

THE IGBO APPRENTICESHIP SYSTEM: NIGERIA'S GATEWAY TO WORLD BUSINESS DOMINANCE

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Abstract: *The Igbo ethnic group in Nigeria is known for success in business and entrepreneurship. This study examined the Igbo man perspectives of apprenticeship and entrepreneurial development in southeast Nigeria. Through an apprenticeship scheme known as Igba-boi or Nwaobi which is by far the most entrenched and vibrant entrepreneurship promotion vehicle in Nigeria, people from this ethnic group have dominated and continued to excel above their contemporaries from other ethnic groups in the country and beyond. This paper analytically investigates peculiar sources, circumstances and skills that are the fulcrum of increasing socio-economic performance of the Igbo people. The study finds that entrepreneurial performance of the Igbos is underscored by their economic culture and value, which are highly existential in their traditions and belief system. These are however fostered by the long years of marginalization by successive Nigerian governments, as well as other prominent factors in pre and post independence Nigeria. The paper concludes that the Nwaobi Apprenticeship System has the potential to significantly increase the level of entrepreneurial metabolism and to stimulate the rate and pace of new venture creation and thus a viable platform for entrepreneurship promotion in Nigeria. The research also concludes that with this progressive rate, Igbo people will in time be a force to reckon with in the socio-political and techno-economic sector of Nigeria, Africa and the World at large. The study recommends that the government of Nigeria and African by extension should adopt the practice of the Igbo man apprenticeship system and entrepreneurial development in southeast Nigeria as a strategy for the development African entrepreneurship.*

Key Words: *Igbo Apprenticeship, Entrepreneurial development, Business Growth, Nigeria and Culture.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

Entrepreneurial development has helped in shaping the economy of most of the advanced and developed nations for over a century now. The phenomenal concept has been a topical issue in both developed and developing economies because of the significant and critical roles entrepreneurship has played in building most of the advanced and emerging economies. It has been asserted that entrepreneurship play critical role by contributing to economic growth, job creation, and national income and hence to national prosperity and competitiveness. Igbo people view entrepreneurship as self employment of any sort, which bothers on continuously identifying, evaluating and taking advantage of business opportunities and initiating sustainable action to ensure success. Indeed, every entrepreneurial endeavour, for the Igbo, is also a veritable answer to the questions elicited from their experiences in their special world. It is as well understood as a search for profit based on innovation, creativity and efficient utilization of resources in a consistent Igbo cultural pattern, which is filled with vision and enthusiasm and is result driven. Therefore, entrepreneurship for the Igbo people incorporates every profit and goal oriented strategies which they describe as Ibido ahia or Oru (starting an enterprise), Izu ahia (business transactions), Imu ahia (learning a trade), Imu oru (learning a craft or vocation), and Igba oso ahia (indulging in trick of marketing another's goods with his consent at a price that raises capital). Igbo people live at the south-eastern part of Nigeria, having a population of approximately 40 million, which amounts to 23 .5% of the total Nigerian population estimated at 170 million. Igbo is the third major tribe out of the more than 250 ethnic groups in Nigeria. The after-effects of the Biafra war severely damaged most of the infrastructure in the eastern part of the country and rendered this ethnic group the poorest among the three major ethnic groups; hence, life in this part of Nigeria was marked by poor infrastructure, lack of jobs coupled with the loss of life-time savings of the Igbo and discrimination by other ethnic groups. The Igbo, therefore, were seen as the "disobedient children" due to the Biafra war. The Igbo entrepreneurs were left with no better choice than to migrate to other places within and outside Nigeria; hence, there is hardly any part in the countries of the world where the Igbo cannot be found engaged in commercial activities. In Igboland, apprenticeship system was an institution that was generally guarded by customs, lineage and rituals. Every

male born into a family was expected to learn his matrilineal craft, and it was easy to identify a young male child as a member of lineage found to be proficient in the lineage craft. The apprenticeship system was brought to the limelight in Nigeria after the Nigerian-Biafran war. Many parents who were left with nothing after the war were forced to send their children (8- 20 years) to survive as traders. This was how Igbo settlers after the war rebuilt Onitsha, Nnewi, Aba and most parts of Lagos. In the apprenticeship system, the 'Oga' (master) and 'Nwaboyi' (Apprentice) are in agreement for a period ranging from 4-7 years whereby the apprentice is to serve and learn from the 'Oga'. Usually, the mode of settlement is contained in the agreement.

