

From Apprenticeship to Enterprise: The Evolution of the Igba Boi System and Its Role in Contemporary Igbo Economic Development

John Nzubechi Iwuajoku, Imo State University
Bright Ikenna Uwandu (Co-author), Imo State University

Keywords: Igba Boi, Igbo Apprenticeship System, Entrepreneurship, Indigenous Economic Institutions, Igbo Economic Development

Abstract

The Igbo Indigenous Entrepreneurship model known as the Igbo Apprenticeship Scheme (Igba Boi) has a rich history. The Nigerian/Biafran civil war which ended in 1970 caused series of economic damages to the Igbo nation. Their properties were largely destroyed, civil servants lost their jobs, and businesses suffered a great damage. The Igbo nation, in order to help rebuild what they lost during the war, began to introduce their own unique style of apprenticeship systems known as "Igba Boi." Over the years, the Igbo Apprenticeship System has gained tremendous traction by producing world renowned entrepreneurs, and has metamorphosed into an acclaimed world business incubation model. The rapid post-war wealth creation in Igboland has been attributed to this age long traditional apprenticeship system. This study investigates the trajectory of Igbo Apprenticeship System and its sustainability in areas of economic, social and environmental development of Ndi Igbo, and it also explores the contemporary challenges that pose threats to this longstanding practice.

Date of Submission: 02-04-2026

Date of Acceptance: 12-04-2026

I. Introduction

Apprenticeship is very important to human growth and existence. By definition, according the Oxford dictionary, it refers to the period of service as a learner of a trade or handcraft. It can also be said to be a system where individuals pay in cash or in kind and submit their selves in order to learn a trade, craft, real life work experience from an expert in the particular field with the hope of mastering the industry and perhaps securing employment after the agreed period of the learning.

It is an integral part of human existence. The success of every human being is as a result of apprenticeship. For instance, when a child is born into a family, he undergoes some training where he is being taught the basics of life. The process of transferring the knowledge can also be said to be a form of apprenticeship. It must not be in a formal setting. Children can also develop some form of skills just by watching their parents or other members from their immediate families.

An apprentice can be a female, male, teenager or adult who embarks on a journey to learn some practical knowledge, skills or crafts, and this learning can be theoretical which are offered in some designated vocational schools, line of business or the occupation the person has chosen to work with for a particular period of time. Many have evaluated this approach to be an avenue where young people can easily transition to mundane world with the experiences they have already acquired. (Olulu, &Udeorah, 2018).

According to Orugun and Nafu (2014:) apprenticeship offers a unique opportunity to obtain required business skills to stand out among competitors. They also describe as a primary aspect of entrepreneurship in Igboland, categorizing the entrepreneurship practice into three; the traditional method, modern method and informal method. The traditional method involves the passing of an age-long family skill to the next generation which continues to evolve, while the modern method involves enrolling youths into vocational schools where they are sometimes channeled into learning and mastering of a particular skill. These schools structured with modern teaching techniques and modalities, run from 8am to 5pm, and sometimes have a particular period of time they call for admission with quotas per year or depending on their admission pattern. The informal method can sometimes be said to be traditional because it involves the admission of non-family members into the skill acquisition.

A very good example of traditional acquisition of skills in Igbo land is the Traditional bone-setting skill which is predominant in Ofekata Orodo in Mbaitoli, Imo State, Nigeria. The bone-setting practice is as old

as the people; it is passed from one generation to the other as long as the male-child is from the community (Bright, 2020: 36-37).

Many successful business merchants in Igbo land have attributed their success in entrepreneurship to this traditional apprenticeship system and have called for its institutionalization. Obiora Okonkwo, the Chairman of United Nigerian Airlines while speaking to Anambra Broadcasting Services (March, 11, 2022) attributed his success to the Igbo apprenticeship scheme which he was a product of during his formative years at the popular Onitsha main market. He also recommended that the scheme be institutionalized in Igboland.

This work of institutionalization will be championed towards x-raying the various economic inputs of the scheme and the contemporary challenges that it is facing.

II. Literature Review

Apprenticeship has long been recognized as a vital pathway for acquiring skills and building wealth in Igboland. According to Olulu and Udeorah (2018), apprenticeships equip individuals with both practical knowledge and business skills that are essential for economic sustainability. Orugun and Nafiu (2014) further emphasize that traditional apprenticeship methods not only preserve cultural knowledge but also prepare youths to actively participate in the economy. Bright (2020) provides concrete examples of skill transmission in traditional contexts, such as the bone-setting practice in Umuduruobi, Ofekata Orod. Personal experiences also attest to the system's effectiveness; Chibuike (2023) notes that being settled by his master formed the foundation for his economic success. Similarly, Neuwirth (2018) observes that apprenticeship in Igboland operates as one of the world's largest business incubators, particularly in markets like Alaba International Market.

