AGE GRADE CULTURAL CEREMONY IN NGURU MBAISE: THE OPARA NA OKWE *IHE-EBIRI* EXAMPLE

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Abstract
From the primordial past to the digital present, the people of Opara Na Okwe community in Nguru, Mbaise of Imo State Nigeria have held tightly to their unique heritage including Ihe Ebiri cultural ceremony. This ceremony which is an Age grade celebration is usually observed by a worthy and upright male member of this community. It is a-once-in-a life-time ceremony which is usually marked with lots of pomp and pageantry. However, some critics have begun to frown at the ostentatious and high cost implication of this ceremony; they opine that the time, energy and resources which the ceremony entails can be channeled to human and physical development of the community, especially in the contemporary era of unemployment and hunger in the Nigerian nation at large. This study is, therefore, an inquiry into the details and implication of the ceremony and an evaluation of this criticism, particularly as it obtains in Opara Na Okwe community of Mbaise. Data were collected through the study of related literature and oral interviews of key players in the ceremony. The Data collected are analyzed using Emile Durkheim's Functionalist theoretical paradigm in order to bring to the fore the important roles of development, social cohesion and stability engendered by this age long cultural ceremony. The study finds out that despite the human and material resources involved in the ceremony, it promotes such values as protection of Igbo language and culture, diligence, generosity, fraternity, socialization and good morals of their male folks, as the ceremony is not for vagabonds (ndịefulefus). This research, therefore, recommends that this cultural ceremony be retained and transmitted from generation to generation due to its historical implication and its inherent enhancement of human relationships. It is also recommended there should be a downward review of its cost implication, long and complex preparation process as well as the need to expunge its seeming fetish and primitive aspects.

Key Words: Opara Na Okwe, Ihe-Ebiri, Mbaise, Culture, Age Grade

1.0 Introduction

The Igbo race in the South Eastern part of Nigeria is replete with numerous cultural heritage. In his painstaking study of the mechanism of the human society, Murphy (1986: 14) defines culture as "the total body of tradition borne by a society and transmitted from generation to generation… it is a set of mechanisms for survival, it is the anvil upon which our persons and destinies are forged". On his part, Taylor in Soules (2020) perceives culture as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs, and many other capabilities and habits acquired by members of society". He further avers that "the total body of culture and tradition" of the primitive race which was once encapsulated in orality is currently being documented for the purposes of preservation, and scholastic references. Amongst these bodies which are being documented in Igbo culture is the age grade system.

Age-Grade cultural systems transverse most communities in the South Eastern part of Nigeria. In this clime where Igbo is the language of communication, its nomenclature is context specific. In some places the age grade system is known by such names as *Ndeebiri* while in others it is known as ọ*gb*ọ. Thus, *Ndeebiri* or ọ*gb*ọ is a compulsory cultural organization whose membership cuts across people of all ages in Igbo land who are grouped according to specific period of birth such as three, four, or five, age range. Depending on what obtains in a given Igbo community, membership of any given *Nde Ebiri* comprises people of the same age range and members relate with each other as age mates (Ebiri or ọ*gb*ọ), irrespective of level of education, wealth or exposure. These criteria also apply in Opara Na Okwe clans in Nguru Mbaise of Imo State of Nigeria.

In defining culture then, we shall locate the culture of the people of the larger Mbaise community within the contexts of their beliefs, festivals and ceremonies. Amongst the festivals and ceremonies of these people are *Oji Ezinihitte*, *Itu aka*, *eghu ukwu,* and *Ihe ebiri* or the age grade ceremony. While Oji Ezinihitte is celebrated on first day of every year (January 1), *Itu aka* is celebrated to usher in the annual farming season. Iri ji heralds the beginning of new yam harvest season. During *Eghu Ukwu*, a goat is slaughtered and prepared for the entertainment of kit and kin in appreciation of couples with ten or more children, while *Ihe Ebiri* ceremony acknowledges the coming of age of illustrious sons of the community. Often, these cultural activities are laced with themes of music, dance and generous entertainment which are usually geared towards the appreciation of God, role models, socialization and communal fraternity. *Ihe Ebiri* which literarily implies age grade ceremony is a significant part of these bodies of Mbaise culture and it is also applies to the people of Opara Na Okwe community.

