

Globalizing an Indigenous Entrepreneurship System: The Igbo ‘Igba Boyi’ Apprenticeship Model

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Abstract

Original Research Article

This paper examines the phenomenon of Igbo Apprenticeship System (IAS) popularly known as ‘Igba Boyi’ as a model of business internship whereby a young person stays with an experienced and successful business person in order to understudy his or her trade or business. As an experiential business incubation model, the entrepreneurial skills, knowledge, discipline and capital start-up infusion are honed, harnessed and deeded to a mentee upon cycling out. Against the backdrop of lack of entrepreneurship knowledge and start-up capital that stifles the growth of SMEs among many African States, this paper interrogates the Model in order to ascertain the plausibility for its replication across cultures and states. By way of qualitative exploration and interrogation of secondary sources, the paper observes that the IAS is salient in bridging the gaps of challenges that beset the growth of SMEs and entrepreneurship businesses especially in Africa. The model was found to be a unique enabler of SME’s development promotes business growth and survival rate; creates access to trade and informal credit; and creates opportunity for excellent entrepreneurship management skills and competence. The paper posits that though the IAS is a traditional entrepreneurship model developed by the ‘Igbos’ in Nigeria, the salient features and advantages are considerably worth replication across cultures. The paper therefore recommends for the globalizing of a working entrepreneurship model in order to reset the SMEs sector and economy generally.

Keywords: Apprenticeship, Entrepreneurship, Indigenous Entrepreneurship System, Igba Boyi,

1. INTRODUCTION

The postulation that entrepreneurship is a catalyst to economic development is commonsensical and far from being anecdotal. Supported by extant literature, entrepreneurship is a source of innovation and change, and as such spurs improvements in productivity and economic competitiveness (UNCTAD, 2004; Stoica, Roman, & Rusu, 2020; Nkamnebe & Ezemba, 2020). This hypothesis is hinged on the premise that entrepreneurship across various economies holds strategic importance to capital formation, increase in per capita income, creation of employment, improvement in living standards, economic independence, among many others. Yet, this importance has not translated to concrete reality for most economies especially, African States. The vestiges of imperialism have equally distorted the development process leading to satellitization of African economies on the West and

more recently, on China. Consequently, indigenous entrepreneurship initiatives have been consigned to debris in preference for Western ‘inventions’. The IAS otherwise referred to as ‘Igba Boyi’ is a radical departure from this.

The Igba Boyi Igbo Apprenticeship Model/System (IAM or IAS) is an indigenous survivalist entrepreneurship approach aimed at incubating and reproducing entrepreneurs through free tenured mentorship. It is an economic practice of mentoring and supporting young members of the society to become successful entrepreneur with supportive start-up capital once he/she cycles out of mentorship. As a practice, this model is reputed to have incubated over 5 million entrepreneurs and transformed major cities like Onitsha, Aba, Ogbete, Alaba and other African cities where Igbos are found in large numbers; while the products of the Igbo apprenticeship scheme show greater dexterity in managing their businesses, are more resilient and evince significantly better results (Nonyelu, 2023). Unfortunately, this

practice has received limited global attention.

This paper interrogates and appraises the IAS with focal interest on the strategic importance it holds for business incubation. Specifically, we analyse the processes, opportunities and challenges of the Igbo Apprenticeship Model with overarching intention of advocating for global recognition and adoption. This is more compelling considering the wane of indigenous entrepreneurship model that reflects Africa's historicity.

2. CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

Apprenticeship: This refers to business internship system of impactful training and mentoring an apprentice in a given line of trade, business or profession.

Entrepreneurship: Entrepreneurship is the pursuit of creating, managing, and scaling a business by taking calculated risks, and being innovative. Entrepreneurship involves combining resources, skills, and vision to bring forth new products, services, or solutions that meet market demands and create value (Shopify, 2023).

Indigenous Entrepreneurship System: This refers to entrepreneurship system that has its root on a particular cultural context that also reflects their history, needs and existential peculiarities

Igba Boyi: This is an Igbo framed business incubation and entrepreneurship model. It refers to a tenured and structured business mentoring system where someone undergoes training from an experienced and successful professional in order to gain valuable skills, knowledge and capital start-up. The 'Boyi' is the mentee while 'Oga' is the mentor.

