcolonial Nigeria governments; and fourth, the manner in which the age-grade organization survives today.

**Okpe Socio-Political System**

Although an early history of Okpe kingdom can, at present, hardly be anything more than tentative, it is quite clear that, since the seventeenth century, the four sons of Okpe with their corresponding four descent groups have played significant parts in that history. These four descent groups named after their ancestors—Orhue, Evwreke, Orboro and Esezi—constitute four politico-kinship units within which any Okpe person can obtain the political titles of Okakuro (chief), Otota (spokesman) and Oroje (king) to be qualified to serve the kingdom as one totality rather than act as representative of any of the various units. There is therefore a preoccupation with maintaining Okpe identity rather than with the political distinction of any of the four descent groups.

But, because the kinship system is patrilineal with a recognition of matrilateral relationships, any Okpe man having only matrilateral or both patrilineal and matrilateral connections with the kingdom can choose to activate and assert his matrilateral kinship relationships to obtain a political title. The criss-crossing of kinship relationships helps to integrate the kingdom and the mutual expectations from this social meshwork tend to reduce tensions in the socio-political system. Yet the four main kinship groups are recognized.

This recognition and, to some extent analytical, separateness of the four groups are, today, given legitimacy and continuity through approval by the Midwestern State government for declarations concerned with succession to the positions of Okpe king and spokesman. This descent group separateness with their inextricable involvement in the total socio-political structure and systems of Okpe kingdom is reaffirmed at moments of succession over which the new state government now have the utmost control. This new phase of government-sanctioned kinship solidarity encourages assertions and protections of small kinship symbols of even the family and of larger symbols of the whole descent group.

The Okpe—79,519 by the 1963 Census—live with other Urhobo within latitudes 6° N and 5° 15’ N and longitudes 5° 40’ E and 6° 25’ E consisting of swamps, mangrove and evergreen forests in the Delta Province of Midwestern Nigeria. Each of the 150 town and village settlements in their 200 square miles of land was founded by a descendant
of one of the four original sons of Okpe. One or more patricians in Okpe constitute a street and one or more streets constitute a ward, many of which in turn constitute a town with its attached villages. Each town is a compact settlement with physical distances correlating highly with nearness in kinship relationships. Also each town, though distinct in relation to the government of the kingdom,¹ is part of one of the four descent groups to which the founder belonged. Thus except in the few cases (e.g. Mcreje town) where descendants of more than one of the original Okpe sons settle in different wards of one town, the necessary solidarity of the descent groups also means the corporateness of each of the towns forming that particular descent group. It is against this background that we may fruitfully discuss Okpe age-grade organization.

TRADITIONAL AGE-GRADE ORGANIZATION IN OKPE KINGDOM

The Urhobo numbering 516,839 (1963 Census) have separate age organizations for males and for females, each age-group or set being commonly called *otu.* Although the Urhobo show some diversity in the delimitation of the population into age-groups and also in the age range of members, men are generally organized into three grades: the boys’ grade, the young men’s grade and the men’s grade. On the other hand, women are generally graded into three that is, the girls’ grade, the women’s grade and the old women’s grade. Different Urhobo kingdoms and states have different names for each of the age-grades although their members perform similar duties. In Okpe, the age-grade organization shows the following divisions and features.

1. Age-Grades for Women

Women age-grades which are more obviously and ritually marked are four in Okpe:

— *Ibiegboto.* This includes girls below ten years. Functionally, they are not differentiated from their male counterpart unless anyone of them is betrothed by which fact she receives special treatment and respect. Members of this age-grade run errands for their parents while older ones in the group do extra duties of caring for the younger children.

— *Egboto.* This grade consists of girls between ten and fourteen years distinguished from the preceding age-grade by size and by the physiological development of the breasts. Members of this grade help their parents in all female duties in the home. This itself is regarded as a training process to prepare the girls for their future responsibilities as housewives.

¹. Okpe kingdom is governed simultaneously through their titular council and the original twelve town units.
— *Otu r'Ewheyya*. This grade includes all women of between fourteen and forty years who have performed their clitoridectomy ceremonies or have become married as a means of initiation. This group meet very irregularly and choose their impromptu spokesman to present their problems in the ward or town council.

