

## IGBO APPRENTICESHIP SYSTEM

MARA CHANTAL



20  
24



A UNIQUE MODEL TO BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT.

## INTRODUCTION

Igbo apprenticeship system, prevalent in southeastern Nigeria, represents a distinctive approach to business development, entrepreneurship, and socio-economic empowerment within the Igbo community. This research delves into the intricacies of the Igbo apprenticeship system, tracing its historical roots, cultural significance, and economic impact on the local and regional levels. The study explores the dynamic relationship between apprentices (known as "apprentices" or "boys") and their mentors (known as "masters" or "uncles"), examining the principles of reciprocity, mutual trust, and communal support that underpin the system. Additionally, the research investigates the role of the apprenticeship system in fostering skills acquisition, knowledge transfer, and inter-generational wealth creation among Igbo youth, while also promoting social cohesion and cultural preservation within the community. Through personal experience, case studies, and ethnographic research methods, this study seeks to unravel the complexities of the Igbo apprenticeship system and its enduring relevance in contemporary business practices, economic development, and community resilience.



## HISTORY

It's a well-known fact that the Igbo tribe in Nigeria has a thriving business culture. Many people marvel at their success and often wonder about the secret behind it. Some even travel to Igbo communities to immerse themselves in their way of life and study their practices closely. Interestingly, individuals from other tribes who grow up in Igbo-influenced environments often exhibit traits similar to the Igbo people – they tend to be business-savvy, resilient, and hardworking.

This phenomenon can be attributed to the Igbo society's unique way of life, particularly their traditional apprenticeship system. Children are encouraged to learn practical skills and trades from a young age, instilling in them a strong work ethic and independence. This apprenticeship system fosters the development of entrepreneurial skills, resilience, and self-reliance, allowing individuals to thrive in business without necessarily relying on government support or familial assistance.

Prior to the arrival of colonial rulers, the Igbo people sustained themselves primarily through farming. Male children often accompanied their parents to the fields, while female children assisted their mothers in household chores, learning essential skills such as cooking and home management. Following their time in the fields, male children would accompany their fathers to the market before attending school. After school hours, they would assist their fathers with household repairs, such as fixing bicycles.

Within the Igbo community, age grades played a significant role. These age grades engaged in communal activities, reflecting the Igbo belief in collective living. Members of the age grades collaborated to support one another, including assisting those without homes by constructing thatched houses. Some members brought their sons along to teach them the art of thatch house construction, passing down these valuable skills from one generation to the next.

During the colonial era, certain Igbo individuals had the opportunity to travel abroad and acquire new skills such as automobile and generator repair. Similarly, those who served colonial masters were also privileged to learn these skills, earning them the title of "masters" among their less fortunate counterparts. In turn, less privileged individuals were able to

send their children to apprentice under these "masters," offering farm produce or providing manual labor as a token of appreciation for the education provided to their children.

Following Nigeria's independence, the apprenticeship system began to gain traction, but its progress was interrupted by the outbreak of the civil war.

However, the conflict ushered in an evolved form of apprenticeship. Despite the widespread displacement and loss of life during the war, the Igbo people remained united. Those who managed to preserve their wealth extended assistance to others in need. Some provided financial support, while others offered employment opportunities to their brethren. Over time, this evolved into a system where apprentices received financial aid or assistance to establish themselves, rather than traditional forms of compensation such as farm produce.



The apprenticeship system, which originated many years ago, has evolved into a powerful business strategy and socio-economic empowerment model that has effectively distributed wealth among the Igbo people and facilitated the growth of empires. Unlike conventional employment structures, Igbo Apprenticeship disregards educational qualifications, literacy levels, or formal schooling. Instead, the system focuses on equipping individuals, regardless of their background, with the skills and knowledge necessary to achieve financial and economic independence.

# What does Igbo Apprenticeship mean?

This traditional system represents a cornerstone of Igbo culture, where children and young adults are immersed in a specific trade or craft, receiving hands-on training under the guidance of experienced practitioners, often referred to as "masters." The apprenticeship begins with a formal arrangement between the apprentice's family and the master, who undertakes the responsibility of imparting essential skills and knowledge to the apprentice.

