

REVIVING IGBO APPRENTICESHIP CULTURE FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Apprenticeship is a system by which a person learning a craft or trade is instructed by a master for a set of time under a set condition. The apprenticeship culture which has its origin traceable to the pre-colonial Igbo was an indigenous effort aimed at cushioning the adverse effects of the civil war on the Igbo people. Under this system, teenage boys stay with their rich relations or neighbours under a tutelage arrangement in which they are exposed to the necessary rudiments and practice of a particular trade or craft. The apprenticeship arrangement, which may not necessarily be sealed with any formal agreement, lasts between five years and ten years, after which the apprentice is settled by his mentor to start his own business or craft as the case may be. Apprenticeship among the Igbo is a value that was once cherished, celebrated and encouraged but this particular value system amongst others is now in the past. This research is poised to investigate the problem that has necessitated the loss of this culture among the Igbo with a view to re-evaluate the benefits accruable from it which in the view of the researcher is needed in the 21st century quest for sustainable development. This research adopted the phenomenological method with a view to reviewing the benefits in the past as well as investigating the problems that have led to the loss of this culture. The paper recommends that in view of high rate of unemployment and the need for sustainable development, it is germane to revive this culture through value reorientation among the youths; most especially among those incapable of affording higher education.

Keywords: Apprenticeship;, Culture; Sustainable development

Introduction

For the sake of history, it will suffice to note that Igbo apprenticeship system is a culture that has lasted since the pre-colonial era. But this system rather became rampant; more general and more pronounced among Igbo people after the civil war in order to cushion the effect of the war. Shortly after the Nigerian civil war in 1967, majority of the Igbo people lost virtually all their business and investments. Following the 3Rs policy of Gowon shortly after the civil war, a pacification of £20 withdrawal was approved by the Nigerian

government irrespective of whatever deposit in the bank this harsh policy of the Nigerian government that made the adoption of the system inevitable as poverty hampered business funding.

Many people through this apprenticeship system have achieved tremendous success and unimaginable progress and excellence in their businesses. The reason for these successes was because they were adequately settled to start their own business at the end of their apprenticeship by their boss. Many notable and outstanding business owners in Igboland attribute their success to what they learnt as an apprentice. To the apprentice, the system offers them the opportunity to acquire business acumen, discipline, good customer relations and exposure to suppliers and this Apprenticeship system has helped to spread wealth from the rich to the poor in Igbo communities; and many of the successful Igbo business men of today affirm to have gone through this system. This culture created a sustainable and enviably raw initiation-incubation/training-investment system that continues to soar as a means of livelihood and sustainable wealth in the South Eastern part of Nigeria. Shortly after the civil war, the Igbo were monetarily not able to continue their legacy of staying ahead of other tribes in Nigeria. Being aware of this limitation, they turned their troubles into a model, worthy of emulation. Today that tough choice has metamorphosed into a positive lifestyle.

Conceptual Clarifications

Apprenticeship

Apprenticeship is a system by which a person learning a craft or trade is instructed by a master for a set of time under a set condition. Apprenticeship is also a system of training a new generation of practitioners of a trade or profession with on-the-job training. This system is often accompanied with a study (classroom work and reading).

What is Development?

According to Karl Pearson, “development is an ancient concept but one which, in our modern age, has acquired new meaning and purpose. Its pursuit unites two strands of human thought: the belief in progress and the conviction that man can master his destiny” (2011:104). Development has varied interpretations depending from the scholar’s viewpoint. The concept of development and in this case development in Nigeria lacks a unified definition as different scholars tend to view it from varying perspective. While some scholars look at development from the aspect of educational training, others view it from the angle of availability of infrastructure within a community. Koffi Annan, a former United Nations Secretary General, provides a good example of an international relations scholar by suggesting in a 2003 United Nations Human Development Program *Report* that “development embraces

human rights and good governance, access to education and health care and ensuring that each individual in rural and urban areas has opportunities and choices to fulfil his or her own potential” (UNDP, 2003)

Sustainable Development

According to Uche (1995), sustainable development is a socio-economic and political movement or strategy that has a global appeal whose main focus is on the dual issues of environmental protection through a conservation process and economic development that would make life on the planet earth pleasant for the inhabitants. For World Development Report (1992), sustainable development refers to meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the needs of future generation.