At the same time, globalization has influenced the scheme, bringing both new opportunities and challenges (Karabell, 2022). While modern youths are exposed to a broader range of economic ideas, there is a noticeable decline in interest in traditional apprenticeship as a path to wealth creation (Onyemaechi, 2023; Okeke, 2021). Misconceptions about the system, especially among educated youths, further threaten its sustainability (Adekola, 2013).

Post-Civil War Apprenticeship System In IGBO Land

The apprenticeship system has been in existence in Igbo land even before the coming of the Europeans. However, it took to another dimension immediately after the Nigeria-Biafra civil war (Ikenna, 2023). The war which ended in 1970 left several severe economic damages on the Igbo nation and in their quest to rapidly rebuild all that was lost, the Igbos introduced this unique kind of apprenticeship (Igba Boi).

Osibanjo (2022) opines that there are three types of apprenticeship system in Igbo land viz: Igba Boi, Imu Ahia, Imu Oru. Whereas Igba Boi is a situation where an apprentice from a less privileged home voluntarily submits his freedom under a master. He is not only there to learn a trade or mastery of a skill, he also stays with his master at home and performs other domestic duties for them. A boi, Nwa-boi or Nwa-be normally comes from the hinterland and stays with the master for tutelage in business or skills for an agreed number of years before he can be free from his master and in return, the master establishes him. This also serves as his formal education. Furthermore, the apprentice is normally a young boy or girl. There are some certain age bracket that are considered not fit for the system as their loyalty to their master will be questioned that is; if they are above 30 years old.

Imu Ahia is a situation where an apprentice learns how to do a business from his master for a specific period of time. In this case, the apprentice might be someone who already has a formal education and wishes to go into a particular line of business. There is no specified age bracket in this situation as the apprentice can even be older than the master. He is not mandated to live with the master, as he can sort for accommodation where he wishes. In some rare cases, he stays with the master and enjoys some level of freedom unlike the former. After the completion of the agreed number of months or years, the master introduces him to his business partners where he can sort for goods. It is worthy of note that, in this situation, the master is not under obligation to offer any form of financial help to the apprentice. While Imu Oru is similar to Imu Ahia, the unique difference is that the apprentice learns a particular kind of craft from his master who is an artisan, for an agreed number of months or years. The apprentice is issued a certificate from his master after the completion of the learning. In addition, Imu Oru is very unique among other kinds of apprenticeship system as the apprentice always needs the recommendation of his master to stand out in the society. For example, the certificate issued to the apprentice by the master has the brand name of the master and signature on it. If the master is not convinced about the competency of his apprentice, he will not issue such certificate with his name on it. Again, in some situations, his master directs some of his clients as a means to encourage his startup.

These were the cases immediately after the civil war. However, as one becomes prosperous from his business or entrepreneurship, they try to engage their younger family members or youths from their village. Okoli and Udogu (2023) opine that the system has gradually transformed into a situation where highly

established entrepreneurs engage the services of young boys in order to train them in their line of business and the boys will in return, be useful to them in their shops. The process of entrusting the boy to the master is usually like a ceremony where the close relatives of the boy, the master whom is sometimes referred to as “Oga”, some respected villagers will gather to bear witness. The master will state his expectations from the boy and assure his family and the villagers his security and welfare. The villagers will as well charge the boy to be of good conduct and remain loyal throughout the period of apprenticeship. It is also on this day that they will agree on the period of years that he will spend with the master.

Also, when the apprentice completes the expected number of years without being found wanting in any way by his master, a similar gathering is conveyed on the day his master will come to settle him. Here, the boy’s family will call their close relatives, friends and well-wishers to come and celebrate with them. Food and drinks are normally served to mark the celebration.

III. Impact Of IGBA BOI Scheme On The Modern Igbo Economy

It is an arguable fact that the economic stability in Igbo land today is as a result of the Igbo brand of apprenticeship. Kalu (2017) opines that, the scheme is the most important factor in any discussion about commerce in Igbo land. Many of the wealthiest Igbo entrepreneurs, such as Innoson, Ekenedirichukwu, Ibeto, Obinna Iyiegbu known as Obi Cubana, and others are products of the scheme. Most of these millionaires did not see the gates of the university. Osibanjo (2022) highlights the scheme as the most effective way of building wealth among the people. He further states that “the Igbo apprenticeship scheme has become the most popular indigenous Nigerian economic institution, globally recognized as world’s largest business incubator: “The scheme has the full potential to do for the Nigerian economy what similar apprenticeship schemes have done in many parts of the world, especially in Germany and India”.