During the apprenticeship period, which can last several years, apprentices work alongside their masters, learning the intricacies of the trade through practical experience. They assist with various tasks, observe techniques, and gradually develop proficiency in their chosen field. Importantly, apprentices do not receive monetary compensation during this time; instead, they are provided with basic necessities such as transportation to work and a stipend for meals.

Upon completion of their apprenticeship, apprentices are typically presented with a sum of money, known as capital, to help them establish their own business ventures within the same industry or their masters presents a well furnished shop filled with goods/products to them as a parting gift to them. These assistance serves as a catalyst for economic empowerment, enabling apprentices to transition from learners to entrepreneurs and contribute to the economic vitality of their communities and improve themselves financially.

It's worth noting that while the apprenticeship system shares similarities with paid learning arrangements, such as learning of work although both are practiced among the Igbo tribe, there are distinct differences. Learning work typically involves a monetary exchange, where individuals pay instructors for the opportunity to acquire new skills, whereas apprenticeship emphasizes experiential learning within a mentorship framework, with an emphasis on practical skill development and entrepreneurial empowerment.

---

## **At what age do apprentice start learning from their masters?**

Some families send their children as early as 6-7 years old to begin their apprenticeship while continuing their schooling. The duration of apprenticeship varies, typically ranging from 5 to 15 years, depending on the specific arrangement between the family and the master.

In contrast, the sister system to apprenticeship, known as 'learning work,' operates differently. In this arrangement, there is no monetary compensation from the teacher; instead, the learner pays the instructor for their training. My younger brother took this path while still in secondary school, learning to repair generators before he turned sixteen. Similarly, my elder sister, despite holding double degrees in biochemistry and nursing, pursued this approach to learn tailoring and soap making. Although I wasn't as committed, I still managed to learn basic hairstyles.

## **How smart are the children who went through Apprenticeship?**

The apprenticeship journey is far from easy. Apprentices are trained not only in managing money but also in endurance and patience. They develop exceptional bargaining skills and outstanding marketing abilities, enabling them to convert customers into loyal clients from a young age. These individuals are known for their respectfulness, resilience, and hard work.

A visit to Onitsha Main Market in Anambra State or Aba in Abia State, Nigeria, reveals young, smart individuals, many of whom are already established and have apprentices learning under them. Apprenticeship is a continuous process: once an apprentice is established, they take on their own apprentices and train them, perpetuating the cycle. Approximately 89% of wealthy Igbos have gone through this apprenticeship system, which contributes to their prominence in the business world. They learn the fundamentals of business from a young age, which is why many corporations prefer to hire Igbo individuals, recognizing their deep business acumen. And indeed, this reputation is well-deserved.



---

# THE PROS AND CONS OF THE IGBO APPRENTICESHIP SYSTEM

## 1. Economic Empowerment:

- The system provides young people with practical business skills and the financial backing to start their own enterprises, promoting economic self-sufficiency and reducing unemployment.

## 2. Skill Development:

- Apprentices receive hands-on training and gain expertise in specific trades or businesses, making them proficient and market-ready.

## 3. Entrepreneurial Spirit:

- The system instills an entrepreneurial mindset, encouraging innovation and self-reliance. Many successful Igbo entrepreneurs credit their success to this early business exposure.

## 4. Community Support and Unity:

- The system fosters a strong sense of community, with established business owners investing in the next generation. This creates a cycle of support and mentorship.

## 5. Wealth Distribution:

- By enabling apprentices to become business owners, the system helps distribute wealth more evenly within the community.

## 6. Resilience and Work Ethic:

- Apprentices develop strong work ethics, resilience, and problem-solving skills due to the rigorous and practical nature of their training.

## 7. Cultural Preservation:

- The apprenticeship system is deeply rooted in Igbo culture and helps preserve traditional values of hard work, respect, and communal support.

# Cons of the Igbo Apprenticeship System

## 1. Lack of Formal Education:

- Some apprentices may miss out on formal education opportunities, which can limit their broader knowledge and career options outside their trained trade.