3. THEORETICAL COMPASS

There are a number of contending theories of entrepreneurship following Schumpeter's classical theory of entrepreneurship. Schumpeter's classical theory of entrepreneurship has actually heralded quite a number of theories including but not limited to "Effectuation Theory, Social Network theory, Opportunity Recognition Theory, Institutional Theory, Psychological trait theory" etc. Among these theories, the 'resource-based theory' carved a niche within which this study draws its theoretical compass.

Resource-Based Theory (RBT) developed as a complement to the industrial organization (IO) view with Bain (1968) and Porter (1979, 1980, 1985) as some of its main proponents but

recently popularised by Jay Barney. A refinement by Jay Barney gives insight on the strategic resources and capabilities that entrepreneurs can exploit to gain a competitive advantage (Alvarez, 2001). Its creative adaptation to entrepreneurship firms up resources (financial, social and human) as the praxis of entrepreneurship existence. Therefore, the Resource-based theory of entrepreneurship argues that 'access to resources by founding entrepreneurs' is an important predictor of opportunity based entrepreneurship and new venture growth (Alvarez & Busenitz, 2001). Thus, access to resources enhances the individual's ability to detect, act upon and maximize discovered opportunities (Davidson & Honing, 2003). In other words, the difference between one entrepreneur and another is the availability of resources and their innovative deployment capability to create and combine new heterogeneous resources. The requisite capability includes opportunity seeking behavior, combining and organizing resources, assembling the resources into a firm, and creating heterogeneous outputs through adroit utilization, exploration and exploitation benign to comparative advantage (Anderson & Miller, 2003). Therefore, the dominant paradigm in determining a company's profits potential, such as the view of Porter (1989), suggests that a firm's internal factors, such as resources and capabilities, determine a firm's profit.

Sit for purpose to this study, first it should be noted that the IAM is founded in the context driven by capability to innovate and create opportunities for change. Successful entrepreneurs who serve as business mentors in the IAM value chain crave for heterogeneous wealth creation. Second, the IAM provides the three needed resources as contained in the theory. Financial capital infusion as 'settlement'; network of social relationship with manufacturers, suppliers and consumers are built within the ambit of tenured apprenticeship. The physical resources may include the plants, land and machines depending on the business where the entrepreneurs are into. Thirdly, in African context where capital for business start-up is a huge handicap, the IAM bridges this gap. The theory's emphasis on capital as a predictor of business capability and success resonates with the axiom of IAM that stands out with capital start-up advantage to the mentee once he/she circles out of apprenticeship. Again, the theory recognizes human resource as one of the drivers of entrepreneurship.

The IAM is human resource centric. As a relationship based model, the mentee leverages on the potent knowledge of the mentor to learn basic skills, attitude, knowledge and tact that transcends business. In this, the attitude of the mentee is honed,

harnessed and processed for entrepreneurship success with targeted output in salient entrepreneurship skill and knowledge. Entrepreneurial knowledge is the ability to take conceptual, abstract information of where and how to obtain undervalued resources, explicit and tacit, and how to deploy and exploit these resources. Entrepreneurial knowledge is the ability to take conceptual, abstract information of where and how to obtain undervalued resources, explicit and tacit, and how to deploy and exploit these resources (Alvarez & Busenits, 2001). The stand-out prism for understanding the theory lies on resources and the effect of their wise application. On this, the IAM finds niche on this tenet exuding pragmatically that when such resources are bundled or combined, in most cases, they can be mutually reinforcing, further differentiating entrepreneurs.

However, along with RBT's development, it has been extensively criticized. Some of the critiques have been leveled indirectly by suggesting amendments to the RBV (Foss, Klein, Kor, & Mahoney, 2008; Makadok, 2001b). Some of the criticism bother on the assumption that the theory has no managerial implications; two, it implies infinite regress; three, its applicability is too limited; among others (Kraaijenbrink, Spender & Groen, 2009). Specifically, Lockett et al. (2009) and Priem & Butler (2001a, 2001b) argue the RBV does not contain the law-like generalizations that must be expected. Rather, it stands on analytic statements that are tautological, true by definition that cannot be tested.

Notwithstanding these criticisms, it suffices to note that no single theory captures the contours of knowledge holistically. Each theory serves the purpose based on the conviction on ideas it canvasses. In the context of wealth creation through heterogeneous multiplication of wealth that leverages on certain resources, the theory serves its purpose to this paper.