Igbo entrepreneurial and business activities remains the backbone of the Nigerian economy, Studies on business and entrepreneurial activities have put Igbos above other ethnic groups in the country In Lagos, which is the Nigerian economic capital, Igbo businesses accounts for the 74% of all investments according to Maliga (2013). This Igbo businesses and entrepreneurial activities have continued to facilitate improved standard of living for Nigerians both in Lagos and other parts of Nigeria. Considering the general economic status of the Igbos after the Nigeria/Biafran war, five decades ago, and this economic achievement by the Igbo ethnic group is very significant. Instead of just licking their wounds from the war, the Igbos has used a unique entrepreneurship apprenticeship approach to spur economic growth and sustainable livelihood. Their competitiveness and enterprising skills made them migrate in droves away from their cultural enclave in southeastern Nigeria, to other parts of Nigeria and beyond, where they have created and established different lines of enterprises.

2. Historical background of Nwaobi/ Igba-boi Apprenticeship System:

The Civil War dislocated the Igbos from other parts of Nigeria to their Eastern Nigeria ancestral homeland which incidentally was the epicenter of the war. At the end of the war in 1970, most of them had lost their investments and businesses; not only were they not able to continue their pre-war position at the forefront of education, public administration, the military, industry or commerce; they found themselves outside the mainstream of all the economic sectors of the Nigerian economy and society. Also, due to lack of capital and near exclusion from the financial sector, they could not benefit from the indigenization policies of the 1970s that transferred ownership of many foreign owned businesses to Nigerians. Based on this, Anyanwu (1999) observes that Igbo people no longer look up to benevolent government for salvation but are working towards self reliance, and even contributes up to 80% of Nigeria's economy while receiving the lowest decreasing allocation from the federal government. Being excluded from most of the sectors of the economy and financially handicapped, petty trading became one of the few options open to them to make a living and it became a survival strategy for the Igbo people. They initiated an unwritten rule of 'zero tolerance' for youth and adult idleness and interestingly many of them flourished over time. Those who were able to restart their lives as traders and craftsmen took in more apprentices at a higher level than before the Nigerian Civil War. The system was mutually beneficial to the business person and to the apprentice. To business people, the motivation was a rational economic decision to use cheap labour for the augmentation of limited resources, while to the young people whose parents did not have the resources to send them to school, apprenticeship offered them sustenance, the opportunity to acquire new usable skills and the hope of becoming self- employed while reducing the financial burden on their families. The system is now an integral and important part of the Igbo culture and they (the Igbos) customized and adapted it to tackle economic challenges as they arise. The Igbo Apprenticeship System is an unpaid business apprenticeship/incubator model that allows people learn business from a master for a certain number of years depending and at the end of their apprenticeship tenure, get cash infusion and support to start their own business. There is no salary paid during the time of the apprenticeship tenure but meals, clothing and fare are provided for by the master. When the years of learning are over, the boy is as good as his master. According to Robert (2015), the Igbo apprenticeship system is the largest in the world because when an apprentice serves, his master is expected to set him up in business incubator platform. This unique form of apprenticeship allows a male or female (depending on the type of business), family or community member to spend time and work with another family or community member or in some cases, not necessarily a family or community member, usually a successful business man (entrepreneur). During this period of time, the apprentice receives mentorship and training from the businessman or craftsman. Alake (2018) contends that as part of the Igbo business culture, the established businessmen (the nurturer) in a town, street or locale has a responsibility to take-in teenagers and young adults (the apprentice) from their homes and give them informal business training and mentorship. Though these apprentices are often not paid, they are provided accommodation, transportation costs (where necessary), feeding and clothing (i.e. physiological needs). It takes roughly 3-7 years, depending on the age and academic qualifications of the apprentices, learning capacity and of course the nature of the business, trade or craft. At the end of this traditional business school and service which at times stretches up to seven years, the Mentor performs the "settlement". This comprises of aiding the apprentice financially and otherwise in starting his/her own business or vocation based on the earlier agreement with the apprentice's family. Once this is done, the apprentice is now on his own, free from the Mentor.