The Igbos have continued to create wealth in all parts of the country through the scheme. It has lifted many families out of poverty. It has lifted many young boys out from the streets and created employment opportunities for the teeming youths as unemployment is on the rise. Chibuike (2023) however, notes that he is equally a product of the scheme as he got settled by his master after rendering his services to him. He also recounts how his parents could not train him in school due to lack of funds, and owes the scheme and his master the gratitude for being the bedrock of his wealth. Neuwirth (2018) opines that, the Igbo culture does not permit children to be in the streets aimlessly, if a child is from a poor background and cannot go to school, the family suggests that he go and learn a trade. He also made some important observations when he visited Alaba International market in Lagos which is the largest electronics market sub-Saharan Africa dominated by the Igbos. The market has over 10,000 merchants with over \$4 billion annual turnover. When he inquired further how they were able to grow the market, then he realized that there are some principles shredded in secrecy which contributes to the growth of the market. The truth and reality remains that the market is being controlled by a collaborative economy. When he further interrogates the merchants how they began and they also respond, “My master settled me”. Upon further enquiry, he understood that a master settles his apprentice who has served him for any agreed number of years. He is required to pay his rent for up to a year or two and gives him a cash to start trading. Neuwirth (TED, 2018) also describes the kind of apprenticeship scheme that existed in Alaba International Market as “the largest business incubator in the world”.

IV. Impact Of Globalization And The Contemporary Challenges Of IGBA BOI Scheme

According to Karabell (2022) by definition, Globalization is the growing interdependence of the world’s economies, cultures, and populations, brought about by cross-border trade in goods and services, technology, and flows of investment, people, and information. This is a major factor that has posed a serious challenge to the Apprenticeship scheme. Onyemaechi, a motor mechanic (2023) opines that, recently, it is now difficult for him to get apprentices who are interested to learn the motor mechanic craft. He further states that there is a decline in the willingness of the youths to learn a trade, skill or serve a master for the purpose of being established afterwards and earning an honest living from there. This is because many youths are instead focused on how to make quick money. They engage in all sorts of quick moneymaking ventures which they believe will save them the stress of learning a skill or serving a master.

Some of the quick money making ventures they engage in are; Sports betting, prostitution, Yahoo-Yahoo (advanced cyber-crime), and other heinous crimes like, kidnapping, banditry and armed robbery. For a developing country like Nigeria, where the use of advanced technologies and internet are not controlled, a great number of youths are being ill influenced and consequently discouraged from the apprenticeship scheme. There has been an increased neglect for cultural values, decline in academic excellence and non-learning of trades.

While globalization has contributed negatively to the challenges of the apprenticeship scheme, there are other human factors which are worthy of note that have as well posed a serious threat to the scheme. According to Okeke (2021), the issue of not settling an apprentice at the end of his/her indentureship by their master has become a growing menace as there is lack of legal protection for the young apprentice as a result of

the verbal agreement between the two parties; it becomes near impossible for the apprentice to take a legal action against his master. Sometimes the masters that are notorious of not settling their apprentice at the end of the agreed years bullies and dismisses an apprentice for cheap excuses. Like; misappropriation of funds, sexual misconduct or disobedience. This can lead to frustration to the apprentice from a poor background that may not have any alternative for financial empowerment.

Another challenge of the scheme is the general misconception that it is meant for people who cannot excel in formal education or for those that are from the wretched background whose parents cannot afford to sponsor their education. This particular notion makes it sometimes difficult to attract young graduates and youths into the scheme. They are being perceived as unsuccessful, disrespected by the society unlike their counterparts in formal education. (Adekola 2013)

V. Conclusion

This scholarly writing highlights the contribution of the apprenticeship scheme to modern economy in Igboland and its contemporary challenges. Even though the scheme has been in existence before the advent of the Europeans as a form of Imu Oru or ImuAhia. The unique attribute of Igba Boi was introduced immediately after the Nigeria-Biafra war to help rebuild the economies which were already shattered in the aftermath of the war. It really served its purpose of introduction. This is evidenced by the massive and rapid wealth creation since 1970 in Igboland.