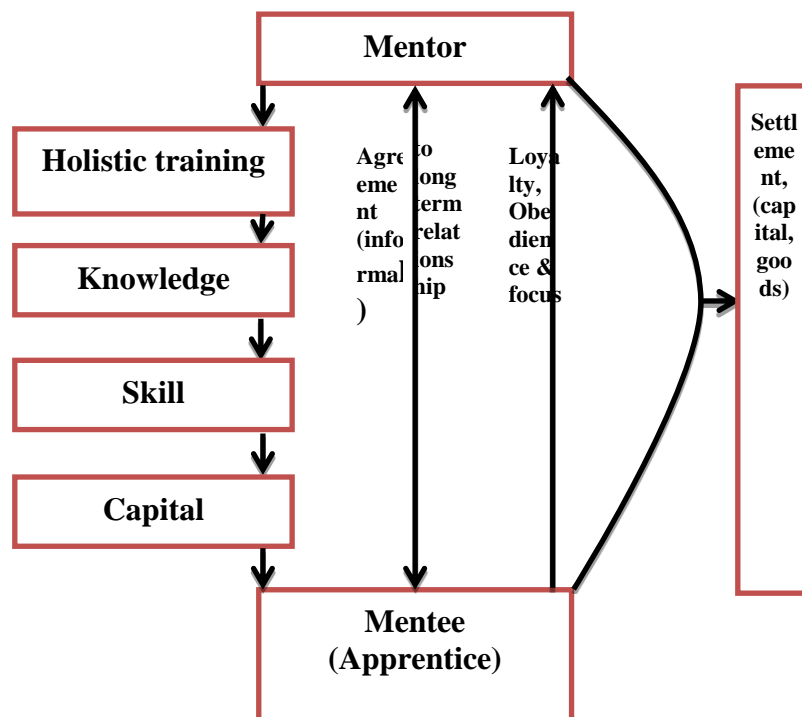
4. IGBO APPRENTICESHIP SYSTEM: CONTEXT AND SPECIFICS

The *Igba Boyi* apprenticeship system is founded in the context of the Igbo entrepreneurial spirit that also resonates with their dexterity for survival. The Igbos (*Ndi Igbo*) are large ethnic group that are predominantly found in the South-East geo-political zone of Nigeria. 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 (Ezeajughu, 2021). The people are renowned for their enterprising mentality, resilience and communalist philosophy that finds expression in the philosophy, *igwe bu ike* (unity is strength) or *onye aghala nwanne ya* (be your brother's keeper (Ogayi, 2012).

Extant literatures on the IAS have largely not had a consensus on the history of the model. While very recent literature seem to trace the origin to the Nigerian civil war of 1967-1970, others trace the origin to pre-historic formation of Igbo nation (see: Nonyelu, 2023; Ekesiobi & Dimnwobi, 2021; Iwara, 2021; BBC, 2021). The historical perspective that traces the IAS to the response to the ruins of civil war (BBC, 2021) is simply ahistorical. Preliminary ethnographic studies on Igbo traditional institutions suggest that the IAS predates the civil war. It is a system that is synonymous with the Igbo people's philosophy and far from being a response to the ruins of war (Ogayi, 2012). The system is founded on the Igbo philosophies of communality, co-prosperity and interdependence. It is a system that was practiced for centuries aimed at lifting others up, prevent poverty and scale opportunities for everyone. The Igbo indigenous entrepreneurial orientation, uncommon attributes and qualities in the arena of business, give them the unique identity as pacesetters in indigenous entrepreneurship. The IAS also known as *Igba Odibo* or *Imu Ahia* (learning trade) is an apprenticeship model that mentors a desiring and willing young ones into a business and nurtures him/her into prosperity. It is a tenured system that lasts between 5 to 10 years as may be spelt out in a formal agreement. Within this period, the mentor hones the mentee's talent, inspire him and expose him to the rudiments of the trade with a large start-up capital infusion upon settlement. The settlement usually takes the form of capital infusion to start-up business, payment of rent, offering goods to sell and share profits at agreed terms. The indigenous entrepreneurship practice has produced millions of entrepreneurs who have found economic space for themselves in Nigeria and abroad, lifting families out of poverty. In fact, the exponential numbers of entrepreneurs in Igbo society have its root to this model and are largely found in many commercial markets in Onitsha, Nnewi, Alaba, Aba and many other cities. It is a system that has produced people and ventures like Innoson Motors, Capital Oil ltd, Dozzy oil and renowned entrepreneurs in auto-parts, agro-businesses, oil consortium and chains of importation conglomerates