Most of the apprentices often join their Mentors at an early stage while some Mentors prefer high institution Graduates because of the nature of their enterprise.

3. The Importance of the Apprenticeship Practice:

Both the master and the servant have their own share of benefits from “Igba-odibo” (Traditional Business School). “Igba-odibo” (Traditional Business School) helps an entrepreneur to start his own business not as a learner. He is already familiar with the customers of the business, has their phone numbers and addresses. This is very helpful in building a good customer relationship. It helps the entrepreneur to know where to buy goods at a cheaper rate and how to sell them. Most wealthy families send their children to “Igba-odibo” (Traditional Business School) practice before providing capital for their own business. This helps them to master all the strategies and techniques of the particular business. They also use this method to change or diversify their businesses if their former businesses are not as profitable as they expected. The servant is always supposed to be grateful to his/her master and/or mistress for showing him/her the way. From all indices, Igbo people of Nigeria have attained an entrepreneurial height. At the moment, they could be considered as the pillar of Nigerian economy. With regard to this fact, Igbo entrepreneurs play vital roles in the growth of Nigerian economy. Igbo entrepreneurial activities have been observed to be the backbone for the economy of Nigeria, and have facilitated improved standard of living of the people at both rural and urban settings. Igbo entrepreneurs make use of entrepreneurial skills in expanding and creating new markets through opportunity utilization. The eastern metropolitan cities are all surrounded by markets, even the interior villages, as business and money are inseparable terms among the Igbo. At the moment, the number of Igbos in credit associations and entrepreneurship has continued to swell with wider margin. This is why 2011 Sahara report describes the Igbos as Nigeria’s major and most enterprising ethnic group and a significant player in Nigerian economy. For the Igbos when compared to the other major ethnic groups in Nigeria, are in the forefront of entrepreneurial activities. Based on this reality, it is revealed that if Igbo tribe is to be removed from Nigeria, the country will suffer severe politico-economic collapse, and any Nigerian government that ignores the Igbos does so at the risk of its economy. But in the midst of Igbo economic performances, one would wonder why Nigeria is still economically stunted and poor. This is because Nigeria is still encompassed by corrupt oligarchy who could not give the Igbos adequate participation in the developmental process. This is part of the source of economic recession and political retardation Nigeria is currently undergoing in President Muhammadu Buhari’s democratic regime.

4. Types of Igbo Apprenticeship :

Basically, research has it that there are two ways of practicing apprenticeship in Igbo lands; these types are the Igba-Boy (serving) and the Imu-Ahia (learning) apprenticeship system. Today, Imu Ahia/Igba Boy has grown to become a cultural heritage in the Eastern region of Nigeria as it has been passed from generation to generation. The Imu-Ahia Igbo Apprenticeship system all started because the Igbo people needed to take back their future which was taken from them. Because they had barely to survive on and limited resources to use, they had to figure out a way of generating revenue at any time. Petty trade was one of the only ways to build back destroyed communities as well as farming, but then, farming required time that was not readily available at that moment.

