THE DELICATE DANCE: DILEMMAS OF THE IGBO APPRENTICESHIP MODEL IN NIGERIA

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KEYWORDS
Igbo Apprenticeship Model, Nigeria, Dilemmas, Modernization, Social Mobility, Gender Inclusion, Sustainability, Adaptation

ABSTRACT
The Igbo apprenticeship model, deeply embedded in Igbo culture and a driver of economic success, faces contemporary challenges in Nigeria. This paper explores the key dilemmas of the model, including the tension between modernization and traditional values, limited social and economic mobility, gender and inclusion issues, and concerns about sustainability and relevance. To achieve this, anthropological and historical methodologies were used to generate data, while the qualitative method was used for the analysis. We argue that navigating these dilemmas requires a delicate balance between preserving the model's strengths and adapting to modern realities. Potential solutions include skill development programs, microfinance initiatives, formalization and regulation, promoting inclusivity, and government collaboration. By addressing these challenges and embracing ongoing adaptation, the Igbo apprenticeship model can continue to be a powerful tool for entrepreneurship, community development, and cultural preservation in Nigeria.

Introduction

Apprenticeships provide hands-on job training, often by pairing apprentices with an experienced mentor. They have always been an important way to encourage people to learn a wide range of skills to support their interests and career prospects, as well as delivering significant benefit to the organizations or individuals that invest in them. They bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical experience, offering a valuable path for both individuals and businesses.[29] The phenomenal concept has been a topical issue in both developed and developing economies because of the significant and critical roles apprenticeships have played in building most of the advanced and emerging economies. Our focus, the Igbo apprenticeship model, has been asserted to have played a critical role by contributing to economic growth, job creation,

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and national income, and hence to national prosperity and competitiveness.[30]

For centuries, the Igbo apprenticeship model has served as a cornerstone of Igbo culture in Nigeria. This unique system, rooted in tradition and community, has nurtured generations of skilled entrepreneurs and contributed significantly to the economic dynamism of the region.[31] However, in the face of rapid modernization and shifting social realities, the Igbo apprenticeship model now faces a delicate dance - balancing its cherished values with the need to adapt and evolve in a changing world.[32]

This paper seeks to examine the dilemmas confronting the Igbo apprenticeship model in contemporary Nigeria. We explore the inherent tensions between preserving traditional systems and embracing modern advancements, examine the challenges of promoting social and economic mobility within the model, and address the critical issues of gender inclusion and sustainability. Through this exploration, we aim to highlight the complexities and nuances of the Igbo apprenticeship model. We argue that navigating its current dilemmas requires a multifaceted approach, one that recognizes both its strengths and limitations. By fostering understanding, encouraging dialogue, and implementing strategic interventions, we can ensure that the Igbo apprenticeship model continues to thrive, remaining a source of cultural pride, economic opportunity, and community cohesion in the 21st century.

Concepts of the Igbo Apprenticeship Model

The Igbo apprenticeship model, also known as the Igbo apprenticeship system (IAS), is a unique business tradition practiced by the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria. It's essentially a mix of business training, mentorship, and investment that fosters entrepreneurship. It is a community-driven approach to business development that involves successful business owners hiring apprentices to learn the trade.[33] The apprentices work for a set period, gaining practical experience and financial backing to start their own business. Apprentices gain practical knowledge through hands-on involvement in all facets of the master's business.[34] This experiential learning fosters practical skills and business acumen. Hard work, discipline, honesty, and respect for elders are instilled throughout the apprenticeship, shaping the apprentice's work ethic and character.[35] The initial stage involves a formal agreement between the apprentice's family and the master. The apprentice may reside with the master's family and contribute to household chores while learning basic business principles.[36] The core stage focuses on hands-on learning. The apprentice actively participates in the master's business, mastering the trade's intricacies over

[30] Ndekwu, O. Igbo Apprenticeship: An Informal System of Knowledge Transmission. Indiana University Press, 2004; Okoye, C. Entrepreneurship and the Igbo Apprenticeship System in Nigeria. Palgrave Macmillan, 2012; Obikeze, C. Igbo Traditional Economy: Entrepreneurship and Development. Malthouse Press, 2017; Okolonkwo, C. A. The Igbo Apprenticeship System and Its Relevance to Modern Economic Development in Nigeria. Journal of Social Sciences, vol. 3, no. 2, 2008, pp. 126-134; Nwoye, A. I. Challenges and Prospects of the Igbo Apprenticeship System in the 21st Century." Journal of Pan African Studies, vol. 8, no. 3, 2014, pp. 55-73; Onwuka, C. U. Gender and the Igbo Apprenticeship System: A Critical Analysis. Africa Today, vol. 58, no. 3, 2013, pp. 56-70.