As their name denotes, this community comprises of two clans namely Umuopara and Obo Okwe, hence the combination in the name "Opara Na Okwe". Kemdirim (2019) declares that in this closely knit community, as soon as a new age grade is identified for possible formation, it goes through the processes of due consultation of elders as well as a careful choice of name for easy identification in the community. This chosen nomenclature is maintained by the age grade till the demise of the last member of the group. It is also pertinent to note that in Opara Na Okwe community of Nguru, Mbaise, active membership of the age grade system is exclusively for males. This implies that it is gender separated. Though sometimes, women who fall within the age range of particular age grades may be allowed to temporarily participate in activities of their male counterparts.

2.0 Literature Review

In every Igbo community, age grade members are reputed for ensuring the well-being of their members and respective communities. It is in this vein that Ihejirika (2013: 12) declares that they always assume such responsibility as "participatory developments of their communities by proffering solution to their communities' common problem". Additionally, Dioka (2013: 64) notes that *Nde-Ebiri* (age grade members) play such significant roles "as ensuring communal cohesion as well as the security of lives and property of people in their respective communities". In the days of yore in most Mbaise communities, age grade members were assigned specific roles geared towards the collective well-being of their respective communities. These roles were assigned according to the physical strength and psychological state of members and they include security, defense, and voluntary construction of homesteads for the homeless, communal farming and settlement of disputes in the community, amongst many others.

With the advent of westernization, education, politics, high profile business ventures and migration, age grade members in Mbaise now contribute actively to the development and well-being of their people and communities in both cash and kind, irrespective of their places of residence. For instance, in Opara Na Okwe community, it is common to see age grade groups with well- to- do or influential members priding themselves with chronicles of developmental contributions of such members to the entire community. The reverse is usually the case with those groups whose members are involved in disgraceful or embarrassing deals or situations. In this case, such erring members are subjected to various punitive measures, depending on the gravity of the offence. This is in tandem with Chukwuma's (1994: 71) declaration that in the cultural settings of the Igbo society, "all erring members are usually corrected through such measures as satire and ridicule".

Commenting on the discipline and importance of the age grade systems in the larger Mbaise community of Imo State, Agulana (2018) declares that:

> Mbaise maintains and believes in the age grade system, which is involved in the socio-cultural, economic and political development in Mbaise. The age grades use fines, suspension, ostracism or expulsion to control the behavior of their members or to force their members to comply with communal rules and regulation. Every responsible Mbaise youth should belong to his own age grade. The benefits to members and to the society in general are tremendous (162).

Such invaluable benefits to membership of age grade groups in this community include caution and sincere advice to erring members, assistance and solidarity to members in their moments of sadness and joy and many more. These general expectations from age grade members in Mbaise also applies to members of different age groups in Opara Na Okwe community. In this community, individuals who have distinguished themselves in family life and career are occasionally singled out and celebrated by members of his age grade who are supported by members of other age grades in the entire community. This ceremony is known as IHE-EBIRI Ceremony. Unlike the Igbere age grade system which has gained wide attention and documentation by scholars and journalists such as Akuma (2008) and Igbere Post (2017) respectively, Ihe Ebiri in Opara Na Okwe currently lacks adequate publicity and documentation. This undocumented nature of this rich cultural heritage has arguably positioned it amongst what Finnegan (1970: 2) describes as "Africa's unwritten literature". In other words, to the best of the knowledge of this researcher, Ihe Ebiri cultural ceremony in Opara Na Okwe of Obo-Etiti autonomous community in Mbaise has not been scholastically documented before now. Thus, this study is a response to Okoh's (2010: 189) call on scholars "to guard, appreciate, transmit and effectively perpetuate oral forms of our societies". In this study we shall highlight the positive values of the ceremony, particularly its roles of socialization, developmental and communal stability. This will be beneficial, not only to scholars and teachers but also students alike.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Durkheim's Functionalist theoretical approach in order to highlight the functions of social stability, human and infrastructural development and historical preservation engendered by age grade cultural ceremony in Opara Na Okwe community of Mbaise. Durkheim's theory of Functionalism perceives society as comprising of interrelated institutions which are dependent on each other for the survival of the society. In other words, Functionalism propagate the idea that various parts of every society work

