

An Assessment of the Role of Igbo Apprenticeship System to the Economy of Benue State, Nigeria

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Abstract

The Igbo ethnic group in Nigeria has a long history of entrepreneurship and apprenticeship systems in Nigeria and around the world. In the traditional era, their entrepreneurship and apprenticeship endowments played complex roles in the socio-economic relationships of different communities. In the contemporary Nigerian society, their entrepreneurship and apprenticeship skills no doubt play a vital role in the growth and development of the Nigerian economy. This review examines the role of Igbo apprenticeship system to the economy of Benue State. It concludes by exploring the challenges of Igbo apprenticeship system in Benue State and making recommendations. The findings indicate that despite the important role of Igbo apprenticeship system to the nation's economy, it is facing significant challenges, and several factors have combined to discourage Igbo apprenticeship system, making it less appealing to unemployed youths, with grave implications for unemployment, wealth creation and poverty reduction. Our data is sourced from primary and secondary evidences. This was counterpoised by rapidly growing literature from secondary

sources on Igbo apprenticeship and entrepreneurship systems in Nigeria. The data synthesized from all these support claim and conclusion that Igbo apprenticeship system plays a significant role to the growth and development of the economy of Benue State and the entire nation and thus, should be encouraged by government at all levels.

Keywords: Entrepreneurship, Role, Igbo Apprenticeship System, Economy, Benue State and Nigeria

Introduction

Entrepreneurial development has helped in shaping the economy of most of the advanced and developed nations for over a century now. Among the Igbo, entrepreneurship has a long history, was in existence before the arrival of the British Colonial masters, and has over the years shown some level of resilience. In recent times, the entrepreneurial performance of the Igbo people of Nigeria has become outstanding. The Igbo are well-known for their entrepreneurial endeavours, both within Nigeria and around the world. They are renowned globally for their zeal and tenacity that they have for business; a unique trait that has distinguished them from others. The Igbo are also known as peace loving and contribute meaningfully to the growth and development of the economy of any society where they reside and Benue State is not an exception. Although the indigenous peoples actively participate in trade and market centres in Benue State, the Igbo to a larger extent dominate trade and market centres in the State because of their ubiquitous nature, entrepreneurial skills, technical know-how, experience and apprenticeship system in trade/business such as boutiques, bookshops, provision stores, patent medicine shops, appliances and automobile spare parts among others. Despite the increasing indigenous participation, the business of opening and running stores in Benue State is still very much an Igbo affair as they dominate the retail trade in the State with virtual monopoly in the

automobile spare parts trade. The Igbo traders are found and stationed in almost all communities of the State where they engage in various trade and their apprenticeship system – a vibrant part of the Igbo business attributes that has for long been shaping their mental and intelligent quotient about business success.¹ Taking advantage of the motor transport system, Igbo traders/middlemen and their apprentices attend virtually every market with manufactured goods to sell and buy off local foodstuffs directly from producers which they conveyed by lorries, to several parts of Nigeria and beyond. It is against this backdrop that this review critically explores the role of Igbo apprenticeship system to the economy of Benue State. Adopting a multidisciplinary approach, the aim is to bring to light and ascertain the role of Igbo apprenticeship system to the economy of Benue State. This is followed by the challenges of Igbo apprenticeship system in Benue State and concluding remarks.

Conceptual Clarifications

Apprenticeship is a method of training youths and the middle aged to learn a trade or craft for their future wellbeing and livelihood. Apprentice is bound by legal agreement to work for another for a specific amount of money for instruction in a trade, art or business.² The Igbo apprentice system or Igbo Trade Apprenticeship System (ITAS) popularly known as '*Imu-Olu*' (which means learning work) or '*Imu-Ahia*' (which means learning trade) or '*Igba boy*' (which means to serve) is a major factor in any discussion about the Igbo wealth creation or commerce.³ The beginning of the Igbo business learning culture is the Igbo Trade Apprenticeship System (ITAS). The Igbo Trade Apprenticeship System is a kind of informal and unstructured training program, scheduled for an agreed period of time, which a person undergoes in order to acquire a desirable aspect of entrepreneurship skill. The Igbo are the most capable of teaching the world trade education through the development and automation of this ITAS. The ITAS is a

vibrant part of the Igbo business attributes that has for long been shaping their mental and intelligent quotient about business success.⁴