[31] Ndekwu, O. Igbo Apprenticeship: An Informal …; Okoye, C. Entrepreneurship and the Igbo …; Obikeze, C. Igbo Traditional Economy: Entrepreneurship …; Okolonkwo, C. A. The Igbo Apprenticeship System and Its …, pp. 126-134; Nwoye, A. I. Challenges and Prospects of the Igbo …, pp. 55-73; Onwuka, C. U. Gender and the Igbo Apprenticeship …, pp. 56-70.

[32] Ndekwu, O. Igbo Apprenticeship: An Informal …; Okoye, C. Entrepreneurship and the Igbo …; Obikeze, C. Igbo Traditional Economy: Entrepreneurship …; Okolonkwo, C. A. The Igbo Apprenticeship System and Its …, pp. 126-134; Nwoye, A. I. Challenges and Prospects of the Igbo …, pp. 55-73; Onwuka, C. U. Gender and the Igbo Apprenticeship …, pp. 56-70.

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[34] Imu Ahia - The Igbo apprenticeship model as inspiration for youth entrepreneurship development, https://hbr.org/2021/05/a-nigerian-model-for-stakeholder-capitalism

[35] Agwuegbo C. O. The Igbo Apprenticeship System as a Model of Indigenous Knowledge and Entrepreneurship Development in Africa. Journal of African Business, Vol. 15 No. 1, 2014, pp. 112–129

[36] Ikenga – The Igbo Apprentice: A Model for Youth Empowerment, https://en.wikipedia.org

several years.[37] Upon successful completion, the master often provides financial backing or credit (known as "Izu") to assist the apprentice in setting up their own independent business.[38]

Apprentices acquire valuable skills like negotiation, marketing, financial management, and customer service, preparing them for business ownership.[39] Start-up capital provided by the master bridges a significant financial hurdle for new businesses.[40] Apprentices develop a network with the master and potentially other apprentices, gaining valuable mentorship and connections that can aid future endeavors.[41] The Igbo apprenticeship model offers a unique approach to cultivating entrepreneurs. It emphasizes practical experience, cultural values, and mentorship. While challenges exist, the core principles of this model can inspire and provide valuable insights for fostering entrepreneurship development in other contexts. Overall, the Igbo apprenticeship model is a fascinating example of a community-driven approach to business development. It empowers individuals, strengthens the local economy, and fosters a culture of entrepreneurship.

The Significance of the Igbo Apprenticeship Model in Nigeria

The Igbo Apprenticeship Model holds significant importance for Nigeria, playing a multifaceted role in the country's economic and social landscape.[42] Despite the challenges confronting it, the Igbo apprenticeship model remains a valuable asset for the Nigerian economy. By addressing the existing issues and potentially incorporating aspects of the model into broader economic development plans, Nigeria can further leverage its strengths to achieve sustainable growth.[43] The Igbo apprenticeship model holds significance for several reasons:

i. Economic Empowerment: It creates a cycle of wealth generation. Apprentices become business owners, contributing to the local economy. The numerous businesses established by the Igbo apprenticeship model graduates contribute significantly to Nigeria's economic growth, thereby lessening the burden on the government for job creation and social welfare programmes. These businesses operate across various sectors, stimulating local economies and generating tax revenue[44] and this translates to higher tax revenue for the government, which can be used to fund infrastructure and social programmes.

ii. Entrepreneurial Spirit: The model fosters a culture of entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurial success through the apprenticeship system leads to higher incomes and a better standard of living for many Nigerians. Apprentices are not just trained in a specific trade but also develop the skills and mindset needed to run their own businesses.[45] Put differently, the model acts as a powerful incubator, churning out new businesses and injecting fresh energy into the economy. A steady stream of skilled and motivated entrepreneurs keeps the economy dynamic. This has contributed to the Igbo's reputation for business savvy. The model has been identified as a major driver of entrepreneurship in Nigeria, fostering a culture of self-reliance and business ownership. It equips individuals with practical skills, allowing them to start their own businesses after completing their apprenticeships, thus creating jobs for

[37] Ikenga – The Igbo Apprentice: A Model …

[38] The Igbo apprenticeship system: A model for equitable wealth creation in Africa? https://hbr.org/2021/05/a-nigerian-model-for-stakeholder-capitalism

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[41] Ezeh, P. E. Igbo Apprenticeship: A Model for Youth Empowerment. Journal of Black Studies, Vol. 30 No. 3, 2000, pp. 331–345

