

Igbo Apprenticeship and the Sustenance of Nigerian Economy

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Abstract

The Igbos are well-known for their industriousness and doggedness when it comes to fending for their livelihood. The Igbo apprentice system tends to emphasize this assertion, seen as an extension of the entrepreneurial spirit of the Igbos, where an induction strategy is utilized to induct mostly young Igbos, though without a clear cut age limit or bracket, into entrepreneurial ventures by established Igbo entrepreneurs who reside in urban areas and are locally referred to as “Oga” (Master), while the apprentice is called “Nwa odibo” or “Nwa nga”(House/Trade Boy). This paper tries to lend a voice to the importance of the Igbo traditional apprenticeship scheme, which seems presently to have been relegated to the backward. It will among other things consider the challenges and prospects of the entrepreneurial apprentice scheme, which it argues could be a panacea to the lingering unemployment and economic quagmire particularly in Igbo land and generally in Nigeria. Oral interviews, personal visits, observations and relevant literature were used as sources of data collection. The method adopted was historical narrative, with thematic and analytic approach. The paper suggests on how to resuscitate the cultural apprenticeship scheme that carved an economic niche for the Igbo. It concludes with recommendations on vital modifications that could help the scheme to remove noted bottlenecks on the part of the mentor and mentee, with the call on government to step in to moderate the scheme.

Key words: The Igbo, Apprenticeship system, Entrepreneurial, Trade, Economy

Introduction

‘Imu-Ahia’, the Igbo apprenticeship system is an informal system where established business owners take in young boys and train them in their line of business while they serve as apprentices. Imu-Ahia literally translated as ‘to learn marketing’ is an integral part of Igbo culture. The Imu-Ahia process in some Igbo villages begins with a formal traditional handing over ceremony between the young boy’s family, the Oga and respected elders as witnesses. Here, the Oga states his expectations and assures the family of the boy’s welfare, while the family admonishes the boy to remain faithful, honest and hardworking to his Oga. This apprenticeship is unpaid, although the Oga typically provides housing, food and clothing. The training period is usually about five- eight years, after which a graduation ceremony would be held for the apprentice during which the Oga gifts the young man a sizeable sum of money and sometimes even extends a line of credit for the purchase of goods required to set up a new business. This training system evolved from the long-standing practice of sending younger family members to live with older relatives in other towns who supervised or provided education, whether formal or informal (trade). The system sought to restore and develop Igbo wealth.¹

This Igbo apprenticeship system also known as Igba-Boi, Imu oru or Igba-Odibo, is an informal scale of business mentorship within the Igbo people. In the Nwa-Boy Igbo Apprenticeship system, a child usually a boy of around 10-18 years is sent off to live in the city with a successful businessman who is a relative or sometimes, a total stranger. It is a

system of wealth distribution amongst the Igbos that became a way of life in Igbo land and was made prominent immediately after the Nigeria – Biafra War.² It is a marketing system that has thrown the Igbo race into the global limelight as legendary business geniuses. This system began way back in the pre-colonial eras by farmers before Igbo traders of the post-Nigeria civil war emulated it. The apprenticeship system has been considered one of the major factors that helped pull most South-Eastern families out of poverty within the first two years after the Biafra war. Senator Ifeanyi Uba, Cosmas Maduka (Coscharis Group), Innocent Chukwuma (Innoson Vehicle Manufacturing), and Cletus Ibeto (Ibeto Group), to mention but a few, are all products of the Igbo apprenticeship system. The success story of this system has become so widely known that an editorial on the Igbo Apprenticeship System (IAS) was approved by the prestigious Harvard Business School in 2021.³ Basically, the Igbo apprenticeship system is an informal agreement where a young boy learns a trade of his choice under the tutelage of his master, a man who is already established in that business. The master settles the boy to start on his own after a specific number of years. As previously stated, this practice began during the pre-colonial era, when farmers took young people to serve them on their farms. After they had come of age, the farmers would settle them with some yams and some portion of their masters' land to cultivate their own crops. Through this, the young men fend for themselves and pay it forward by taking other young men to work on their farms.⁴