together for the good and survival of all. In the interrogation of the possibility of the attainment of social order in the society, Durkheim (1893) asserts that "the totality of beliefs and sentiments common to the average members of a society forms a determinate system. It can be termed the collective creative consciousness". Other notable proponents of Functionalism include Akhter, Spencer and Parson. Each of these scholars is in tandem with the idea that various aspects of culture cooperate to fulfill society's needs and that if all intuitions in the society play their parts well, the society will be orderly, stable and productive. For instance, Akhter (2016: 3) posits that every society is built on the culture of role allocation and performance. He avers that for society to survive, every institution or group in that society must live up to its expectation. This study supports Akhter's view because the success of Ihe Ebiri cultural ceremony in Opara Na Okwe largely depends on the active participation of all the different age grade groups who are assigned different roles before and during the ceremony. On his part, Parsons (1977: 27) argues that the collective consciousness of the people in the society on the need to strive for the good of one another ultimately leads to order, cohesion, stability and development. The researcher concurs with Parsons' view. In Opara Na Okwe community, every age grade group contributes both time and treasure in order to support the chief host of the ceremony, irrespective of his financial capability.

2.2 Methodology

The design employed for this study is the qualitative research methodology. This research design according to Ihejirika and Omego (2013: 69), sets out to "deeply explore, understand and interpret social phenomenon within its natural setting". The social phenomenon to be explored, understood and interpreted under this methodology usually border on aspects of human existence, particularly questions of identity which includes issues of culture, ethnicity and religion. Like all empirical inquiry, qualitative research method involves the collection of data through in-depth qualitative interviews, observations, documentations, and analysis in order to develop an appropriate hypothesis to be used in the investigation of details and advantage of Ihe Ebiri cultural ceremony. This study therefore seeks to answer the qualitative methodological questions of the 'how' and 'why' of the subject matter; it seeks to understand the perceptions, feelings, and values that underlie the Ihe Ebiri cultural ceremony in Opara Na Okwe community of Nguru Mbaise. Data for the study were collected from related literature on the subject matter and oral interviews of five key players in the observed Ihe Ebiri cultural ceremony in the community. Further information was also collected through audio-recording tape, video and still photographs which the researcher eventually analyzed.

3.0 Data Presentation and Analysis.

In this section, we shall present and interpret the data collated in the process of this research.

3.1 Process of Nomination as Ihe Ebiri Celebrant

The process of nomination and approval as the next Ihe Ebiri celebrant by all members of his age grade are subject to numerous screening criteria. Amongst these criteria are level of success in chosen career, integrity, marriage, children and their upbringing, contributions to physical and human capacity development in the community, amongst many others. Paramount in these criteria is a stable family because the celebrant's wife, first son, first daughter and last child, each has different symbolic roles to play in the process of the ceremony as we shall soon discover. Thus, the successful emergence of a given candidate as the next Ihe-Ebiri celebrant in this clime may be likened to the Igbo proverb which says that *when a child washes his hand clean, he qualifies to dine with kings.* In other words, it is only those who are morally upright and have succeeded in both career and nurturing of exemplary family life that qualify as candidates for Ihe-Ebiri ceremony in this community. No wonder that the people of this well-organized community insist that "Ihe Ebiri ceremony is not for *efulefus".* This implies that the ceremony is not for vagabonds or those who live irresponsible or disreputable life style.