[42] Imu Ahia - the Igbo apprenticeship model …; The Igbo apprenticeship system: A model for equitable …; How The Igbo Apprenticeship System …; Agwuegbo C. O. The Igbo Apprenticeship System as a Model …; Ezeh, P. E. Igbo Apprenticeship: A Model for Youth Empowerment…; Mbaku, O. N. The Igbo Apprenticeship System: An Informal Institution …;Ikenga – The Igbo Apprentice: A Model …

[43] Agwuegbo C. O. The Igbo Apprenticeship System as a Model …

[44] How The Igbo Apprenticeship System …

[45] Imu Ahia - the Igbo apprenticeship model …

themselves and others and, by implications, reducing unemployment and boosting the overall economy.[46]

iii. Social Upward Mobility: The system offers opportunities for individuals from less privileged backgrounds to climb the social ladder and achieve financial security through hard work and dedication. Apprentices gain valuable skills and seed capital, enabling them to build a better future for themselves and their families.[47] By acquiring valuable skills and starting their own businesses, individuals can and will improve their socioeconomic standing and achieve financial independence.

iv. Community Building: The Igbo apprenticeship system strengthens social bonds.[48] Masters act as mentors, and apprentices become part of a network that provides support and fosters a sense of responsibility towards the community.[49] This means that the masters often provide guidance and support to their apprentices, extending beyond just vocational skills. This contributes to a more cohesive society and, by extension; helps preserve this cultural heritage and instill the traditional Igbo values of hard work, resilience, and entrepreneurial spirit in younger generations.

v. Adaptability: The model helps develop a skilled workforce by providing practical training in various trades. This not only benefits the businesses established by graduates but also contributes to the overall skilled labour pool in Nigeria. As a result, the model is being studied as a potential tool for economic development in other regions.[50] While traditional aspects might need adjustments, the core principles of mentorship, practical training, and community support can be adapted to different contexts.

The Dilemmas of the Igbo Apprenticeship Model in Contemporary Nigeria

The Igbo apprenticeship model, while a cornerstone of Igbo culture and economic success, faces several challenges in contemporary Nigeria. At this juncture, we may outline the key dilemmas of the Igbo apprenticeship model in contemporary Nigeria. Some of the challenges have been mentioned in passing or obliquely in the course of our discussion above. However, it is appropriate now to accord the issue the specific attention it deserves. Below is a synthesis of the key dilemmas:

1. Modernization and Traditional Values: Balancing the transmission of traditional values like hard work and respect with the need for innovation and adaptability is difficult. The Igbo apprenticeship model faces challenges in the modern context, despite its reputation for promoting business in Nigeria.[51] The system sometimes struggles to incorporate new technologies and adapt to changing business practices. The traditional model of the system prioritizes practical training over formal education, hindering apprentices' adaptability to changing business environments.[52] Some of the traditional skills taught do not align with modern market demands, leaving apprentices unprepared for the evolving job landscape. This method does not fully equip apprentices with essential skills for contemporary business realities, such as digital marketing and e-commerce. The informal nature of apprenticeship agreements creates ambiguity

[46] Imu Ahia - the Igbo apprenticeship model …; The Igbo apprenticeship system: A model for equitable …; How The Igbo Apprenticeship System …

[47] The Igbo apprenticeship system: A model for equitable …; Ezeh, P. E. Igbo Apprenticeship: A Model for Youth Empowerment …

[48] How The Igbo Apprenticeship System …; Agwuegbo C. O. The Igbo Apprenticeship System as a Model …; Mbaku, O. N. The Igbo Apprenticeship System: An Informal Institution …

[49] How The Igbo Apprenticeship System …; Agwuegbo C. O. The Igbo Apprenticeship System as a Model …; Mbaku, O. N. The Igbo Apprenticeship System: An Informal Institution…

[50] Ezeh, P. E. Igbo Apprenticeship: A Model for Youth Empowerment …; Ikenga – The Igbo Apprentice: A Model …

[51] Nzelu, E. Innovation and Tradition: Balancing the Igbo Apprenticeship System in the 21st Century. International Journal of African Entrepreneurship, vol. 12, no. 2, 2018, pp. 1-12; Onuoha, U. A. The Impact of Technology on the Igbo Apprenticeship System in Nigeria. Journal of Asian and African Studies, vol. 56, no. 4, 2021, pp. 516-532.