The apprenticeship system blossomed after the Nigeria-Biafra war, where the harsh 20 Pounds Policy of the Nigerian government forced a lot of Igbo into poverty. The war saw many Igbos lose their property, businesses, jobs, and education. Equipped with only 20 pounds, the Igbo man had to start afresh through petty trading to survive. Through their resilience and business acumen, they grew their businesses enough to take in boys, usually from villages, to teach them the trade. Writing in African Business Magazine, June 8th, 2021, Kelechukwu Iruoma noted that “the Igbo apprenticeship system allows young people to learn a trade and start a business. Supporters vaunt it as a Nigerian model of stakeholder capitalism”.⁵ The Igbo process of apprenticeship basically involves only Igbo young males, the females were originally not part of this. At the conclusion of secondary school education of the prospective apprentice, and where despite his ambitions to pursue higher education but due to financial difficulties that hindered the continuation of his education to tertiary level, temporarily or permanently, the young adolescent is encouraged to go into entrepreneurial apprenticeship, where he will be engaged to serve one of his brothers in the cities under the Igbo apprenticeship system known as Igba boi (Apprenticeship) – a cultural practice where young Igbo boys are sent to businessmen in various cities to learn trades.⁶ When the boy has learned from his master, the master sets him up with capital and goods to start his own business, when he himself will become an oga. For a successful apprenticeship to be achieved, the nwa boi-boi (apprentice) must be obedient and submissive to his oga (master). The Igbo entrepreneurial apprenticeship scheme provides the new knowledge, skills, behaviour, experience and the capital to young Igbo boys to start their own business and improve their competence in their learned occupation. Igba boi makes the Igbo youths strong, obedient, exposed and very versatile. It also contributes and ensures the sustenance of the Igbo traditional individual growth and Igbo nation's economy.

The Concept and the Historical Background of Apprenticeship in Igboland
Ndubuisi Ekekwe, a Nigerian academic and entrepreneur in a study says that the Igbo apprenticeship system was propelled by Igbo leaders when young men started to leave the region after the end of the civil war in 1970. After the defeat of Biafra in the Nigeria-Biafra War that took place from 1967-1970, the Nigerian government seized the bank accounts of

many Igbos but issued them with a small grant to start afresh. Many young men used the money to travel to various cities around the country and start businesses. He noted that as the elders blessed them, they dropped a message: ‘onye aghala nwanne ya’ (do not leave your brethren behind), Ekekwe, whose work on Igba boi has been published in the Harvard Business Review, sees what followed as a valuable case study in “stakeholder capitalism” that has produced several prominent Nigerian businessmen, including car magnate Innocent Chukwuma, Innoson Motors and his likes. He pointed out that, “As people made progress, they came back home to pick their kinsmen, dividing and sharing opportunities in the cities. And with that playbook, a region that should be the poorest in Nigeria (because they lost the war) is today regarded by the United Nations as the most secure on human development,” he told the BBC.⁷

Chief Uche Nworah, the Managing Director/Chief Executive Officer, Anambra Broadcasting Service (ABS), Awka, Anambra State, was the convener, National Summit on Igbo Apprenticeship. In an interview said, “The Igbo apprenticeship scheme is an entrepreneurial model where an entrepreneur takes an apprentice and teaches him or her rudiments of a particular trade for an agreed period. On completion, the entrepreneur gives the apprentice seed capital to set up his own business”.⁸ Having said that, there is no recorded history of how long Ndigbo have been practicing the apprenticeship scheme. What is obvious is that it is majorly indigenous to Ndigbo and over time, has become part of their culture and tradition. It falls within the ‘self-help’ ideology, the ‘in-group’ philosophy, which found wider acceptance amongst Ndigbo after the Nigeria-Biafra war, when Ndigbo were stripped of their savings and money in Nigerian banks and given only 20 pounds in exchange for whatever amount they may have in the bank, pre-war period.⁹ As the Igbo proverb goes, ‘Onye ajulu adighi aju onwe ya’ (if people reject and deny you, you should not deny and reject yourself). The Igbo then set about rebuilding their businesses and communities, carrying friends, relatives and associates along. Individuals, Age Grade system, Town unions, Ndi Iyom (Women group), Nze na Ozo and other traditional Igbo societies rallied round in this regard.