VI. Recommendation

Although, there are several challenges that are posed to the scheme, its benefits are numerous and cannot be overlooked. The researcher therefore recommends;

- Establishment and institutionalization of a legal framework for the scheme would be beneficial to the both parties involved. This will ensure the existence of a valid contract between the apprentice and his master. Detailing the overall duties of both parties ensuring that each party understands their obligations under the agreed document. In addition, this might as well resolve conflicts and disputes when they arise, providing a concise structure of the whole process. Government should establish more of vocational and subsidized schools. When there are availability of such training centers in the society, and it is accessible for the masses, it will help to take off some youths from the streets. One of the benefits of such centers is that the graduates are being issued certificates upon completion of their skills or artisanry and they do not necessarily need start capital before they begin earning from such skills. The certificates from such centres are however recognised worldwide as the graduate might decide to practice with it in any part of the world.
- Considering the near death economic situation of the country, children should be encouraged to take up their family business or go into the line of skill their family is known for. When they take responsibility of steering such business and perhaps, study courses in the high institutions that will give them an informed knowledge of how to run such enterprises, it would propagate those businesses, boost and help them strive. With the developed ideas, it could become more productive and created more employment opportunities in the country

References

- [1]. Adekola, G. (2013). Traditional Apprenticeship In The Old Africa And Its Relevance To Contemporary Work Practice In Modern Nigerian Communities. *British Journal Of Education, Society & Behavioral Science*, 3:397-406.
- [2]. Anambra Broadcasting Services. (2022). National Summit On Igbo Apprenticeship Scheme, 11th March, 2022.
- [3]. Bright, I. U. (2020). Changes And Continuities In Traditional Bone Setting In Umuduruobi, Ofekataorodo Autonomous Community. Undergraduate Research Thesis, History Department, Imo State University (Unpublished), 36-37.
- [4]. Chibuike, C. I. (2023). Personal Interview At His Shop Located At Douglas Road, Owerri, Imo State Nigeria, Tuesday, 5th December, 2023.
- [5]. Ikenna, U. (2023). Personal Interview At His Hometown At Mbaitoli Local Government Area, Imo State, Nigeria, Thursday, December, 2023.
- [6]. Kalu, I. A. (2017). Paper Presentation Titled Igwebuikwe Economics Towards An Inclusive Economy For Economic Development At National Conference On Peace And National Development, Veritas.
- [7]. Karabell, Z. (2022). "What Is Globalization? And How Has The Global Economy Shaped The United States?" Council On Foreign Relations. Available At <https://www.piiie.com/microsites/globalization/what-is-globalization> (Accessed 4th December, 2023)
- [8]. Okeke, T. C. (2021). Decline Of The Potency Of Igbo Apprenticeship Scheme In Anambra State, Nigeria. *International Journal Of Research And Innovation In Social Science*, Volume V, ISSN 2454-6186.
- [9]. Okoli, I. A., & Udogu, P. C. (2023). Appreciation Of The Igbo Apprenticeship System As Microcosm Of Soft Skills. *Nnadiiebube Journal Of Education In Africa*, 8(2).
- [10]. Olulu, R. M., & Udeorah, S. A. F. (2018). Contract Of Apprenticeship And Employment Generation In Nigeria. *International Journal Of Scientific Research In Education*, 3, 335-344.
- [11]. Onyemaechi, U. (2023). Personal Interview At His Workshop Located At Orji Mechanic Village, Owerri, Imo State, Nigeria, Tuesday, 2nd December, 2023.
- [12]. Osibanjo, Y. (2022). Virtual Keynote Speaker At Akwa, Anambra State, In The National Summit On Igbo Apprenticeship Scheme. Available At <https://www.nairaland.com/7025745/Igbo-Apprenticeship-Model-Most-Popular> (Accessed 15th December, 2023).
- [13]. Orugun, J. J., & Nafiu, A. T. (2014). An Exploratory Study Of Igbo Entrepreneurial Activity And Business Success In Nigeria As The Panacea For Economic Growth And Development. *International Journal Of Scientific & Technology Research*, 3(9), 158-165.

- [14]. Oxford English Dictionary (2022), Third Edition, Oxford University Press.
- [15]. Newirth, R. (2018). Igbo Apprenticeship System Is World's Largest Business Incubator. Available At <https://www.informationng.com/2018/11/igbo-apprenticeship-system-is-worlds-largest-business-incubator-platform-robert-newirth-reveals.html> (Accessed 9th December, 2023)
- [16]. TED (2018). November 2018, By Robert Newirth, Youtube Video.
- [17]. Robert Newirth 2018, Igbo Apprenticeship System Is World's Largest Business Incubator. Available At <https://www.informationng.com/2018/11/igbo-apprenticeship-system-is-worlds-largest-business-incubator-platform-robert-newirth-reveals.html> (Accessed 9th December, 2023)
- [18]. TED, November 2018 By Robert Newirth (Youtube Video)