As soon as the individual is pronounced as the next Ihe-Ebiri celebrant for the coming year, the months, weeks and days leading to the D-day are parked full of significant preparatory activities. Each of these activities is laced with themes of food, drinks, music and dancing. As at 2019 when the researcher gathered information on this age-long tradition of the Opara Na Okwe community during the Ihe Ebiri ceremony of a member of Uzoma age grade, the process of the ceremony entailed six stages namely, Nmayan ikpo oku ebiri (invitation), Nnabaata-Udu (acceptance of the Keg), Ihe-Agugu (List of requirements), Ura-Ehi (Wake orVigil), Nri Ogo (in-law's food), Ihe-Ebiri (the actual ceremony). The implication and significance of these stages are as follows:

3.2 Dispatch of Invitees (Ìkpọ Oku Ebiri)

Following the nomination and acceptance by the chief host, an invitation is immediately extended by them to all the grades in the community. This could take the form of either written or verbal invitation and it is specifically to intimate all other age grades in the community with details of the forthcoming ceremony. Details in this invitation include the name of the celebrant, name of the host age grade, date and venue of the ceremony. This invitation is compulsorily accompanied with a keg of palm wine and some kola nuts delivered to each age grade in the community, usually during their routine age

grade meetings. As at 2019, the Opara Na Okwe community had twenty age grades. As earlier mentioned, each of these age grades are recognized by carefully chosen names by which they are identified. Often, these names reflect good values and virtues such as royalty, morality, solidarity, Godliness and integrity. For instance, the names of the twenty age grades in Opara Na Okwe community invited by the observed celebrant and their literal translation are as follows: *Okaome* age grade (Fidelity/promise keeper); *Chinedu* (God leads); *Obinwanne* (fraternal hearts); *Udoka* (peace is best); *Ndukaku* (life is worth more than wealth); *Uzoma* (Good ways/roads); *Ugobueze* (Eagle is king of birds); *Ihunnanya* (love); *Ekwuemeaku* (Promises fulfilled with wealth), and *Obiwuruotu* (united by Hearts). Others are *Umunneji* (Children of the same mother); *Ogbedeneto* (the young shall grow); *Nnayerugo* (father's gift of Royalty), *Chidubem* (God, lead me on); *Ndubuisi* (life is ultimate); *Ugochinyere* (Royalty from God); *Uchendu* (lively thought); *Ifesinachi* (destiny); *Oganihukanma* (Progress is better); and *Onyeaghala Nwanneya* (solidarity) age grades. The invitation of each of these age grades to the ceremony and their acceptance to actively participate in the ceremony is a very paramount aspect of the whole process. This is because each of them has a significant role to play in the process of the ceremony. It is important to note that there is no compulsion to the number of age grade groups to be invited by a celebrant. In other words, the number of age grade groups to be invited by any celebrant is specifically dependent on the celebrant's financial capability as well as the capability of members of his age grade who are co-hosts of the ceremony.



Plate 1. Official Banner of Host Age Grade (Uzoma Age Grade)

3.3 Celebrant's Acceptance of Palm Wine Keg (*Ihe Nnabata du*)

This literarily implies the symbolic acceptance of palm wine keg by the celebrant and members of his household. This mini ceremony takes place few months after his pronouncement as the next Ihe-Ebiri celebrant. Attendance and participation is compulsory for every member of his age grade and their wives.

On the fixed date for this ceremony, the activity commences at noon with the arrival and reception of members of the celebrant's age grade with their wives in an elated mood, drumming, singing, dancing as they approach the home of the celebrant with the symbolic UDU (PALM WINE KEG). They are warmly received by the celebrant and his household. After moments of joyful dancing with his guests, the chairman of the age grade makes a short speech about the ceremony at hand, stating their reason for coming. This is followed by the symbolic hand over of the UDU (palm wine keg/jar) by the immediate past Ihe-Ebiri celebrant to the celebrant and his household. The celebrant receives the keg and makes a short speech which centres on his joy and whole hearted acceptance of their nomination as well as his readiness to be the chief host for the year's Ihe-Ebiri ceremony. Afterwards, they are feasted with assorted items of entertainment, including kola nuts with garden egg, alligator pepper, kegs of palm wine, other assorted drinks,10cm basin of oil bean seed salad (ugba), two big lumps of meat, a big pot of native soup prepared with assorted meat and fish, and a big basin of fu-fu (cassava). The ceremony is laced with intervals of spontaneous singing, dancing and merriment by the celebrant's age grade members and their wives.