FIGURE 1: IGBO APPRENTICESHIP MODEL



Source: Author's compilation

As depicted in figure 1, the IAS has essential features. First, is the **mentor** who holds the ace in the process. He leverages on his wealth of experience and entrepreneurship skills to impart knowledge to a mentee. The relationship is formalized through an **agreement** with the mentee for a specified period. The period of apprenticeship is often determined by mentee's educational qualification. For instance, a young secondary school leaver may spend up to 4-5years while a Primary school leaver may spend as much as 8 years. In this contractual agreement, the mentor expresses his willingness to transfer knowledge, skills and business rudiments to the mentee. The **mentee** in return, pledges his/her loyalty, obedience and commitment to the mentor within the period. Upon satisfactory services in line with the tenets of the agreement, the mentor will set up the mentee by renting a shop independent of his control. This period usually precedes the settlement maturity period. The intendment here is to appraise the mentee's dexterity in managing his own business. Whatever the mentee makes within this period will form the basis for his capital infusion during

settlement. For instance, if the initial capital infusion was N1 million and the mentee within a year was able to make profit of N3 million outside the capital, the mentor is then convinced of his entrepreneurial sagacity. This will form the basis in determining the capital infusion for the mentee. At the expiration of the tenure, all things being equal, the mentor will now settle the mentee with capital start-up and sometimes with goods and capital as well. The agreement is deemed to have expired by this process but not the relationship.

The relationship between the mentor and the mentee is a life-long process. When the relationship is cordial and mutual, the duo will continue to relate and possibly collaborate in exploring further business opportunities and reproducing further entrepreneurs.

5. PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES OF IAS

1. Capital infusion for start-up: dearth of start-up capital for business is a major challenge stifling the growth of SME

in Africa. The IAS adequately fills this gap by ensuring that the mentee gets start-up capital infusion upon completion of his apprenticeship tenure. The amount is dependent on the *Oga's* might and the level of effort put in by the mentee sometimes, goods are given in addition to capital to the mentee.

2. Holistic training: the period of apprenticeship is an intensive period of home training and all round informal education. The mentee leverages on his stay with the *Oga* to learn domestic skills, social relationship, morality and good conduct that will help him in the future.
3. Helps in development of entrepreneurial skills: This is obviously the major reason for entering into apprenticeship. The *nwa boyi* learns the art of the trade like price bargaining, goods sampling, marketing, sourcing of goods and good customer relationship.
4. Builds long-term relationship: all things being equal, the relationship between the *oga* and *nwa boyi* does not end with the settlement. The duo by virtue of having had close association is engaged in mutual and long-term relationship. This relationship can culminate into further business partnership. In some instances, the mentor can further support the mentee in times of business challenges and vice versa.
5. Extends business contacts and connection: Upon settlement, one of the first benefits that the *nwa boyi* gets is inheriting some business contacts and customers of his *Oga*. Both the *oga* and then *nwa boyi* can jointly explore business opportunities thereby extending the frontiers of their business connections.
6. Character formation: the apprenticeship period is an intensive period of character formation leading to making the mentee the man he is. Certain norms, morals and values are impacted. This helps in nurturing the character of discipline, honesty and moral piety.

Despite these essential benefits, the IAS is challenged by so many factors. The challenges bedeviling the system sometimes results in court litigation and threat to life.

First, is the intentional refusal to settle the apprentice. Dishonesty on the part of the master or the apprentice has tended to dent the good intentions of the *igba boyi* 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.

Secondly, the Igbo apprenticeship system often leads to abuses on both sides. Thus, some callous masters at times inflict domestic violence on their Inductees while some will fail to settle theirs at the end of the service. This puts the apprentice into hard and regrettable conditions. Worst still, there has been news of apprentice liquidating their masters and cart away their wealth.

Another challenge of Igbo apprenticeship system 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.

Again, complete dearth of legal framework to ensure a high sense of regards to the agreement *ab initio* is a fundamental challenge. This is possibly the most critical challenge of the igbo apprenticeship system (IAS). 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 has 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. THE IMPERATIVE OF GLOBALIZING THE IGBA BOYI APPRENTICESHIP MODEL