— *Ekwokweya*. This grade consists of women above forty years who have passed the child-bearing age, and of the category of women, called *emetogbe*, who are either widows, divorcees, or very old women who have returned to live in their own patriclan.

Members of the last two age-grades are entrusted with all the rituals surrounding childbirth, stillbirths, deaths resulting from certain diseases or from suicide, or, in the nineteenth century and before, the births and deaths of twins. They also propitiate to offset effects of witchcraft and evil spirits believed to affect the town or ward. They are responsible for cults concerning the fertility of women and of crops and ensure that women taboos are kept. They also organize sectional protests against the destruction of crops by cows, pigs, and sheep. The women seek diviners' advice from time to time and acquaint the ward or town council with any possible or imminent effects of the lapse of any purification rites.

**Integration of the Women Age-Grades**

Women age-grades are less integrated at the levels of both the town and the kingdom than is the case of the male age-grades. Daughters are scattered in marriage outside the patriclan and town and are, of necessity, involved in the daily economic routine of their households. Every town recognizes its eldest female patrilineal descendant in whose house women of the ward or town discuss matters concerning them as a whole. The women age-grade organization as a whole is less important than the male one in the politico-jural domain.

2. *Age-Grades for Men*

There are five male age-grades as follows in Okpe kingdom:

— *Ibiemoherhe*. This consists of males up to the age of twelve years. Members of this grade are only potentially important to the town and the kingdom and until six or seven they are ignored in Okpe. The functions of this grade are mainly in the domestic domain, running errands involving short distances and light responsibilities. Circumcision rites are normally performed in respect of those of the children who are between six and eight years.

— *Ibiemeswo*. This grade consists of boys of between twelve and twenty years who generally clean up the street and the ward or town centres and paths. They also take active part in farm and community works and run errands of public interest and greater responsibility and
for longer distances. No special ceremonies are performed as rites de passage for the next age-grade.

— *Otu r'Orere*. This age-grade includes men of between twenty and thirty years who, in the nineteenth century and before, provided warriors to defend the towns and the kingdom. Members of this grade did the heavy work in the wards and towns such as the clearing of bushes and the building of shrine houses and are sometimes spoken of as constituting a junior arm of the next age-grade.

— *Otu r'Ivwrawha*. This consists of men of between thirty and sixty years. They form the largest age-grade particularly in those Okpe towns and other Urhobo states where the ages of its members range from twenty to sixty years, that is to include the preceding age-grade. Members of this age-grade form the main working group and also act as supervisors for the younger age-grades. Prior to pacification by the British government, members of this age-grade were the important town warriors who defended the whole kingdom when the need arose and were summoned whenever the younger warriors were incapable of successfully waging a war. They also encouraged the younger warriors them and prevented from decamping. They executed orders from the town or state council and court. The more elderly members of this grade, sometimes referred to as *Otu r'Ikpimi*, are normally excused from hard work and gradually become members of the town council. In practice, therefore, members of this grade qualify for the next age-grade at different personal ages.

— *Otu r'Ekpako*. These are the town elders of over sixty years. No other qualification than age is required to attain this status. Members constitute the head grade of the organization which runs the governments of the wards and town.

*Integration of the Male Age-Grades*

Age and emigration determine a man's movement in the age-grade organization, and after twenty years, he becomes gradually committed to integrative roles concerned with the town and kingdom. A demonstration of strength or of leadership qualities such as organizational ability, commanding dignity and persuasive speeches in the age-grade system, may qualify a man to exercise one or the other type of political power and authority in the kingdom. Members of each age-group know each other well, their relative ages and capabilities; each age-group is thus not undifferentiated and its leaders belong to the upper age limit of the members in the grade. A leader is regarded as a person of tested reliability and accustomed to receiving and executing orders with efficiency and dispatch. Each age-group has some organization for carrying out its duties in the town or kingdom in which community interests are placed above those of the patrician or lineage groups.

A two-way communication between the eldest and youngest age-
grades passes through their leaders, for example when carrying out the administrative decisions of the elders. There is a successive subjection of the age-grade leaders involving the street, ward, town and state social units. The most important leaders in the age-grade organization are those of the grade next to that of the elders. Their position in the various wards and towns is one of very great authority and is, therefore, eagerly sought by all who want to share in town or state politics. The age-grade leaders selected from the towns to attend the state council or court are regarded as junior state executives (ediegware, sing. odiagware) for the chiefs constituting the council. In this council, one of the age-grade leaders is selected as the overall state age-grade leader.