Apprenticeship System among Igbo Nigerians

Among the Igbo, hard work is encouraged and independence is a culture that frowns at laziness and teenagers perambulating the streets without handwork. In case one is unable to go to school, his parents ensure that he learns a trade. Usually, arrangements would be made to intern with a relative who runs either a spare parts, building materials, supermarkets business etc for a specific period of time to learn the trade. It is an unpaid apprenticeship- but meals, clothing and transport fare are provided for. There are some who are sent to learn craft such as motor electrician, mechanics, carpenter, welding, etc. When the agreed years are over and the individual has been proven to be good to operate independently, the master sets up the business/trade for the apprenticeship. Sometimes, in order to prevent the apprentice from misappropriating the capital, the master tells him that at the end of one year, a certain percentage should be returned. The apprentice graduate in turn also gets his own apprentice who learns under his tutelage.

There are cases of apprentices managing a business branch with little to or no supervision. This is done with ownership mind-set that the success of the business guarantees theirs. It also in the long run encourages them to commit enough sweat equity into it.

According to Robert Neuwirth (2018), the Igbo apprenticeship system is the largest business incubator platform in the world because when an apprentice serves, his master is expected to set him up in business. He further added that apprenticeships that work like locally generated venture capital and systems for allocating scarce resources can propagate and scale these models that could help communities thrive from the bottom up.

For example, Chiagoziem is a 34 year old Marble Store Owner in Dei-Dei, Abuja. According to him, “My Oga gave me N12 million after 9 years. I joined him at 16 years, and 30 percent of that N12 million is a loan to be

repaid over my first 5 years. I finished paying 9 years ago, but he gave it all back to me.”.

Many of the rich men in Igbo land like Mr Innocent Chukwuma of Innoson Motors, Mr Cosmas Maduka of Coscharis Motors, Chief ChidiAnyaegebu of Chisco Motors, Chief Alex Chika Okafor of A-Z Petroleum/Chicason Group, etc, went through this apprenticeship scheme. Many of today’s rich Igbo men came from very poor families. This apprenticeship scheme gave them the foothold to rise to wealth, for their parents would have not been able to pay their school fees or give them the money required to start a business that has prospect.

Peculiarities of Igbo Apprenticeship System

The Igbo apprenticeship in comparison with the apprenticeship system in the South-West (predominantly Yoruba) region reveals an interesting similarity. To the Yoruba, the apprentice, upon completion of their apprenticeship pays the master a ‘freedom fee’, buys drinks and throws a party according to his/her financial abilities before they can graduate and get on with their trade officially. The period of apprenticeship is usually 2 – 3 years on the average. The apprentice is usually presented with a certificate. The apprentice does not necessarily live under the care of his/her boss and is responsible for his/her own feeding in most cases.

Conversely, in the Igbo apprenticeship model is a departure from the above. Apprentices join an established business person; leave their parents/family to live under the care and supervision of the master. The apprentice is often closely related to the master. They do not travel home during festivities to their family without the consent of the master even if the master and family are in the same city (Okoro, 2018).

Igbo apprentices also do other domestic chores in the house like car washing, ironing and cleaning whenever they are not in the shop. They are appraised based on not just work ethic while learning and growing the master’s businesses but on performance in non-business related areas like respect for the master’s spouse/family etc.

At the end of the apprenticeship, they are compensated with a take-off fund which they use for shop rent, goods, equipment (if needed) and in some cases, accommodation for a given period of time. This does not in any way prevent collaboration with the master despite being a competitor. In some cases, due to the apprentice’s weak buying power, a master can assist with goods procurement for a former apprentice to help them reduce overhead importation/exportation cost.

Apprentices avoid the malicious use of the master's resources as it is believed that such actions could inhibit success in their own future businesses. This fear engenders honesty during the years of service as every proven act of theft, diversion of fund, flamboyant use and wastage of business finances terminates the arrangement (Okoro, 2018).