3.4 List of Items for the Ceremony (*Ihe Agugu*)

This takes place few weeks to the date of the ceremony. It is also specifically between the chief host and his age grade members and their spouses. The essence of this gathering is to review their level of preparedness for the soon coming ceremony. During this gathering, the celebrant's age grade members look into details of the list of items required for the successful hosting of other age grades in the community whom they have invited to the ceremony. It is at this stage that they commence the disbursement of finances to members for the procurement of nonperishable items needed for the ceremony. Again, this gathering ends with generous entertainment with compulsory items and their specified quantity, all provided by the chief celebrant. These items include 8 Kola nuts with Garden eggs, 10cm basin of Oil bean seed salad (Ugba), 2 big lumps of meat, 1 jar of palm wine, 1 carton of beer, 1 crate of malt, 1 big basin of Fu-fu (cassava), Half basin of garri and a big pot of native soup.

3.5 Vigil (*Ura Ehi*)

This is done on the night preceding the date of the ceremony. Ura-ehi means wake or vigil. It involves the chief host, co-hosts and members of all other age grades who had been earlier invited to the ceremony. This takes place in the home of the celebrant. As an evening event, it is a sort of moonlight gathering of all age grade groups in Opara n'Okwe community. Sitting arrangement is in age grade groups and according to their order of seniority. The essence of this evening gathering is majorly one of free interaction and socialization of

different age grade members in the entire community, majority of who may have returned from far and near for the once-in- a life time ceremony. Interestingly, this gathering is never devoid of feasting which is provided by the celebrant and his family. As an organized process, there is a compulsory list of what the host must provide for the night entertainment of the entire age grade groups in his community. The list of requirements for this all evening entertainment include but not limited to kola-nuts with garden eggs, basins of oil bean seed salad (ugba), 1 big cock (native chicken for pepper soup), 4 tubers of Big Yams, 2 Jars of Palm wine, 2 lumps of meat, 1 carton of beer, 2 crates of malt, 1 basin of fu-fu (cassava), Half basin of garri, Nice soup, Canopies, tables and chairs for their comfort during the vigil. Special sitting arrangements are made to accommodate all invited or participating age grades. However the degree of entertainment is determined by the financial capability of the celebrant. This significant part of the process is also laced with lots of drumming, dancing, interaction and socialization.

3.6 In-Law's Food (*Nri ọgọ*)

This takes place early in the morning of the day of the ceremony. This also involves the celebrant, host age grade and members of other age grades. One of the male respondents Innocent Ibeana who is a member of the host age grade said that Nri Ogo is "food prepared and served by an "in-law". Within this context, 'In-law' implies the wife of the celebrant who is generally perceived as a "sister-in-law" to members of all the age grades in her spouse's community. As the name, *nri ọgọ* connotes, the celebrant's wife is expected to rise early in the morning of the day of the ceremony, and carefully prepare and serve her "brothers- in-law" with the same culinary delight she has served her husband over the years of their marriage. Her food MUST be acceptable by their standard before her husband is given the final nod for the ceremony. Thus, she rises early that morning and prepares a huge pot of native soup with assorted ingredients, including stock fish, dry fish and assorted meat. When this is ready, she presents her whole pot of soup, including basins of fu-fu (cassava) to her "brothers-in-law". Her dish is immediately subjected to a thorough scrutiny by representatives of all the age grades who have been invited to the community. Each of these representatives must publicly stir the soup pot to confirm its wealth of ingredients, acceptable quality, quantity and taste of her dish. This is a very critical point in the process of qualification for the ceremony as the candidate may either, according to them, "PASS" or "FAIL" this critical test. This stage is critical because the celebrant may be disqualified and the ceremony, cancelled if his wife (their sister-in-law) presents less quantity or ill prepared or tasteless dish that falls short of their expectations. However, once, the dish is declared acceptable, popularly known as "PASS", there is an air of excitement as the wives of the celebrant's age grade members rend the air with