Every age-grade leader is part of the social organization and government of a town and, in this respect, becomes subject to the town council and to its eldest man, the okarorho, who heads the government of the town. His assistants, the elders, are also expected to be very knowledgeable in town and state traditions as well as in government and indigenous politics.

Within the framework of a delegation of executive, judicial and political powers from the elders, the younger age-grades hold their councils and courts where they pass by laws to regulate their behaviour and where they deliberate on minor disputes, cases of robbery, adultery, assault and petty theft and defaults within and between age-groups.

The age-grade council and court system are subject to the ward and town gerontocracy. Although the oldest man normally heads the government of the town, power and authority are, in practice, decentralized and shared amongst the elders and the various age-grade leaders.

The town government functions largely in terms of its judicial role. Court trials arise from the routine performance of the age-grade duties and from breaches of the town laws and customs. Town council deliberations as well as court reconciliatory trial processes occur quickly to reestablish confidence, reemphasize the need for public works and to restore the social system to as near equilibrium as possible. Okpe kingdom has a well-defined code of justice dealing with every known form of crime and every aspect of civil law, although these are not formally separated. Also, during one day's meeting, a town or state council could perform the legislative, administrative, executive and judicial roles of government, one type of role being begun as another one ended in an interdependent way. All serious cases of offences, for example murder and violent robbery prior to the nineteenth century, were dealt with not by the age-grade or town government but by Okpe state government having a different criterion for membership.

Within an ideally small community, all the townspeople participate in one form or the other in settling their own affairs through free discussion and act as final arbiters for the governmental processes as directed by the elders. It must be noted that the age-grades have their different leaders whose opinion is always sought by the town council or court on
matters peculiar to the age-grades or concerning certain aspects of town
government such as the execution of administrative decisions. It is
therefore obvious that the town rulers and politicians are in close social
contact with the various members of their community. A single court
trial or council policy thus has the potentiality of activating interrelated
and complementary roles of both the elders and the younger members
of the age-grade organization.

THE IMPACT OF THE BRITISH AND NIGERIAN GOVERNMENTS

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the British government
assumed a self-imposed task of pacifying the territory now known as
Nigeria, a task which was in many ways a means by which to promote
British economic interest in the territory. Prior to 1895, the British
Consular Government, the Royal Niger Company and the Niger Coast
Protectorate, established British government legal rights in the area
through treaties with the various chiefs. New courts resulting in new
judicial education and socialization of the elders and of those in the
grade below them were established through the Native Courts Proclama-
tion of 1900.¹ The British Consular Government Constabulary post in
Sapele, an Okpe town, provided a check against ‘disorders’ and inhibited
assertions of certain precontact age-grade activities. British government
police patrols and punitive expeditions featured in the pacification
process in the area. To this end, roads were constructed to link important
centres and towns, and schools were built by the Government and by
the Roman Catholic, the CMS and the African Missionaries. By 1928,
there were seven such schools with a population of about 200 pupils in
the kingdom, these being in addition to those attending the major schools
in the urbanizing areas of Warri and Sapele where most of the education
was given. A majority of those passing through these schools looked
outside the social system for employment. For those that remained in
the kingdom, the tendency was to devote more attention to education
and new economic pursuits than to the obligations and duties of the
age-grades.

It must be said here that those mainly involved in this early Western
school system were mostly youths freed early from family and kin-
ship constraints and given new and wider identifications in socio-
political or in economic affairs. There were high fall-outs from these
first schools and thus, by 1946, only one warrant chief, A. E. Omarin,
who had attended the Intermediate School, opened by the British
Colonial Government in Sapele in 1904, was an educated member of the
British-sponsored Okpe council and court. The early somewhat unfin-

¹ Proclamation No. 9 of 1900. In CO 588/1. Southern Nigeria Proclamations
ished education together with the provision of schools as areas for new socialization and identities and as ‘civilizing’ centres for integration into new and wider social systems, jolted the integrative and indigenous societal identification roles of the age-grades. Until they became elders and while living under no fear in places outside the kingdom, the Okpe no longer considered the age-grade organization to be adequate or sufficiently important for economic livelihood and the prosperity of individuals or for the preservation of Okpe social system under a new distribution of power. Also, as from 1910 (Hubbard 1948: 276), the missionary activities diverted attention from rites and ceremonials of the age-grades which were classified as being ‘paganistic’ throughout Okpe, and other Urhobo kingdoms and states.