## 2. Exploitation Risks:

- There is potential for exploitation, where apprentices may be overworked coupled with the fact that they are not paid salaries.

## 3. Variable Quality of Training:

- The quality of training can vary significantly depending on the master. Some masters may not provide comprehensive training or adequate financial support.

## 4. Limited Financial Compensation:

- Apprentices do not receive salaries during their training, which can be a financial strain for their families.

## 5. Dependency on Master's Success:

- The apprentice's future is often tied to the master's business success. If the master's business fails, it can adversely affect the apprentice's prospects.

## 6. Modern Business Practices:

- The system may sometimes lag in teaching modern business practices and technology, as it is heavily rooted in traditional methods.

## 7. Physical and Emotional Strain:

- The rigorous nature of the apprenticeship can be physically and emotionally demanding, potentially leading to burnout or health issues.

## How a country can leverage on the Igbo Apprenticeship system.

A smart government makes the right decisions for the development of its citizens. Despite the disadvantages of the apprenticeship system, a forward-thinking government can adopt, refine, and modernize this system to enhance the livelihoods of its citizens, boost national



productivity, and generate more revenue. Here's how this can be achieved:

**1. Mandate Participation :**

- Require citizens to attach themselves to a company or trade once they reach a certain age. This ensures early exposure to professional environments and skill acquisition.

**2. Company Involvement :**

- Mandate companies to accept a specified number of young individuals within a certain age range for apprenticeship programs. This creates a structured pathway for skill development and employment.

**3. Financial Support :**

- Provide stipends for citizens undergoing training in companies. This financial support ensures that apprentices can sustain themselves and focus on their training without undue financial strain.

**4. Mentorship Programs:**

- Assign experienced mentors to trainees to guide them through their apprenticeship. Mentorship ensures that apprentices receive personalized attention and support, enhancing the quality of their training.

**5. Post-Training Support :**

- Offer business support at the end of the training period, including grants, low-interest loans, or access to business incubation centers. This support helps new entrepreneurs establish their businesses and contribute to the economy.

**6. Cyclical Training :**

- Once established, these new business owners are encouraged to take on apprentices themselves, perpetuating the cycle of training and skill transfer. This approach ensures a continuous supply of productive, resilient, and hardworking citizens.
-

# ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

1. **Integration with Formal Education:**
  - Integrate the apprenticeship system with formal education, allowing apprentices to continue their academic studies while gaining practical skills. This hybrid model produces well-rounded individuals with both theoretical knowledge and practical experience.
  
2. **Technology and Modern Practices :**
  - Incorporate modern business practices and technological training into the apprenticeship programs. This ensures that apprentices are equipped with up-to-date skills relevant to the contemporary job market.
  
3. **Quality Assurance:**
  - Implement quality assurance measures to ensure that all apprentices receive high-standard training. Regular assessments and feedback mechanisms can help maintain training quality across different companies and industries.
  
4. **Public-Private Partnerships:**
  - Foster public-private partnerships to create a collaborative ecosystem where government, businesses, and educational institutions work together to design and implement effective apprenticeship programs.
  
5. **Monitoring and Evaluation:**
  - Establish robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks to track the progress of apprentices and the overall impact of the apprenticeship system. This data-driven approach helps in making informed decisions and continuous improvements.

By adopting and enhancing the apprenticeship system, a government can cultivate a skilled workforce, foster entrepreneurship, and drive sustainable economic growth. This approach not only benefits individuals but also contributes to the broader socio-economic development of the nation.

# Conclusion

Apprenticeship is a necessity for a society that want to flourish in business, improve the livelihood of the members and Forster growth among themselves.

Thank you for taking your time to read this article.

*Mara Chantal*

WRITER/AUTHOR/POET





*Follow*  
**MARA CHANTAL**

*Mara Chantal(Amarachi Ogbonnaya) is a prolific Nigerian writer from the Igbo Region of Nigeria.*

*Read more of Mara Chantal works;*

- 1. The Northman Family,*
- 2. The Ghost of Sherlock*
- 3. Soulless*
- 4. Last Assassin: Knights of Gaddok*