The Igbo Apprenticeship System is an unpaid business apprenticeship/incubator model that lets people learn business from a master for a certain number of year (5-8) depending and at the end of their apprenticeship tenure, gets cash infusion and support to start their own business. There is no salary paid during the time of the apprenticeship tenure but meals, and peradventure medical bills if the need arises, clothing and t-fare are provided for by the master. When the years of learning are over, the boy is as good as his master.⁵ There are basically two major types of apprenticeship under the *Nwaboi* apprenticeship system. They are '*Imu-OruAka*' and '*Imu-Ahia*'.⁶

i. '*Imu-OruAka*' (Learning a Craft or Skill): in this type of apprenticeship, the apprentice is handed over to a master or professional craftsman for mentorship and training over an agreed period of time. The time frame for this type of apprenticeship is between 3- 5 years depending on how fast the apprentice is able to learn the craft or skill.

ii. '*Imu-Ahia*' (Learning a Trade): this is another type of apprenticeship under the *Nwabo* system. In this case, an apprentice is sent to a successful businessman; often a trader. The apprentice undergoes mentorship and training during the agreed period of time. The time frame for this type of apprenticeship is between 3-7 years which is still dependent on how fast the apprentice learns the trade.

In either *Imu-Oru Aka* or *Imu-Ahia*, the businessman or craftsman in charge of the apprentice is called the 'Master' (also called '*Oga*') or 'Madam' (if a woman) local parlance. The *Oga* may decide to collect money as payment for the training and mentorship of the apprentice. Where payment is not made, the apprentice is expected to serve the '*Oga*' in different capacities (in most cases including responsibility for domestic chores) in place of the payment while undergoing the apprenticeship. Payment is usually accompanied with some drinks meant for the entertainment of witnesses who are usually relatives, fellow

tradesmen or craftsmen within the environment in which the trade or craft is to be learnt. It is important to note that whether payment is made or not, drinks (refreshment) for entertainment of witnesses is mandatory. It is a form of ritual and initiation process for the apprentice. During this process, the apprentice(s) gets to know the 'Ogas' and other apprentices within the environment and in that line of trade or craft. Also, the Master or Madam is expected to mentor and train the apprentices in the particular line of business or craft and also guide them in the development of skill-sets such as planning, organizing, coordinating, controlling and decision-making that could be essential to run the business effectively. Therefore, when the system is looked at closely, it is noticed that it is envisioned to be a proper entrepreneurship training and management development programme; albeit of an informal nature and limited only by the expertise of the Master and the learning capacity of the apprentice.⁷

Trends of Igbo Apprenticeship System in Benue State

In Benue State, there are currently two trends of Igbo apprenticeship system: fulltime and part-time Igbo apprenticeship system.

a. *Full-time Igbo apprenticeship system*: This is the most common of the trends. Here, the apprentice assumes the son or daughter of the master. The apprentice therefore leaves his parents and comes to live under the care and supervision of an established business Igbo person who becomes his master and he the servant. He takes care of his master for the agreed number of years, and does every chore that the master assigns him. He serves his master not only in the shop or in relation to the business but at home as well, like washing of cars, cleaning the home, washing and ironing his master's cloth, etc. He has no right to travel home without the consent of the master, even if the parents live in the same city with the master. He must work hard to win the trust and favour of his master, as it is the master who would make an appraisal of his service in the growing of the business venture and in non-business-related areas. At the end of the apprenticeship, the master gives the apprentice a take-off fund or capital for the