[52] Nzelu, E. Innovation and Tradition: Balancing the Igbo Apprenticeship…; Onuoha, U. A. The Impact of Technology on the Igbo Apprenticeship …

around expectations, duties, and compensation, potentially causing disputes.[53]

2. Social and Economic Mobility: Apprenticeships are often concentrated in specific trades or sectors, restricting opportunities for career diversification and upward mobility.[54] Although it encourages entrepreneurship, the Igbo apprenticeship system has difficulties advancing social and economic mobility. Entry into prestigious apprenticeships is expensive, potentially perpetuating inequality and hindering access for underprivileged individuals.[55] The traditional male-dominated system in the economy limits women's participation and economic empowerment. Unequal power dynamics and a lack of formal contracts expose apprentices to exploitation and financial exploitation.[56] In fact, issues of unfair treatment, inadequate compensation, and extended periods of indenture raise concerns about exploitation and power imbalances within the system. Emphasis on practical skills hinders future career options, and graduates may lack financial resources to establish businesses, hindering their full economic benefits.

3. Gender and Inclusion: Societal expectations and ingrained gender roles discourage women from pursuing traditionally male-dominated trades. While it is an established tradition that encourages business, women and girls have historically been excluded from the system. The patriarchal system, characterized by societal expectations and a lack of female role models, hinders female participation in apprenticeships (certain trades) or access to leadership positions.[57] Finding ways to ensure equitable access and opportunities for all, regardless of gender or background, remains a challenge. The system often relies on informal networks and social capital, making it difficult for outsiders to access. Prejudice and discrimination from potential masters further hinder these opportunities.[58]

4. Sustainability and Relevance: Ensuring the model remains relevant and competitive in the face of globalization and changing economic trends is crucial. However, the lack of formalization and regulation makes the system vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.[59] A pillar of Igbo economic success for many generations, the Igbo apprenticeship system has difficulty keeping up with a rapidly changing world. The apprenticeship system faces challenges due to limited female participation and government support for the system, which has hindered its growth and adaptability in a changing economy, requiring adaptation to modern skills like digital literacy and business management.[60] The system's emphasis on long-term commitment and delayed gratification is in contrast to the shifting societal attitudes towards education and instant gratification.[61] Simply put, the apprenticeship system faces competition from alternative training programmes and formal educational institutions for the recruitment of young talent.

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[56] Okafor, C. Social and Economic Mobility in the Igbo Apprenticeship …; Obi, C. U. The Igbo Apprenticeship System and Poverty ….

[57] Agbasi, J. C. Women's Participation in the Igbo Apprenticeship System: Challenges and Opportunities. Gender and Behaviour, vol. 15, no. 3, 2017, pp. 1-12; Uzoigwe, N. C. Promoting Gender Equality in the Igbo Apprenticeship System. Journal of Pan African Studies, vol. 12, no. 1, 2018, pp. 15-30.

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Reinvigorating the Igbo Apprenticeship Model

The Igbo apprenticeship model, while facing challenges in contemporary Nigeria, holds immense potential for fostering entrepreneurship. Despite these challenges, the Igbo apprenticeship system continues to play a vital role in fostering entrepreneurial spirit and economic development within the Igbo community. However, acknowledging the dilemmas creates an opportunity for improvement. Navigating these dilemmas requires a delicate balancing act. By preserving the strengths and values of the Igbo apprenticeship model while adapting to contemporary realities is vital for the model to continue to serve as a powerful tool for entrepreneurship, community development, and cultural preservation in Nigeria. These involve initiatives like:

1. Promoting Fair Practices and Transparency: Developing standardized apprenticeship agreements outlining rights, responsibilities, compensation, and dispute resolution mechanisms will protect both apprentices and masters.[62] In line with this, government agencies or industry associations should implement standardized training modules and certification processes to ensure a fair and equal foundation for success for all participants. Advocate for government policies and programmes that incentivize businesses to hire graduates of the apprenticeship system and create a level playing field.[63] Simply put, government agencies or industry associations should establish oversight frameworks to ensure fair treatment of apprentices and adherence to ethical practices. Providing mentorship beyond the immediate master-apprentice relationship will offer apprentices broader guidance and support.[64]

2. Enhancing Skill Development and Modernization: Modernize the curriculum to include digital literacy, marketing, and business management skills, preparing apprentices for the modern business landscape.[65] Develop training modules that address the specific needs and partner with educational institutions to allow apprentices to combine practical training with formal education, creating well-rounded graduates.[66] While establishing scholarship and grant programmes to assist marginalized groups in covering costs associated with apprenticeship participation will encourage apprentices to rotate through different businesses within the model and expose them to a wider range of skills and industry practices.[67]