This determination to succeed with others also finds expression in the Igbo mantra of ‘Egbe bere ugo bere’ (Live and let live), ‘Onye aghana nwanne ya’ (leave no one behind along the journey of economic success or along the journey of life). This meant that people that could already stand on their feet business-wise after the war had to recruit apprentices to serve them or to work with them in their businesses and trades, after which the apprentices (boi-bois) are settled (Idu ahia) by their masters to start their own businesses. That way, the wheel of economic progress and development continued to grind in the South East and in other places where Ndigbo sojourn. The aftermath of the Biafra-Nigeria war encouraged and saw an intensification amongst the Igbos trying to rebuild what they had lost in a bitter and devastating three years which claimed nearly half her population. Confronted with the challenge of starting life from scratch, it was during this time that Ndigbo saw a spike in the Igbo apprenticeship system (IAS), variously called in peculiar Igbo dialects as it suites the various parts of Igboland as seen above, including Igba boi or Imu oluaka. The Igbo apprenticeship system is an unpaid business apprenticeship/incubator model that lets young boys learn business methods from a master for a certain number of years (usually between five to eight years) and at the end of their apprenticeship tenure, gets cash infusion and support to start their own business. The structure works in a manner where an older “uncle” in trade teaches and establishes his younger kin in the said trade who in turn teaches other young folks. The Biafra war may not have birthed the Igba boi system but it incontestably popularized it. The BBC in May 2017 referred to the IAS as “a Nigerian scheme forged in war that creates billionaires”. Lately, there’s been much ado for the Igba boi practice

especially following its endorsement by Harvard as a college course equivalent to a BSc certificate and according to Forbes (2017), Anambra in southeast Nigeria either by good fortune or hard work has bred more naira billionaires than any other town in Nigeria.¹⁰

Associated Concepts

Igba Boy: The Igba boy stage covers the length of the ‘Nwa Boy’s’ stewardship. There is no fixed model from this stage, it differs from one businessman to another. During this period, the boy is put through the ropes of the business. But it does not all start in a day, at first he might be subjected to running petty errands for his Oga. With time, he moves up the ladder. When he’s able to prove himself and earn the trust of Oga, he is put in charge of managing the business while his boss is away.

Idu Ulo/ Idu ahia: After the agreed time, usually between five - eight years, the boy gets to graduate. It is not as simple as that though, the boy must have served his Oga diligently and with no gross misconduct. Yes, a little truancy here and there, but nothing major, then he will be deemed worthy of settlement. A lavish party is thrown in his honor, his Oga will give him his blessings and a key to his own shop, fully stocked. This is done in the presence of other boys to show them that it pays to be honest and equally present a practical example of reward, in order to encourage the “junior boi bois”.¹¹ Today, the Igbo Apprenticeship System has involved to what they call Imu Ahia (learning of trade). In the Imu Ahia system, the boy is not required to serve the Oga completely but just in the areas of the business and it is paid for by the apprentice.

The Routine of Igbo Apprenticeship System

The routine of Igbo apprenticeship could thus be described as follows: In Igbo apprenticeship, a young man leaves his family to live under the care and supervision of the master of the trade he wants to learn. The number of years is between five to eight years, which according to writer’s finding the number of service year depends on the age or academic qualifications of the apprentice in question. The younger or less academic qualified, the more the service period becomes. This apprentice could be related to the master. He could be his brother, cousin, or any other distant relative. The apprentice could even be the son of a best friend or friend of a friend. In most cases, the apprentice is usually from the same hometown as the master. Life as an apprentice was purely about survival, early as 5am he would be up to wash his master’s car, after which he would set out about a mile to the shop to open it before 6am and display the wares. His first meal for each day depended solely on the first few sales commonly called in Igbo lingua ‘Oso afia’ or ‘igba oso ahia’, a situation where one would run around and convince clients/customers to patronize their store, thereafter, the profit received is split between the shop owner and whoever brought the customer. The apprentice is often not allowed to go home to his family without his master’s permission during festivities, even if they live in the same city. It’s a total lockdown for the apprentice as he is under the full control of the master.