Typical to western orthodoxy influenced by imperialism, the dominantly prevailing knowledge of entrepreneurial processes and practices largely reflects axioms that are inextricably linked to the idiosyncrasies of economic

systems of developed countries. In fact, it has long been argued that the bulk of entrepreneurship episteme is tinted and framed by Western hues. Thus, embedded concepts are encumbered with ideological and ethnocentric biases. This has meant that large part of the world system remains insufficiently accommodated in the formal discourse of entrepreneurship theories and practice. Particularly excluded are theoretic movements and practice inflections in African societies prior to as well as after the initiation of large-scale contacts with Europe. Consequently, the intellectual development of the discipline (i.e. historical development of the doctrines) in relation to African contexts has been hampered mainly because of the prevailing tendency to apply Anglo-centric prisms to the analysis of environments for which they are ill-conceived. This, in turn, mirrors a general failure by modern scholars to fully appreciate the spatial and temporal dimensions of entrepreneurship itself. As rightly noted by Adeola:

A study of enterprise cultures of Africans in Western terms has led to the arbitrary truncation of the vast canvass of entrepreneurship development in the region: the imposition of constructs and ideas prevalent in developed economies on Africa without regard to Africa's own constructs, categories, ideas and institutions. The implications have been far-reaching for the development of entrepreneurship education in Africa, resulting, in part, to a general failure by scholars to recognise non-linear and discontinuous movements of entrepreneurship in comparative settings. More recently, however, researchers have started to pull conceptual and analytical tools from various disciplinary areas to reinterpret what has been alluded to as the 'critical mess' of entrepreneurship. The results have been profoundly refreshing; boundaries have continued to be pushed back, 'truth claims' have come under increasing tensions, orthodoxies and taken-for-granted assumptions are challenged, methodological pluralism and conceptual flexibility are significantly evident and gaining popularity (Adeola, 2020:7)

Essentially, the IAS as exemplified by *Igba Boyi* is an indigenous entrepreneurship model that mirrors the cultures and existential challenges of Africa. The model embodies this

modern rationality. Africa needs homegrown solutions to their problem. Unarguably, lack of access to capital is a major challenge that stifles and kills entrepreneurial creativity. With the IAS, the issue of capital infusion upon completion of agreement tenure is solved. This is unique and exemplary.

Of note, the *Igba boyi* is a model has essential utility to reproduce entrepreneurs that are essentially lacking in many developing countries. Those '*boyi*' today are the '*Ogas*' of tomorrow (Iremeka, 2022). By the time they complete their apprenticeship, they will be 'settled' by their '*Ogas*' to start their own businesses. The cycle continues because when they start their own business, they will in-turn take under their wings another set of '*boyis*'. This reproduction functions to address unemployment and rather creates wealth. .

In globalizing the IAS, the importance of this system to the development of SME should be considered. The Igbo apprentice system (IAS) creates interconnection 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, it's imperative to consider the replication of this model across cultures. Africa in particular can make headway in tackling unemployment, multidimensional poverty and lowering the rate of startup failure inherent in the peasant SMEs by adopting the Igbo apprenticeship system (IAS) to coexist with modern forms of apprenticeship that exists in many businesses. 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 and modified apprenticeship system which allows the apprentice with a pay, allows the apprentice to engage in other forms of skill acquisitions but does not require raising huge capital. It is a fact that most Igbo business is started on meagre resources. In fact, the IAS can be seen as **zero to hero** (wealth) entrepreneurship incubation system.

6. CONCLUSION

Dearth of capital start-up and the institutional challenges facing the informal sector is being remedied by the *Igba Boyi* apprenticeship model. This study has interrogated the IAS with a view of recommending it as a model to be replicated across cultures. Notably, the study extolled the peculiar features

of the system and the inherent advantages in the area of wealth creation, character formation, skill and knowledge transfer and most importantly, capital infusion. Some challenges that bother on trust, dishonesty and lack of legal framework to legitimize and formalize the agreement structure were salient.

However, the obvious prospects of replicating this model across Africa in particular lies in strengthening this system at home. We are imagining a situation where for example, there could be a national agency regulating such apprenticeship schemes. The agency will be responsible for a national database, and an apprenticeship exchange where aspiring 'boyi' will register their interest, and prospective 'Ogas' will register their willingness to absorb them. This will help in standardising the scheme. There will be guarantors as well.

In strengthening this as well, an insurance scheme for 'Igbo boyi' could be introduced to enable them access start-up grants should their 'Ogas' fail to settle them when they complete their apprenticeship. The 'Ogas' will contribute towards such an insurance scheme and receive refund of the premium they have contributed if they fulfill the terms of the apprenticeship. A

concrete formalization through these directions will limit the challenges that tend to discredit the IAS and systematically position it for global adoption.

7. Conflict of Interest Statement

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

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