With effective British government under the indirect rule system, people who had been leaders in the traditional age-grade organization became the most virile and obvious choice as warrant chiefs. Here, they played alternative roles as British government personnel and as respected members of the town's erstwhile virile age-grade organization. These two major areas of role playing reinforced and enriched each other and, where there was conflict, the roles of the warrant chief were, in nearly every case, preferred, but without severing attachment to the town’s age-grade system. Indeed, when too old to satisfactorily perform their physically exerting task, for example in travelling to distant courts and councils, warrant chiefs resigned to the full performance of their roles as elders and head of the age-grade system. The age-grade leaders and elders who were made warrant chiefs were insignificant in terms of their numbers relative to the total population of the age-grades to which they belonged. They were nevertheless the most voiceful, less tolerant of tradition and more prepared for change in the government of the towns as a result of exposure to systems outside their own.

It was perhaps through this involvement of the traditional social system and of its principal political actors in the British government of the territory that contributed most to the continuity of Okpe age-grade system.

The constitutional developments which ended with the achievement of independence in Nigeria in 1960 are already well known (Ezera 1960). This change of political status for Nigeria presented no radically different situation for the age-grade organization. The government and politics of the new state provided areas of activities beyond those of any indigenous state; but while identifying with the wider social system, association with age-mates is not lost. Maintaining this link is important on two sides. On the one hand, locally-based new state politicians rely partly on members of their age-grades for political party support and as contacts for reaching a larger body of followers and sympathizers. On the other hand, members of the same age-grade who have socialized together and feel related to one another are assured of contact with important people and institutions outside their social unit through one of their members.
In this way, the friendliness and reciprocal obligations existing between members of the same age-grade are extended beyond the indigenous social system.

Today, economic activities and independence are important when considering changes in the age-grade organization. There are two main spheres of economic activities in the kingdom: the urban and the rural areas. In the latter case, farming, palm produce, rubber industry, shopkeeping and trade provide the main economic activities, and any of these daily occupations involve tedious and enervating work yielding low income. For example, after 21 days of very hard work in 1928-1929, a hard working man could produce 40 kerosene tins of palm oil valued at about £12 in four collecting periods which took about 3 months to accomplish. In 1967-68, the time devoted to palm produce was shorter but varied and as low as 2 kerosene tins of palm oil could be produced. This was sold in grades I, II, and III and for 12, 10, and 8 shillings per tin respectively. On the other hand, from 1 to 5 sheets of rubber produced by one person after labour between 5 a.m. and 2 p.m. daily were sold (1967-68) in grades I, II, III at 8½, 8, and 7 pence per pound respectively; each sheet weighed approximately 1 pound.

Production, expenditure and savings are all now individualized and the tendency is towards personalized decisions to move from Okpe local system to urban or other rural areas. Even for those who remain, there is a primacy of interest for economic survival rather than for the corporate duties and obligations pertaining to the age-grade organization.

Movements to the urban areas for any reason involve a high degree of detachment from the rural age-grade formations. The physical separation favours this attitude. Thus now, an Okpe individual learns quickly to depend on himself with a primary concern for his household alone though he entertains visitors from his rural home and maintains interest in the welfare of his town and the kingdom. Although he does not get involved in traditional duties and obligations of his town's age-grades, an Okpe emigrant nevertheless sends monetary contributions when requested in respect of some of those duties, such as erecting a house or constructing a bridge for which labour may now be hired. When back to the rural base for a visit or resettlement, the tendency is to continue showing detachment through impersonal urban attitudes, spiteful references to age-grade duties and obligations and through aloofness from age-grade meetings and discussions.

The changes created by the economic and political subsystems of the new state obviously affect the territorial relationships and social units for which the age-grade system traditionally acts as an integrative mechanism. Migration for economic, political or other reasons alter neighbourhood relations and scatter members of the various age-grades. In this way, the corporateness of the age-grades and their unifying roles are minimized.
HOW RELEVANT IS THE AGE-GRADE SYSTEM TODAY?