He is expected to prepare his master’s shop before the master arrives for work. He will run all the errands the master sends him without question. His duties are not limited to the shop alone. The apprentice is expected to run errands for the household. He will respect and obey the master’s spouse and help her with domestic chores like cleaning the house, fetching water, and in some cases, cooking. In return, the master takes care of the apprentice’s every need, including feeding, clothing, transportation to and from work, and housing. If the apprentice falls ill, the master must take care of his health.

It is an all-round training for the boy apprentice, which requires a lot of patience and discipline. The apprentice is not only apprised of his performances in the master’s business

but his behaviour in his household as well. At the end of the apprenticeship, the master rewards the young boy with some funds to start his own business. Some masters even rent and furnish shops for their outstanding apprentices. Because these boys are just starting out on their own, some benevolent masters can assist with providing goods for their former apprentices to help reduce the extra cost of purchase.

Entrepreneurship as Bedrock of Igbo Economy: The Traditional Igbo economy is based on subsistence and commercial activities of Agriculture, Industry and Trade. However, the most prominent among these and which the Igbo are widely known for is trading. This must have been informed mostly by the entrepreneurial apprenticeship scheme culturally practiced by Igbo people. A brief description of the Igbo economic base will suffice here for a background understanding.

Agriculture/Farming: Subsistence farming characterizes agriculture among traditional Igbo people. The chief agricultural products include yams and cassava. Other important subsidiary crops include cocoyam, plantains, maize, melons, okra, pumpkins, peppers, gourds, and beans. Palm products are the main cash crops. The principal exports include palm oil and, to a lesser extent, palm kernels.

Industrial Arts/Manufacturing: The Igbo blacksmiths of Awka are renowned for their ironsmithing or blacksmithing. Men's wood carving and women's pottery and patterned woven cloth are of very high quality and much sought after, and Igbo has renown carpenters, who are found all over Nigeria. The stylized character of Igbo masks consists of figures with beak noses, slit eyes, and thin lips.¹²

Trade: The Ikwo and Ezza in the Abakaliki Division of Ogoja produce a substantial surplus of yams for trade, just like different parts of Igbo land are known for their peculiar agricultural and industrial products.¹³ Women dominate rural retail-market trade. Trading is a major social and economic function of women in traditional Igbo society. Women engage in all sorts of economic activities to make money to purchase the essentials they need. They make mats and pottery and weave cloth. Women do most of the petty trade, which is very active. The manufacture and trade of pottery is almost exclusively the domain of women. Igbo also process palm oil and palm kernels, which they market with the surplus crops from their farm stock, and generally monopolize the sale of cooked foods. They also mine and sell salt.¹⁴

Wage Labour: This is also important in the Igbo economy. High literacy rates among the Igbo have helped them obtain jobs as civil servants and business entrepreneurs since Nigeria gained independence in 1960. However, the apprenticeship system blossomed after the Nigeria-Biafra war, where the harsh 20 Pounds Policy of the Nigerian government forced a lot of Igbo into poverty. The war saw many Igbo lose their property, businesses, jobs, and education. Equipped with only 20 pounds, the Igbo man had to start afresh through petty trading to survive. Through their resilience and business acumen, they grew their businesses enough to take in boys, usually from villages, to teach them the trade in order to ensure continuity in chosen business lines and also the sustainability in the general growth of Igbo economy, powered by the instinct to survive.