“Igba-odibo” (Traditional Business School), deals mainly with buying, selling, promoting, and distributing goods as business strategy. Here, the apprentice is exposed to the concepts of marketing. “Imu-ahia” (business coaching): this is used for a learner who is not under the direct supervision of a master/coach in marketing business, but who is just there to learn the business. It is mainly for those who have some capital to invest in a business but lack the knowledge thereof. Many traders use this also to diversify their businesses.

- “Imu-oru” (craft/vocational apprenticeship): this involves working with different tools and equipment. It means learning the expert knowledge of a particular vocation. It is also a means of diversification.
- “Igba-oso-ahia” (a form of business trick): this is used by traders to raise capital for business. It involves selling another person’s goods at a higher price. This research work deals with Igba-odibo (Traditional Business School) as a business induction strategy towards the success of indigenous Igbo entrepreneurs in micro business.
- “Igba-odibo” (Traditional Business School): once a ward is under the care of his master/mistress, he becomes a servant “Odibo” (servant). The “Igba-odibo” (Traditional Business School) in this context refers to someone who is being trained in the act of buying and selling or marketing concepts. It is a process whereby a family gives out their children to live and serve the wealthy ones in the society. The terms and conditions of “Igba-odibo” are mostly oral, yet they are embedded in the Igbo customs, norms, and traditions, and there is no charge for “Igba-odibo” unlike in the case of some apprenticeship trainings. The final apprenticeship contract between the master and the apprentice’s family is normally preceded by a trial or test period of about three months, a period during which the apprentice’s suitability for the job or other role is being tested. Once an apprentice is

under the care of his/her master/mistress, he becomes a servant. The master and/or mistress cares and caters for the servant's/ maid's well-being for an agreed period of time, while, in turn, the servant/maid assists his/her master and/or mistress in business and other domestic works while living with them. The apprentice is expected to be faithful to his/her master/mistress. During this period, the master/mistress as the mentor exposes the strategies of the business to him/her. If the apprentice is intelligent enough to master the business, the master/mistress may start another business outlet for the servant to manage. This helps them to master all the strategies and techniques of the particular business. The apprentice is expected to serve his master without reservation. The Igbo believe that "onye fee eze, eze e-ruo ya aka" (You will be measured in the same way you measure others). The implication of this is that when a servant/maid serves his master and/or mistress faithfully, he/she will be served faithfully by another servant/maid.

5. CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS OF THE NWABOI APPRENTICESHIP SYSTEM :

The challenges facing the apprenticeship system(s) in Nigeria are numerous but some of those that relate directly to the Nwaboi Apprenticeship System include the following:

- Non-Settlement of Apprentices: Dishonesty on the part of the Master or the apprentice has tended to dent the good intentions of the Nwaboi apprenticeship system. It has been observed that towards the expiration of the agreed apprenticeship period in some cases that Masters accuse the apprentices of frivolous crimes and send them away just to avoid their contractual obligations and thus deprive them of the settlement entitlements. Similarly, due the fears of this scenario and sometimes due to inherent dishonesty, apprentices also run away with their Master's money or properties. It has been contended that this type of mistrust is an obstacle to the future and survival of the system.
- The Igbo apprenticeship system often leads to abuses on both sides. Thus, some callous Mentors at times inflict domestic violence on their Inductees while some will fail to settle theirs at the end of the service. This puts the Inductee into hard and regrettable conditions especially now that communalism through which the Inductee could have depended on his relatives, is gradually fading in Igbo culture giving way to western individualistic existence. Worst still, there has been news of Inductees liquidating their Mentors and hurling away their wealth. One of the outstanding enduring weaknesses of the Igbo entrepreneurship is the absence of most Igbo entrepreneurs to harness positively their entrepreneurial tendencies and proceeds to the development of the Igbo nation. For most of the proceeds of Igbo entrepreneurs are not invested in Igbo land but in other parts of Nigeria, like Lagos, Abuja, Kano, Kaduna, Jos, and beyond.
- Inadequate Legal Framework to Guide the System: This is possibly the most critical challenge of the Nwaboi apprenticeship system. Although the Contract of Apprenticeship in Nigeria is regulated by the Labour Act 2004, it has been contended that the system is a far cry from what is obtainable in other countries in terms of mode of operation, regulation, rewards, structure and implementation. In fact, the general view is that the Nigerian Labour Act that incorporates the rules and regulations of the apprenticeship scheme is quite inadequate and does not encourage the development of skills and craftsmanship among the youths and young graduates. Further, no programme have been put in place to promote the awareness of Law Act to the populace, Masters and the apprentices neither are there mechanisms to sanctions those whose actions contravene the letters of the Act. The provisions of the Labour Act to regulate apprenticeship in Nigeria are at best merely good intentions and consequently, the laid down rules are never adhered to or implemented. Therefore, order and formalization which the Labour Act was trying to create was a mere pretense and Nigeria still operates an unorganized, unregulated and broadly informal apprenticeship system without a defined vocational profile or framework.