chants and songs in acknowledgement and praise of the celebrant, his family and his entire age grade members. This happens simultaneously with the release of many gun salutes which reverberate the whole community, signaling the success of the celebrant's wife as well as informing all concerned to prepare for the ceremony proper. At this point the dish which has "PASSED" the test and taste is shared among members of all invited age grades, as they feast and depart to their various homes to adorn themselves with choice dressing for this once-in-a-life time ceremony which begins at noon. This collaboration between the chief host, is age grade members and all members of invited age grades in ensuring the success of the ceremony is a functionalist idea.

4.0 *Ihe Ebiri*(Age Grade Ceremony)

This commences at mid-day with shots of gun salutes meant to usher in guests and all invited age grades, excluding the host age grade. The host age grade plays the significant role of ushering in the chief celebrant and his family. Thus, to commence the ceremony the celebrant dances into the arena with his family. Immediately behind them are all the members of his age grade and their wives adorned in similar or uniform attire. Interestingly, the researcher observed that each member of the celebrant's age grade is bearing a large tuber of yam as they joyfully usher in their chief host into the arena. Godwin Kemdirim one of the respondents declares that "In our land, yam is considered as the king of crops. The presentation of a tuber of yam by each member of the host age grade is not only to support our brother in the financial implication of the ceremony, it also symbolizes our different professions, accomplishments, strength and success in our respective careers".

4.1 Double Entertainment of Invited Age Grades

Another respondent Collins Amadi throws light on the nature of entertainment of guests during the ceremony. He said that "In the entertainment of all invited age grades, the norm is that every item of entertainment presented to all the invited age grades by the chief celebrant, MUST be replicated by his age grade group, hence their identification as 'Co-hosts' of the ceremony". In other words, if the celebrant presents a keg of palm wine and a bowl of kola nuts to each of the twenty invited age grades, the members of his age grade equally presents another keg of palm wine and another bowl of kola nuts to them. The same thing is repeated when other items of entertainment are served. These items of entertainment are majorly traditional drinks and dishes including palm wine, garden eggs, oil bean seed salad (ugba), fu-fu (cassava), native soup, bread fruit, melon cake and much more. The entertainment is so generous that the researcher noted that majority of these age grade members had their fill and also enough to take home. No wonder people from this happy and closely knit community look forward to this rare cultural ceremony. When asked about the

origin of this cultural ceremony, the chief host, Emmanuel Ejike replies that "Ihe Ebiri in Opara Na Okwe dates back to our distant past and have been handed over to us by our ancestors. As you can see, our children are actively involved in this ceremony because they are expected to also pass it down to their own children".

4.2 Role Of Celebrant's Children

While the organized double entertainment is in progress, some of the children of the celebrant must compulsorily pay homage to all invited age grades. Those to play this symbolic role are the celebrant's first son (*diọpara*), first daughter (*ada*) and last child (*ọdu nwa*). Each of them pays this homage bearing significant parts of a cow in either a basin or a tray. For instance, the first son carries the upper head of the cow, the first daughter bears the jaw of the cow, while the last child carries the tail of the cow. As they approach each of the age grades, they are promptly appreciated with gifts of cash tossed into their basins by members. Concerning the significance of these different parts of a cow carried by each of the participating children, another respondent Collins Amadi who is a member of Uzoma age grade declares that:

> Our people believe in the saying that 'the more the merrier'. That is why our wealth is usually measured by our population and human capacity development. During this ceremony, the cow head carried by the celebrant's first son signifies leadership. It implies that the celebrant has successfully nurtured his first son as and his siblings, over whom he can act as leader in the absence of their father. On the other hand, the cow jaw carried by the first daughter implies that the celebrant also has a daughter who would support her brother in the execution of his leadership responsibility as the first son in the family. Also, the cow tail carried by the last child signifies vulnerability as the last offspring and the need to be cared for by his older siblings in the absence of their parents.