The Relationship and Implications of Apprenticeship to Igbo Economy
The theme of discourse here was aptly captured by Tunji Adegbite as he reported thus: "The Igbo apprenticeship system is one of the many untapped blessings the Nigerian Culture

possesses. The widespread success of Imu-Ahia has drawn people from other parts of Nigeria and foreign nationals to study its model in the hopes of recreating a similar system. The advantages of the Igbo apprenticeship system to the Igbo economy are numerous, some of which include: The system helps build business ecosystems using cultural models: as a cultural nation, many long-standing businesses were built through cultural beliefs centered on alignment of values. A form of startup incubator: This model can be compared to the now common modern-day incubator program. It gives practical business knowledge and insight. Some have likened the kind of business skills acquired during this training to those obtained in a more traditional business school. The Imu-Ahia model is an excellent example of mentorship; in other words, “catch them young” mindset. The training is usually done on a more personal level compared to formal education, and so incorporates social grooming, values and ethics development. The boys go through this training at a young age and become young experts on both the hard and soft skills required to run a successful business. It provides the opportunity for Entrepreneurship mindset: The Igbo apprenticeship system builds an entrepreneurship mindset regardless of the mentee continuing in that same business line or setting up a new one entirely. It helps fine-tunes business ideas and skills that build expertise even at the startup stage, thereby eliminating the startup error syndrome. Graduates of this system are usually good sales and marketing experts. Perhaps, this is as a result of the reinforcements usually attached to how well they perform while looking after the trainer’s store. It also creates the opportunity for securing Angel investment to run a business: At the end of the Imu-Ahia training, the trainee receives funds to jump-start his own business, at little or no interest rate. It reduces the rate of unemployability and poverty. The purpose of the Imu-Ahia training is to ensure that clansmen overcame poverty and establish a pathway for generational success. Apprentices receive on-the-job train, which offers the opportunity to acquire applicable skills”.¹⁵

Keen observation has exposed the fact that the system of Igbo entrepreneurial apprenticeship has developed numerous entrepreneurs in Nigeria and beyond and helped improve the economic welfare of the Igbo people. It has enabled people to acquire lifelong skills such as running and nurturing businesses and building value chains and in the process has produced or made more millionaires than from any other sector in Eastern Nigeria. A publication of Tansian University (An African Journal of Arts and Humanities, July 2019) says: “The Igbo apprenticeship system has produced more millionaires and billionaires than the entire Nigerian university economic system has produced”.¹⁶ Neuwirth (2018) further observes that numerous Igbo multi-billionaires were the products of this business incubator platform, which has undoubtedly had great influence on Igbo economic growth. Such men as Innoson, Coscharis, Ibeto, Chikason, Ekenedilichukwu, are all from our great city of Nnewi in Anambra. “None of these men ventured anywhere near the gates of a secondary school, some didn’t even finish primary school, but control multibillion-dollar empires”.¹⁷

It has been recorded that some Igbo youths chose the Igba boi system over formal education, many have stopped schooling after their primary school education, while some others stopped after secondary school stage to travel out to the cities for entrepreneurial apprenticeship. For the fact that many have practically succeeded in their chosen entrepreneurial trade and were able to settled down to start their own businesses successfully, has lend credence to the system.

Engaging in apprenticeship in Igbo land is always a tough one, because it is not easy to stay under someone’s control for a couple of years. It requires that the apprentice must be ready to endured and learn. One of the advantages of the Igbo apprenticeship system is the expectation that as soon as the apprentice serves out his agreed years, he becomes the owner of his own

business. It is a matter of time for him to garner the experience that will lead him in life. Most bustling markets in Nigeria big cities like the Yaba market, Alaba market, Idumota market, and others in Lagos and other western part of Nigeria, as well as those of Sabon Gari markets in the North, the big markets in Port Harcourt, Asaba, Onitsha, Nnewi, Aba, Owerri, Umuahia, to mention but a few in the South and East of Nigeria have become centres for Igbo apprentices.¹⁸

The importance of the apprenticeship system has been further highlighted with the attention being accorded it from ESUT Business School, and some other business schools in the world, including Harvard, who have also in the past done one study or the other on Igbo apprenticeship. People are coming to the realization that the time has come for us to look inwards and re-discover economic and entrepreneurship promotion models such as the Igbo apprenticeship scheme that has continued to make the Igbo economy strong, and Igbo people stronger with little or no government support.