6. NIGERIA'S WAY FORWARD TOWARDS A ROBUST ECONOMY USING IGBO'S APPRENTICESHIP SYSTEM:

The Igbo apprentice system creates a network of traders who are independent and have practical financial management knowledge, zero-capital entrepreneurship skills, principles of local and international trading and people management. This knowledge, which can hardly be gotten in a university, saves them from the costly trial-and-errors business methods and risky experiments that can decimate capitals and ruin investments.

Considering the foregoing, I strongly believe that Nigeria can make headway in tackling unemployment and lowering the rate of startup failure in Nigeria by aligning the Igbo apprenticeship system with modern forms of apprenticeship that exists in many businesses in Nigeria as internship. Too many youths are idle and unable to sustain businesses, even when given the capital to do so. They will certainly fare better if exposed to the effective apprenticeship system which does not require raising huge capital. It is a fact that most Igbo business is started on lean budgets. The Nigerian government can work out a semi-formal arrangement based on the Igbo apprenticeship system that is the

mainstay of South-East Nigeria. It does not need much to empower the system because its product is ready to create value in the market. They are trained to be inventors in many business areas. Interestingly, most of them are not uneducated. While they may not all be university graduates, many have various levels of formal education with certifications and only decided to learn a trade after being unemployed for a long time. To them, acquiring business skills by serving someone positions them to better their economic fortunes as independent business owners. The evidence proves them right.

Do you not wonder why there is no Nigerian market that thrives without Igbo traders and their apprentice trying to break new grounds while enriching themselves? It is simply the Igbo apprentice system at work. If it is empowered, the Nigerian economy will benefit massively and become if not the biggest economy in the world.

7. CONCLUSION:

This study has succeeded in bringing to the limelight the different roles apprenticeship and social capital play in business development as well as the stages when they are needed. The entrepreneurial performance of Igbo people from ancient to contemporary times is dynamic and continuous. But Igbo entrepreneurs have been successful because of their practice of right business strategy and effectiveness. These practices are however propelled by their worldview, economic value and other essential historical factors. Igbo entrepreneurs have not only dominated Nigerian economy but that of Ghana, Niger, Togo, Gambia, Mali, Cameroun, China, South Africa, to mention but a few. It is interesting to know that the process of entrepreneurial development involves the entrepreneurs, families and the entire society who promote entrepreneurship culture.

8. RECOMMENDATION:

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made: The government of Nigeria and African by extension should adopt the practice of the Igbo man apprenticeship system and entrepreneurial development in southeast as a strategy for the development African entrepreneurship. This is because of its sustainability in SMEs development and poverty reduction among the Igbo ethnic group in Nigeria. The government should also setup a regulatory agency at the state and local government levels that will be charged with the responsibility of regulating the master and apprentice relationship and mentoring. This is to ensure that the apprentices are properly mentored on the basic principles that propel Igbo man apprenticeship system. SMEs owners should develop internal control system and carryout regular audit of their business to eliminate or reduce theft by apprentice.

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