3. Addressing Social and Familial Considerations: Promoting female participation and tailoring opportunities within certain sectors will address gender bias in the system.[68] This can be done by creating targeted mentorship programmes specifically for women, connecting them with successful female entrepreneurs who can provide guidance and support. Organize workshops and discussions within communities to challenge traditional gender roles and educate families about the benefits of female participation in the system. This should aim at a paradigm shift from trade-specific skills to transferable skills like communication, problem-solving, and business management. This will open up opportunities in diverse fields for women. Financial planning workshops and access to microloans will help new business owners manage family obligations while establishing their ventures.[69] Exploring virtual

[62] Challenges of Apprenticeship Development and Youths Unemployment in Nigeria, https://www.researchgate.net

[63] The Igbo apprenticeship system: A model for equitable …

[64] Ikenga – The Igbo Apprentice: A Model …

[65] Decline of the Potency of Igbo Apprenticeship Scheme in Anambra State, Nigeria, https://www.rsisinternational.org/journals/ijriss/Digital-Library/volume-5-issue-9/129-135.pdf

[66] Mbaku, O. N. The Igbo Apprenticeship System: An Informal Institution …

[67] Ukwueze, N. C. J. The Igbo Apprenticeship model: A panacea for start-up failures in Nigeria. IDOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences, 6(1), 2021, pp. 17-23.

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[69] Agawu, O. I. & Nwachukwu, I. I. The Igbo apprenticeship system and the development of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Nigeria. Journal of African Business, 15(2), 2014, pp.186-202; Anyadike, C. C. The Igbo apprenticeship system and its relevance in the contemporary Nigerian business environment. African Journal of Business Management, 4(7), 2010, pp.1204-1213; Njoku, S. O. The Igbo apprenticeship system: A model for youth

mentorship or apprenticeship programmes will broaden opportunities beyond immediate geographic limitations.[70]

4. Fostering Innovation and Adaptation: Workshops on innovation, business plan development, and market research will equip apprentices with skills to adapt the model to evolving economic conditions.[71] Establishing strong alumni networks will provide apprentices with ongoing support, peer-to-peer learning, and access to potential business partnerships.[72] Partnerships with technology providers will introduce apprentices to digital tools that enhance business operations and customers reach.[73]

Conclusion and Recommendations

The Igbo apprenticeship model offers a unique approach to cultivating entrepreneurs and remains a significant contributor to economic and social development within the Igbo community. It emphasizes practical experience, cultural values, and mentorship. Its emphasis on skills development, access to capital, and cultural values fosters a fertile ground for entrepreneurship and upward mobility. While the Igbo apprenticeship model boasts a rich history and valuable contributions to entrepreneurship, the core principles of this model can inspire and provide valuable insights for fostering entrepreneurship development in other contexts. By acknowledging the challenges and implementing these strategies, the Igbo apprenticeship system can become a more inclusive platform for fostering entrepreneurial spirit and economic empowerment for all members of the Igbo community. This will allow individuals to explore their identities within the system while contributing to its continued success in the modern world. The Igbo apprenticeship system can evolve and thrive in the 21st century by continuous adaptation, promoting fair treatment, and integrating modern business, which can ensure this unique system continues to empower future generations of Igbo entrepreneurs. Simply put by finding ways to address exploitation, promote education alongside experience, formalize agreements, and encourage gender equality, the Igbo apprenticeship model can continue to empower future generations while ensuring fairness and inclusivity.

From the foregoing it is clear that it is difficult for the traditional informal Igbo Apprenticeship Model to adjust to contemporary society. It requires a complex strategy to guarantee its

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relevance. Notwithstanding these difficulties, the paradigm includes built-in adaptability and modernization capabilities. Balancing tradition with innovation will develop a system that is culturally relevant and responsive to the 21st century's challenges and possibilities. To this end, the study proposes.

i. Formalization and Legal Framework: Introducing legal frameworks that protect the rights of apprentices, ensure fair settlement terms, and provide mechanisms for dispute resolution is crucial.

ii. Standardized Training and Certification: Developing structured curricula and certifications to enhance the quality and recognition of the skills acquired.

iii. *Promoting Inclusivity:* Actively encouraging the participation of women and girls in apprenticeship programs to unlock a wider pool of entrepreneurial talent.

iv. Addressing Societal Perceptions: Raising awareness about the value and potential of vocational training and apprenticeship will help change negative stereotypes.

v. Government and Stakeholder Support: Government agencies, business organizations, and community leaders should contribute to providing resources, oversight, and support for the apprenticeship system.

vi. *Modernization and Adaptation:* Integrating modern business practices and technologies into the training process to equip apprentices with skills relevant to today's economy.