No master would want to incur the wrath of the community back home, by failing to keep to the terms of apprenticeship after the agreed number of years of service. In view of the fear of labelling as a master with a reputation for not settling apprentices - a tag that lasts generations, the master does everything possible to fulfil their obligation. Apprentices accept a small settlement package given with the master's blessings rather than a fat but stolen fund from his master.

Influence of Civil War on Igbo Apprenticeship System

During the Nigerian Biafran war that lasted from 1967 – 1970, Igbo entrepreneurs, business owners and workers suffered unimaginable losses leading to untold hardship and poverty. The Federal Government through her draconian policy permitted only a withdrawal from banks a paltry amount of 20 pounds no matter what amount the individual had in the bank. As if that was not enough obnoxious, their properties were also declared abandoned. The hardship that these policies brought to bear on the Igbo people is better experienced than explained.

However the entrepreneurial acumen of Igbo people was not taken away and this underscored their concerted efforts to rejuvenate Igbo economy. This has also deepened Igbo apprenticeship system which is already a way of life for the survival of the Igbo man.

According to Stears Tosin Adeshokan in Aake (2018), "...by the end of the War in 1970, the region was so devastated that money and human capital were scarce."(p.43). In his views, "Thousands of people were unable to return to homes they previously owned in other parts of Nigeria. Not only was the hope of Biafra lost, but livelihoods were also halted. Petty trade became one of the few ways money could be made."(p.45). He further notes that prior to the civil war, the Igbo were largely in their third generation of foreign-trained professionals, at least a step ahead of the Yoruba. The civil war actually destroyed all of such ambitions. Muhammed Haruna writing an article in *The Nation newspaper* titled 'People and Politics', states that "by 1963, the Igbo were producing their second generation in Law, Medicine and Engineering." (The Nation, October, 2015)

Benefits Accruable from Apprenticeship Culture

Apprenticeships system generally stimulates economic development. When the right things are done for people in a community, business grow and economic development is engendered. Industries may become involved in other local and regional workforce development efforts as well as government support to ensure development. However, industries and governments cannot do it all but what is required to sustain growth and development particularly in Nigeria is the apprenticeship culture which the Igbo is dubbed.

Skills acquired through the apprentice system become lifelong and long-lasting. Soft skills and habits is often needed to be developed in many people who lack a high school certificate or bachelor's degree. Coupled with that, there are few, well-paying jobs for those who must have acquired higher education.

Apprenticeship system creates independence and distribution of wealth. An apprenticeship program encourages apprentices to be independent and foster wealth creation and distribution, thereby leading to economic growth needed for sustainable economic development. It's not by compulsion for individuals to participate. Over time, if willingness is developed, it will engender economic development as well as cultural development.

Apprenticeships among Igbo people improve corporate culture. Giving people the opportunity to grow and develop has had a positive impact on corporate culture. Apprentices trust they can become the best for their benefactors and also aspire to become the best version of themselves. Human resource development, wellness, job creation, and other initiatives offered in-house in apprenticeship system inspire more people to participate in the process.

Apprenticeships help with knowledge sharing. The youngest and least experienced apprentices will take on attitudes of older, skilled ones. One needs not wonder why apprenticeships system help create a society where people think as a community to nurture and educate one another for society. When a boss provides training and opportunities for his apprentice to acquire the necessary skills to excel personally and they are financially supported and established, the apprentice will be happy and in turn extend such good gesture to others.

Apprenticeship helps businesses develop highly-skilled employees. Apprenticeship programs also reduce turnover rates, increase productivity and lower the cost of recruitment. No doubt, apprentices provide manpower. Additionally, apprenticeship

- Helps in producing results and highly-skilled businessmen, tailored to the specific needs of businesses,

- Increases knowledge transfer through on-the-job learning from an experienced mentor, combined with education courses to support work-based learning.
- are structured training programmes which give you a chance to work (literally) towards a qualification. They help you gain the skills and knowledge you need to succeed in a chosen skill.
- give fantastic experience apprentice in the working world and shows that he can ‘hit the ground running’ and provide real chance to put skills acquired and practice with confidence in a chosen environment.