hiring or purchase of a shop, goods, equipment, where necessary and in some cases, accommodation for a given period of time. This take-off fundor capital does not in any way mean that he ceases to collaborate with the master; the master still assists him or her with goodsprocurement to reduce overhead importation cost, knowing fully well that the apprentice has a weak purchasing power.⁸

b. *Part-time Igbo apprenticeship system:* As the name applied the apprentice learn the trade or craft on part-time bases especially after school. The category applied mostly to children of businessmen or craftsmen who are interested in learning their parents' trades and schooling at the same time or outsiders who are interested in learning a trade while schooling owing to the harsh economic reality in the country. While the children of the businessmen or craftsmen stay with their parents and perform household chores assign by their parents, attended schools and come to the shop after school, weekend and during holidays. Those interested in learning a trade while schooling, more often than not come to the shop after school from their respective homes and such have little or nothing to do with house chores of their masters. All these people must work hard to win the trust and favour of their masters, as it is the master who would make an appraisal of his/her service in the growing of the business venture and in non-business-related areas. Depending on the initial agreement, at the end of their apprenticeship tenure, the apprentices get cash infusion and support to start their own business or certificates.

Organization of Igbo Apprenticeship System in Benue State

The Igbo apprenticeship system is organised in a way that minimized the challenges of theft, mistrust and misunderstanding while at the same time enhancing the efficiency of the apprenticeship system. There are three principal stages in undergoing an apprenticeship/training under a master. They are ingratiation stage, incubation stage and funding stage.

a. It all begins with *ingratiation*, which involves the processes of the master going to the village, picking a relation and introducing him to the system, their duties, roles and overall workings of the system. It is a period of orientation.⁹

b. The next is the period of *incubation*, which offers the apprentice the business spaces of learning to mature in the business, in co-creation, trainings and cultivation of business models. The incubation platform is full of risks and practical in nature. It is during this period that the apprentice is trained and nurtured. During this period, honesty, accountability and work ethic are core principles.¹⁰

c. The final stage is *funding*. This is when the master settles the apprentice to begin his own businessventure. This is dependent on the financial capability of the master and the commitment of the apprentice to the success of the business during the incubation period.¹¹

The Role of Igbo Apprenticeship System to the Economy of Benue State

The purpose for the establishment of any skill acquisition centre is to promote socio-economic development. This is the situation in Igbo apprenticeship system where the people relied heavily on the apprenticeship system to ensure smooth commercial transactions and wealth creation for the realization of economic and socio-cultural prosperity. The Igbo apprenticeship system plays a number of roles including the following:

i. The Igbo apprenticeship system helps in identifying and bringing mentors (established businessmen and craftsmen) and mentees (potential businessmen and craftsmen) together by providing a platform for mutual working relationships between them. In other words, it creates and serves as a platform for training of potential businessmen and craftsmen in commerce or a place for the profitable ventures and skills acquisition in order to improve living standard of the potential businessmen and craftsmen and their relations. This implies that it is an avenue for direct transfer of knowledge and technology from the mentors to the mentees

for wealth and job creation, skills acquisition, poverty eradication and improves living standard as well as economic development.¹²

ii. It encourages socialization and interaction among the mentors and the mentees. Apart from the primary function of the apprenticeship system as an avenue for wealth and job creation, skills acquisition, it also doubled as veritable institutions for social interaction, cross-fertilization of ideas and fashion as well as initiating and encouraging economic, social and political development in an area. This implies that the Igbo apprenticeship system function as a strong vehicle for pulling people together from different ethnic and socio-cultural backgrounds. This process intensifies and facilitates integration among the Igbo on the one hand and between the Igbo and their neighbours or host communities on the other hand and also fosters the process of integration which enhances peaceful coexistence.