Given the above changes, the problem is to examine the forms in which the age-grade systems operate today, a problem which is more difficult at Okpe state level. For, here, there are now few age-grade leaders recognized for any duties—and these are usually ceremonial only—on behalf of the whole kingdom.

On the other hand, the towns still have their gerontocratic governments as assisted by the younger members of the age-grades. The grades that are relevant in this respect are the third and fourth male groups, that is, the Otu r’Orere and Otu r’Ivurawha. Even here, it is the associations consisting of members of these groups that are important. The association that is of the greatest importance today is the idugbu. A majority of the members of this association are those who would otherwise be hardened warriors and Okpe state executioners (ikorikpokpo) who were proscribed during the British Colonial Government pacification. The idugbu assume police duties in the town and also function as night guards. In these capacities, they arrest thieves and suspects, carry out investigations and help to cater for the property of their townspeople and protect the rights and liberty of their fellow citizens.

The idugbu sound their drums and/or keep their lamps in conspicuous places each night in the town to assemble members and to remind people of the existing curfew hours generally between 10 or 11 p.m. and 5 or 6 a.m. During this period, no one may be found in the streets.

Not every member of the Ivurahwa or Otu r’Orere can become a member of this association. Members are selected by the elders to represent the street or ward and the association reports their activities and send complaints to the town’s council or to its individual members from whom fresh instructions or support may be had.

As traditional detectives, the idugbu cooperate with their counterparts in other Okpe towns or villages and assist the Nigeria government police in carrying out quick investigations and in arresting offenders in the locality. Also, a few towns lodge the lists of their idugbu with the Western Urhobo District Council (an arm of the new State Local Government) and with the local Police Office.

The idugbu, appointed and slightly rewarded by the town, can be regarded as the local or localized representatives of the Nigeria police; they take all grievous offenders to the Nigeria police after informing the town rulers. This means that although the town rulers know of the thefts and other serious offences in the town, they do not now complete their traditional judicial process of rendering justice as required by the traditional government. Instead, what starts as a process of government typical of the town traditions ends up as an item in the process of justice rendered by the Nigeria police and the new state judiciary. This kind of linkage between the functionaries of the traditional age-grade system...
and arms of the new state government is an unofficial or quasi-official approval and recognition of the continuity of these altering roles pertaining to the age-grade organization.

The most important of the age-grades today is that of the elders, ekpako. No longer very capable of the strenuous and individualized economic pursuits of the younger age-grades, the elders retire almost fully to the government of the town and wards. The present generation of elders missed some of their traditional training and education through socialization in the various junior grades. Also, currently, youths are more or less unsocialized fully through the age-grade process. What types of attitudes and functions these present ‘educated’ youths will take as elders when governing the town in future is a moot point.

As for the present elders, they act as a corporate group and are the most important integrative mechanism for the whole town. As by tradition, each ward is represented by an elder in the town council while other elders in the ward attend the town council as ordinary members. As a body and as individuals, they are consulted by various new state government functionaries and officials with reference to such things as local traditions, customary law and the payment of taxes to the new state. Thus the ekpako are still regarded as controlling the government and politics of the town which they also represent in external affairs. They still pass laws binding on all members of the town provided these laws do not conflict with the new state laws or the bylaws of the District Council. Also, they ask wards or individual families to keep their compounds clean and occasionally request communal labour for essential buildings or other tasks in the town.

The elders meet quite frequently, that is on every market day and on other days depending on the urgency and importance of matters requiring quick decisions and direction. Their corporateness and unity as well as their commitments to obligations in respect of all their townspeople are all strengthened at such moments that they meet.

Conclusion

The survival of the age-grade system in various forms in spite of modern influences including minor lineage in-group development and self-identity and individualized economic pursuits and assertions, suggests that there are gaps in the new state government of the various social units. The new state government local agencies, such as the Public Works and Health Departments, perform or compel individuals or families to accomplish duties previously performed through the age-grade organization. But the roles of these ‘external’ agencies do not completely involve all aspects of the indigenous social systems. For example, the new state government police are, as yet, too few to be stationed to maintain law and order in every town although this is not to say that
the ultimate aim of the Nigeria police is to open a station in every town, however remote. Also, the new state customary courts—a total of five in Okpe—are too few to cope with the various local and minor offences while the political and governmental systems of the new state cannot assume the various roles of town or indigenous state government and politics.