Problems Militating against Igbo Apprenticeship Culture

One of the major problems militating against Igbo apprenticeship culture in the contemporary times is the evil of get-rich-quick syndrome. The get-rich-quick syndrome is doing more harm than good to the Nigerian society. As such, most youths today are no longer interested in apprenticeship neither do they care about the dignity in labour. To them hard work encouraged under the apprenticeship system is a waste of time, all they care about is making money at the expense of others. This accounts for the reason why our mechanic, carpentry and welding workshops are replete with old men. Instead, these youths delve into armed robbery, political thuggery, kidnapping, “yahoo and yahoo”, money ritual etc which are vices that are not helpful to Nigerian society.

A visit to a mechanic workshop in Alaba market Owerri, an old Mercedes mechanic has this to say “the young boys of today are no more interested in learning the job even when they come; they leave within a week; some who stay a little longer, hardly complete their training.” They are dissuaded by flamboyant display of ill-gotten wealth. What is more worrisome is the fact that most youths detest higher education because they believe it is a waste given the fact that unemployment is on the increase.. Obviously, the Igbo apprenticeship scheme can serve as a panacea to a society of saturated labour market and dearth of employment. Unfortunately, the youth are not interested. Another problem militating against the apprenticeship culture is the fact that most boss renege on agreement to settle and set up the business/trade for their apprentice after graduation from the apprenticeship. As much, it is not in doubt that some of the apprentices are the architect of their own misfortune, but the obvious remains that most wicked masters tactically deny their apprentice of their entitlement of faithful stewardship. This they do by accusing them of embezzlement, insubordination, etc. There is also some unverifiable accusation of untimely death of apprentice which is linked to the unwillingness of their masters to fulfil their required obligations.

Reviving Igbo Apprenticeship Culture

Much has been said about the uniqueness of Igbo Apprenticeship system popularly called '*Imu-Ahia*', which literally translates to 'learning market/trade'. It has been considered as perhaps, one of the major factors that helped pull majority of South-Eastern families out of poverty shortly after the Biafran civil war.

There have also been the calls for a restructuring and mainstreaming of the apprenticeship system in accordance with the contemporary realities of business funding, processes and training. And based on the benefits inherent in the system, the researcher enjoins the people as well as the Nigerian government to revive this culture as it holds the prospect of wealth creation and distribution.

Learning a trade has always been the norm with the Igbo people of South-East Nigeria. An Igbo person believes in controlling his financial 'destiny' and the best way to guarantee this was through commerce and venture into business. Reviving this culture has become germane in view of the much talked about sustainable economic development and in reconsideration of the benefits discussed above

Conclusion

The writer has discovered that the Igbo apprenticeship culture sufficed in providing economic stability for the people of eastern Nigeria after the devastating effect of the Nigerian Biafran war and beyond. It was also observed that this culture has nosedived due to the identified problems discussed above. But the researcher is of the view that the culture must be revived going by the benefits and prospects it holds not just for the people of the southeast but for the country. The need to grow businesses in Nigeria cannot be overemphasized in an economy with a very frightening level of unemployment. The Igbo apprenticeship culture holds great prospects for sustainable economic development, hence it should be revived.

The apprenticeship system which has long been part of Igbo culture is such that purports a form of responsibility on established businessmen in urban areas to pick up teenagers-young adults from their homes and give them an informal, but raw and practical, cutthroat business education. The idea centres on taking them off the streets and the perilous tendencies of an idle mind to give them a purpose, worthy of emulation, so they can also continue the trend when they are established.

In the end, the Igbo apprenticeship system is more gratuitous than the strict business of modern incubation. The Igbo have always stayed ahead of the business curve, in an ideal that originates from their struggles. If this trend

continues and Nigeria somehow finds a way to encourage it, Aba and other Igbo business hubs, might take absolute control of another channel of national wealth creation different from crude oil.

This apprenticeship culture is what has helped to spread wealth from the rich to the poor among the Igbo. It helped the Igbo to recover fast after the devastation of the Nigerian Civil War in which they lost virtually all their wealth and received the “ex gratia” payment of £20 irrespective of their deposits in the banks. It helped to spread the art of trading and money management among the Igbo. It helped to teach Igbo how to fish rather than giving them fish. Nigerian venture capitalists should also look to modernize the Igbo apprenticeship system.

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