Igbo apprenticeship is a fascinating model of enterprise development that is also accommodating the female folks. It is designed in a way that once an entrepreneur agrees to take an apprentice under his/her tutelage, the apprentice automatically become potential competitor to the master. At the end of the apprenticeship the master/mistress goes ahead to fund the start-up which will make the now new entrepreneur to almost immediately begin to compete with the master/mistress within the same jurisdiction of business. However, what is paramount to a typical Igbo male entrepreneurial mentor is not whether such competition would dislodge his own business as the master, but rather he would pride himself to have mentored as many upcoming Igbo youths as possible. In fact such achievement becomes part of the master's resume, which is flaunted at every given opportunity of publicity, be it in any formal or informal gathering.¹⁹

The scheme has not only helped in improving the economic fortunes of Anambra state as popularly and generally insinuated, but those of several other states and countries where Ndigbo sojourn. Take Lagos State for example, if you go to Idumota, ASPANDA, Ladipo, Trade Fair, Orile and such other large markets, you will see Igbo traders working hard in their various shops, both the Ogas and their Boi-Bois contributing towards the economic complimentarity of the Igbo and Nigeria economy.²⁰ Those boi-bois today are the Ogas of tomorrow. By the time they complete their apprenticeship, they will be 'settled' by their Ogas to start their own businesses. The cycle continues because when they start their own business, they will in-turn take under their wings another set of boi-bois. They will build factories, rent or buy lands and properties, invest in the towns and states where they trade, and also at home as Ndigbo believe in the 'Aku luo uno' philosophy – taking part of their wealth home. That's how Ndigbo collectively contribute to the socio-economic development or industrialization of the towns, states and countries where they reside. The Igbo race is a sojourning race. They are well known for being industrious and they bring economic and other values wherever they reside.

The Igbo apprenticeship scheme has helped in reducing unemployment in the region as it informally provides employment to thousands of youth in the region. The Igbo strongly believe that there is no food for a lazy man. If you don't work, you won't eat. This has forced many young people to learn any skill of their choice, such as trading, mechanic, and bricklaying, among others, to survive. Even university graduates who cannot find white-collar jobs are forced to learn a trade under the apprenticeship system to survive. At the end of the apprenticeship, the graduate can establish his own business instead of waiting endlessly for an employment letter. The Igbo apprenticeship system has also reduced poverty in

Igboland, it has become a major means to escape hardship and the attainment of genuine rich status. Youths whose parents and guardians cannot afford post-primary and university education embrace apprenticeship to learn any trade of their choice to escape poverty. Although the practice is fast dwindling as boys now prefer to go to school, those still interested in buying and selling still adopt this system instead of wasting their years, they engage in “hustling” to raise enough funds for schooling.²¹ The scheme provides funding for business startup. With the Igbo apprenticeship system, a young person doesn’t need to go through the vigorous process of sourcing for funds to start up a business. All he must do is diligently serve his master for some years, and he is settled with startup capital.

It builds mentorship and entrepreneurial mindset. The Igbo apprenticeship system is the perfect example of mentorship where an apprentice has a better chance of making fewer business mistakes when he begins his own business. Under the supervision and mentorship of his master, the apprentice learns all there is to know about running a business. He will adopt the entrepreneurial mindset whereby he doesn’t look up to the government to earn a living. Ndigbo has many billionaires and millionaires due to this mentorship and mindset. Some apprentices are known to manage their masters’ business with little or no supervision. This gives them the ownership mindset, which creates the belief that their masters’ success is their success. So, they work hard not just to impress their masters but to have the bragging right of being the brains behind their masters’ success.²²