iii. It creates direct and indirect jobs for the mentors, the mentees and their subordinates/partners who are constantly train to acquire the necessary skills required in the expertise of their line of business.¹³ The mentors and the mentees—when they graduate and established their own business, recruit, train, and utilize an array of people ranging from apprentices, drivers/transporters, informants, sales boys and girls, cashiers and accountants, storekeepers, gatekeepers, suppliers of logistics like sample products, and contacts of potential clients (i.e. potential buyers or sellers). By extension and implication therefore, Igbo apprenticeship system plays a decisive role in reducing the number of crimes and vices notably theft, armed robbing, kidnapping, fraud and prostitution. It is valuable because it creates a lot of employment opportunities for a large number of people from the area and neighbouring towns thereby reducing the unemployment rate and its attendant social effect of armed robbery and other crimes in the State.

iv. The Igbo apprenticeship system serves as a platform for learning, awareness and information dissemination. The Igbo apprenticeship system is a platform

where mentors and their subordinates/partners – the mentees are constantly directly or indirectly train and retrain to acquire the necessary skills required to promote the expertise of their vocation and profession. The apprenticeship system, therefore, inform the mentees about market demand and supply (social outlook, economic profit, demographic characteristic, concentration and dispersion etc.) and thereby assists them in planning their business to attune them to the environment after graduation and establishing their own business.

v. It serves as a source of revenue generations for individuals, organizations and the government. The apprenticeship system is crucial source of income generation for several families and the government in the area. As seen earlier, it employs majority of people, thus raising the level of individuals and government income and standard of living of the common man.¹⁴ The Igbo are mainly traders and relied on the platform created by the apprenticeship system in the area to train younger ones (potentials entrepreneurs) to generate capital and keep up economic growth. The government derive much revenue in the form of land taxes, import and export duties, income tax on brokers and middlemen involve in transactions with the mentors and the mentees– when they graduate and established their own business.¹⁵ This shows that the apprenticeship system prosperity contributes considerably in fostering revenue generation and economic advancement.

vi. It creates an atmosphere for general economic and infrastructural development of the economy. The growth and expansion of the apprenticeship system in the area improves entrepreneurship and motivates development. The development of the apprenticeship system, the mass population it attracts, and the opportunities it offers; attracts some public facilities to some urban and suburban areas in the State, thus increasing their status. This development increases the intensity of commercial transactions and activities on the part of the farmers and traders occasioned by the high demand for their products especially on market days. The improved status of these areas brought into the surrounding area

increases opportunities for development and growth as well as progressive adjustment in well-being. In this way, the mentees are able to strike a balance between opportunities and household or community needs.

Challenges of Igbo Apprenticeship System in Benue State

A variety of factors conspired to ravage the apprenticeship system efficiency and effective organization of the apprenticeship system in Benue State. Nnonyelu, N. and Onyeizugbe, C. identified five (5) challenges in Igbo apprenticeship and theoretical orientations as low value of the apprenticeship scheme, lack of formal contract, lack of certification, no harmonized curriculum and lack of governmental support.¹⁶

(a) *Low value of the apprenticeship scheme*: It does appear that apprenticeship in Igboland and diaspora has not flourished, as one would expect owing to negative work ethics or low socio-cultural image of apprenticeships observed globally to the misperception in the public domain that apprentices are children of low class families. It seems to us trite that such public negative perspective of apprenticeship has kept many young adults that ordinarily would have been interested, out of the scheme. It is felt that the apprenticeship scheme is populated by not too bright individuals, academic failures, never do wells, which some Igbo villages refer to as “*akologholi*”. In the distant past the success stories posted by the successful apprentices were significant wake up calls for their cohorts in the villages to lobby, or solicit through their families to be “recruited” as apprentices. They became role models, reference group and significant others, that copying them was a major boost of the apprenticeship scheme.

(b) *Lack of formal contract*: Another major challenge that Igbo Apprenticeship has faced over the years is the absence of a clear formalized contract. It is expected in some quarters that contracts of apprenticeship have to be written to subsist and be valid in law. This is clearly not the case, as it seems to us reasonable to argue, that the attrition rate in apprenticeships may not be rosy, and this needs effective monitoring. In the absence of tight social bonds that will ensure that the master or “*Oga*” respects

the reciprocal relationship, or verbal agreements, the master has very easily found escape routes or the opportunity or convenient excuses not to “settle” the “*nwaboyi*” meaning not to equip the successful apprentice, and set him on his own journey of business and life.