The traditional social system has therefore continued for many reasons and though not very virile owing to many inroads by the new state government, the age-grade organization has retained only certain of its original functions.

The first schools and alien courts in the kingdom were established when some of the present elders were of school age. Although these elders, at least, without being schoolchildren or alien court members or Christians themselves, experienced some of the impacts of the alien institutions on the traditional social and age-grade systems, they have nevertheless become preoccupied in old age with their traditional roles of administration and government. The corporate and integrative functions of the age-grades are, today, meaningful only with reference to the elders' grade, the deranging modernization ripples not being successful in totally breaking the position and functions of the elders. Yet, this grade cannot function alone since it must rely on members of the younger age-grades, however scattered and however undevoted to the traditional social system. This kind of dependance will itself induce further changes in the nature and functions of the elders in the town.

Eisenstadt's (1965:112) "main hypothesis: That age-set systems arise and function in those societies in which the basic allocation of roles is not overwhelmingly determined by membership in kinship groups, and where some important integrative functions remain to be fulfilled beyond these groups" is largely true of traditional Okpe kingdom. Perhaps even more so in the 1960s. For, there is now a proliferation of statuses and roles crucial for the existence and continuity of Okpe kingdom and yet deriving from outside the descent group system and indeed from outside the Okpe social system as a whole. There are obviously both educational and integrative tasks clearly beyond what is now expected of the age organization and descent system as the new state government and political roles ensure the inextricability of Okpe kingdom from the wider social system. Yet, especially, in indigenous Okpe political affairs, membership in any descent group is the prerequisite for participation. As noted earlier in this article, the new state government strengthens both the identities of the four descent groups of Okpe and the exclusiveness of the whole kingdom particularly with reference to their high political positions. On the other hand the analysis shows the weakening of the age-grade systems and functionaries through new modernization agents, institutions and processes. Modern socio-political leaders now require new preparation to serve a new and wider society.

Also, social stratification and role allocation in the new state are not
by age criterion while social identification with the new and wider social
system is by schools, political parties, new churches, clubs, unions and
associations rather than by age-grades. But while the age-grade organi-
izations are now largely unutilized as such and therefore few prizes attach
to the activation and assertions of their membership, new associations
such as idugbu and new friendship groups of age-mates provide significant
social networks which are utilized by unorganized and dispersed age-
grade members acting in wider political or economic arenas in which
they nevertheless require local support.

With no more warrior groups and with the new Churches preaching
against indigenous values and rites connected with the age-grade organi-
ization, the continuity of Okpe social system rests more on the strength
of kinship and descent systems. Just as the new state creates conditions
maintaining the solidarity of the descent groups so do their inroads, ser-
vices and agencies like the hospitals, police, army, local government
councils, and cooperatives, assume some of the traditional roles of the age-
grades. Where these modern services are not available, say in very remote
areas of the kingdom, members or associations deriving from the age-
grade system do act as substitute, for example to arrest, but not to
punish, offenders until taken to the nearest police station or to another
new government body. Also, new trends in government-encouraged self-
help programmes including various buildings, and civil defence partic-
ularly as a result of the last war in Nigeria, tend to revive some aspects
of traditional informal and formal education and socialization processes
involved in the age-grade organization in various Okpe communities.

The strength and corporateness of the town elders and of the descent
groups of which they are part act in many ways as a structural corollary
to the current weakness of the younger age-grades. The commitment
of the elders as a group to the unity of the towns, particularly those in
the rural areas which still constitute 70-80% of the new state, offers
one of the most important mechanisms at present for preserving the
continuity of Okpe indigenous social system and for countering the
divisive effects of factionalisation based on party politics and other
government processes in the new state.

REFERENCES

Driberg, J. H.
1929 "Age-Grades", Encyclopaedia Britannica, 14th ed.

Eisenstadt, S. N.
1956 From Generation to Generation, New York.
Ezera, K.

Gulliver, P. H.

Hubbard, J. W.
1948 *The Sobo of the Niger Delta*, Zaria.

Kerr, R. B.
1929 Ukpe Sobo Assessment Report, CSO 26/3 21943, National Archives, Ibadan.

Lowie, R. H.
1920 *Primitive Society*, New York.

Otite, K. J. O.

Schurtz, H.
1902 *Altersklassen und Männerbünde*, Berlin.