The spiritual aspect is the fear of karma, which Ndigbo generally believes in the law of karma. This means apprentices are scared to wreck their masters’ business because they fear the same thing will happen to them in the future. This fear pushes them to do all they can to make their master’s business flourish so that when it is their “turn,” their businesses will flourish too. Also, no master wants the reputation of not settling apprentices because it is a tag that lasts for generations.²³ Apart from the fact that it will incur the wrath of the community back home, the fear of the apprentice’s chi (One’s Guiding Angel) affecting his business for not fulfilling his part of the bargain after years of service is enough to make the master comply with the rules. In this case, Igbo apprenticeship appears to be more spiritual than financial. With such compelling obligations on both parties, the soul of Igbo traditional entrepreneurial apprenticeship scheme is maintained and this has served as a major propelling nexus of the system.

Conclusion

The Igbo entrepreneurial apprenticeship system is a culture among the Igbo people. It is a local strategy that has helped build strong businesses facing harsh realities. Unfortunately, the system is fast dwindling as many youths now prefer the get-money-quick syndrome. Unlike before, youths are no longer patient enough to learn a trade. Everyone wants to be a millionaire overnight without working for it. The cheering news is that the system has attracted global attention as case studies in prestigious institutions like the Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka Anambra State Nigeria and Harvard Business School, Boston Massachusetts, USA. The importance of education should not be sacrificed on the altar of the apprenticeship system. The system has its drawbacks. Some young people are taken to their masters while still in primary or secondary school. When they get to the cities, their education is abandoned. Some ogas need to do more to ensure that the young people who are brought to them have already learned how to read and write. The apprentice should be able to write and defend his product because some business is all about calculating and measuring by metres and inches, like in electrical wire materials, plumber pipes and some building

materials, to mention but a few. If the apprentice is not educated or did not attend school, it will be hard for such apprentice to cope.

Research shows that some complain that bad ogas mistreat their apprentices and can summarily fire them without warning or compensation, as most agreements are merely verbal. Therefore, institutionalizing the largely informal system would be one way to address apprentice security while retaining the benefits of the tradition. It is strongly and widely believed that despite the increase of mistrust and unhealthy competition in the Igbo society, if Igbo businessmen should maintain the Igba boi culture and regularly return to their villages to pick the next generation to train, many more entrepreneurs will emerge in the coming years to the benefit of the general Igbo economic growth and sustenance. Among the pros or benefits of the apprenticeship system for the employees on one hand, and to the Igbo economy on the other are the following: It helps to gain hands-on experience, which makes the apprentice future business management more competent to the glory and boost of the Igbo economy; It ensures benefit from support systems and learning aids for a more integrative and sustainable Igbo economy; The inherent gain trade-recognized qualifications ensures sustenance of acquired skills, which are transferred to younger apprentices; It also provides the opportunity for an apprentice to feel and master the work environment and the nitty gritty of the business by the time he will be ripe to handle his own; The period of apprenticeship also help to improve the employability of Igbo youths and integration into the Igbo economic circle.

On the side of the mentor, apprenticeship programs help employers to recruit and develop a highly-skilled workforce that helps grow their business, improve productivity, profitability, and an employer's bottom line. Some of the cons or problems with the apprenticeship system or disadvantages of being an apprentice include: the limitation on the prospective apprentice to have access to certain careers; The apprentice may not experience university life; The apprentice is saddled with greater responsibilities so early in life; The apprentice is subjected to short holidays or none at all; The competition and temptation as an apprentice is tough; There is no salary or lower salary as the case may be; The tendency of experiencing an age gap is possible; An apprentice is hardly recognized while on service, even if he performs well in his services to his oga, probably to discourage misbehavior.²⁴