(c) *Lack of certification*: Another challenge posed to Igbo apprenticeship in Benue state and Nigeria, in fact Africa at large, is evident in is the lack of certification which has greatly hampered the development of the Igbo apprenticeship scheme. One may argue that awarding certificates, or the undue emphasis on credentials, what is known as credential has been the bane of education in Nigeria, yet it seems incomplete for a training programme, vocational, or practical not to have evidence of having successfully completed a programme, and even the duration. This has been a major hindrance, making it difficult to separate the successful apprentices, and the uninitiated or untrained artisans.

(d) *No harmonized curriculum*: Similarly, the content of the curriculum may be another stumbling block. There are no mechanisms to check what is being taught, as some of the apprentices do more household chores, rather than what they have been brought to do, under the traditional, informal arrangement that still holds sway in Igboland, and in the diaspora, where the Igbo have emigrated plying their trade. It is of course this aspect that is worrisome, and it seems to us improper, as it could be very easily seen as modern slavery in disguise. Although, the apprenticeship relationship in Igboland is an unequal one, however, both parties expect something in return. It therefore cannot be skewed, or one sided, if it is going to be sustainable.

(e) *Lack of governmental support*: The apprenticeship scheme in Igboland and diaspora is left entirely in the hands of the individual master or “employer” of the apprentice. No funds are made available to subsidize the training costs. The Nigerian state does not consider it necessary, has not seen the propriety of encouraging the apprenticeship scheme to succeed and transform itself. Any success of Igbo apprenticeship or even entrepreneurship across the divide in Nigeria has to be rightly placed in the doorstep of individuals who have cultivated bridges of friendship,

marriage, commercial cooperation. Needless to say this marginalization has continued till this day. The lack of support from the Nigerian state is understood in the light of the prebendal, patrimonial and rentier character of the state. What is more perplexing however is that the component units, the states within the South Eastern region and Local Governments therein have also not paid any heed to what is happening in the world of apprenticeship. It is this official neglect of apprenticeship that is in our view, the singular, most important factor that has affected the Igbo apprenticeship scheme, and stopped it from flourishing.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has succeeded in bringing to the limelight the different roles of Igbo apprenticeship system play in economic development of Benue State as well as the challenges confronting it. It shows that Igbo apprenticeship system is not substitutes to western education as some scholars believed; rather, they are complementary. The study has also show-cased the indispensable role of apprenticeship in entrepreneurship development. Indeed, apprenticeship does not only provide training for the apprentices; it equally provides mentoring services and serves as nursery for any entrepreneurial ambition. If government can adopt the practice and deepen the platform, she can comfortably fix the unemployment problem that is affecting the young and the economy of the country and as well promote sustainability insmall and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) development and alleviate poverty among Nigerians. All the government at all levels need do is to create the enabling environment for the apprenticeship scheme to flourish as a direct intervention in the upgrading of the apprenticeship scheme, increasing the general skill levels, and supporting massively through injection of funds is a panacea to the observed flaws in the system.

Recommendations

Based on the findings from this study, this paper therefore recommends as J. J.Orugun and A. T. Nafiu, aptly put it thus:

- a) Benue State and other parts of Nigeria should emulate the Igbo entrepreneurship culture.
- b) The federal and state governments should incorporate the Igbo Trade Apprenticeship System (ITAS) as Internship Training in her entrepreneurship program in all universities in Nigeria.
- c) Government policies on small and medium scale enterprises (SMEs) should be reviewed in a way that paves a platform for other ethnic groups in the country to imbibe the Igbo business spirit.
- d) Start-up capital should be made available to the would-be entrepreneurs at low cost of acquisition.
- e) The Nigerian government at all levels should motivate the Igbo entrepreneurs through provision of business expansion fund.

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