Spouses of celebrant's age grade members



Plate 2. From left: Celebrant's First Daughter, First Son, and last child paying homage to invited guests



Plate 3. First Son bearing the symbolic Cow Head supported by members of his Age Grade



Plate 4. Celebrant's first daughter paying the traditional homage of welcome to invited guests

4.3 Role of Guests

As earlier mentioned, members of all invited age grades appreciate the celebrant's children with cash or other gift items as they approach their group to pay the traditional homage of welcome. Aside of this, these age grades also present gifts of cash to support the celebrant before departure. In the same vein, other groups of people present, including in-laws, friends and well-wishers also pay homage to the celebrant with gifts, including cash to support him before departure.

5.0 Summary of Findings, Recommendation and Conclusion

5.1 Findings

Following an in-depth study and analysis of data collected, the researcher finds out:

That Ihe Ebiri cultural ceremony in Opara Na Okwe is an exclusive preserve of male members who have distinguished themselves in career, family and morality

That the success of the ceremony is dependent on the support, collaboration and active participation of the celebrant's family, his age grade members who are the cohosts and members of the entire age grades in the community. This is in tandem with Durkheim's Functionalist's theoretical view that all institutions in the society cooperate in order to engender order, stability and development for the good of all.

That there is a high cost implication of the ceremony due to the numerous stages of preparation for the occasion

That age grade ceremony in Igbo land is context specific. For instance, while Ihe Ebiri in Opara Na Okwe Mbaise is not for every member of a given age grade. It is celebrated by an individual who acts as the chief host at the peak of his career, the Igbere people's age grade ceremony is celebrated at retirement by entire members of the concerned age grade, and hence it's called *Igbọtọ Nma* which literarily means submission of work tools or retirement.

5.2 Recommendation

This research recommends a reconsideration of the item carried by celebrant's children in the payment of homage to invited guests. The subsisting different parts of raw cow flesh which they carry on their heads appear primitive and fetish, especially in our modern era of Westernization and Christianity.

The study recommends that Ihe Ebiri cultural ceremony in Opara Na Okwe be retained and transmitted from generation to generation due to its historical implication and its inherent enhancement of human relationships. The collective participation of all and sundry in order to ensure a successful celebration promotes development and peaceful coexistence in the in the community. This aligns with Functionalist theory of institutional cooperation for the good of all in the society.

It is also recommended a downward review of the long and complex preparation, as well as high cost implication of the ceremony.

5.3 Conclusion

Culture is the way of life of a people. The people of Opara Na Okwe community have held on to their age long multifaceted cultural heritage, particularly the

age grade cultural ceremony. This paper has elucidated the whole process of age grade cultural ceremony in Opara Na Okwe community of Nguru, in Aboh Mbaise Local Government Area of Imo State. In this closely knit community, Ihe Ebiri connotes the once-in-a-lifetime age grade cultural ceremony. As enumerated above, during this ceremony, the entire community, particularly all age grade groups gather to support, acknowledge, appreciate and celebrate illustrious sons of their community with lots of pomp and pageantry. Using Durkheim's Functionalist theory, we have enumerated the various advantages of this cultural ceremony to the community including development, social and economic stability. Adopting the qualitative research methodology, we have analyzed our Data which we collected through in-depth study of related literature, audio recording and oral interviews. In our analysis, we noted with interest, the different roles played by key participants, particularly the wife, children and members of the celebrant's age grade who are co-hosts of the ceremony. As co-hosts, the celebrant's age grade are mandatorily required to duplicate every item of entertainment presented to guests by the celebrants. The researcher observed that apart from the appreciation of the celebrant by his people, the occasion also serves the purposes of socialization, fraternity and merriment as each stage is usually laced with generous entertainment. Amongst many others, the study recommends a review of the long and complex process of preparation as well as the downward review of cost implication of this cultural ceremony. This documentation is therefore expedient at this time for the purpose of reference material for future generation.

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