The study also observed abuses in the Igbo apprenticeship scheme. There have been reported cases of apprentices overstaying the agreed period, or the 'Oga' refusing to settle the 'boi-boi' as agreed. These acts give the Igbo apprenticeship scheme a bad name. This study recommends that this and other associated issues be addressed and amicable solutions proffered by both contracting parties of the mentor and mentee to encourage the growth and sustenance system. Agreements of apprenticeship should be respected and kept to its letters. Perhaps people may need to distinguish between "help" and "exploitation", why on earth will any apprentice spend eight - ten inglorious years at the hands of his master, while an undergraduate will spend less, six years in pursuit of his medical degree in a university.²⁵ The apprenticeship scheme should not be reduced to a case of subjugating Igbo youths to a child who was terribly battered, maltreated, and basically used by an older man for his own profit and self-gratification. Some scholars have argued that the Igbo apprenticeship system took more than it gave, for instance, it killed male-child education in the southeast, a skirmish which the former governor of Anambra state, southeast Nigeria, Willie Obiano fought painstakingly through mass sensitization, mobilization and went on to initiate the annual celebration of an International Mass Literacy Day.²⁶

Recommendations

The Igbo Entrepreneurial Apprenticeship scheme could be repositioned to help Nigeria as it battles various issues including unemployment, banditry, and ethnic agitations among others. There is a saying that the idle mind is the devil's workshop. Adopting the Igbo apprenticeship scheme by both the federal, states and local councils will help provide economic opportunities for our young men and even women by extension. Perhaps, as part of the repositioning of the scheme, the apprentices could get local higher institutions to validate their apprenticeship as is done in some parts of Europe. The apprentices could be awarded credit hours in areas like Marketing, Business Management, Customer Service, Leadership, Accounting etc for trade apprentices, or similar credit hours for those learning a skill such as mechanical, technical or other skills. This is because the apprentices on a daily basis in their masters' shop, they are learning the practical aspects of these disciplines. We envisage a situation where perhaps, by the time they complete their apprenticeship; the apprentices will receive some certification, a diploma or so. This will greatly improve their self-esteem and encourage them further along their entrepreneurial journey, as against the situation where many of them go through life with the toga of being an illiterate. This is despite the life and practical lessons they have learnt as apprentices for several years. There could be a national agency regulating such apprenticeship schemes. The agency will be responsible for a national database, and an apprenticeship exchange where aspiring 'boi-bois' will register their interest, and prospective Ogas will register their willingness to absorb them. This will help in standardizing the scheme, with guarantors and other safeguards in place. An insurance scheme for 'boi-bois' could be introduced to enable them access start-up grants should their Ogas fail to settle them when they complete their apprenticeship. The Ogas will contribute towards such an insurance scheme and receive refund of the premium they have contributed if they fulfill the terms of the apprenticeship.

The scheme should be supported by the Government at all levels to encourage our youths to have a re-think and adopt this Igbo model of apprenticeship, learn a skill or trade under someone's tutelage for an agreed period, and qualify to be given seed capital by the Oga on completion. This is surely a better model than the present trend of our youths getting involved in all kinds of 'get rich quick' schemes to get rich. As Nigeria continues to face economic instability and a decline in public education quality due to poor infrastructure and funding, many youths are undertrained and find it difficult to secure jobs. The Igbo apprenticeship model, an effective pipeline of training and developing entrepreneurial skills in the face of repeated obstacles offers a guide for an adaptable training system that equips young people with the requisite skill to succeed. The idea of training trainers and churning out millionaires, with the benefactors not minding if the beneficiaries would outclass or dislodge them from their own business as a result of the ensuing competition should be resuscitated. Such healthy competition should be promoted, with a view to repositioning the scheme and making it better and stronger.

If the government and other relevant stakeholders, including the higher institutions, development partners etc, could pick more interest in the scheme with a view to adopting and promoting it further, more successful entrepreneurs will be created and their economic activities will fast-track development not only in the South-Eastern region but also in the country as a whole. Sustainability of the scheme is another important issue surrounding the maintenance of the chain of Igbo apprenticeship scheme because it is widely acknowledged and observed that Igbo businesses don't usually continue after the founders pass on. There were many businesses, which were giants in the 70s, 80s and 90s owned by Igbo men of that era, but most of those businesses are no more. Several reasons have been advanced for that.

However, with more focus mainly on Igbo apprenticeship scheme and encouraged by Government, continuity of mentor's businesses by mentees would be assured.

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