

The Apprenticeship System and the Sustenance of Wealth in Igbo Land

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Abstract

The apprenticeship system is a program that has produced numerous entrepreneurs in Igbo land and has helped improve the economic welfare of the Igbo people. It has enabled them to acquire lifelong skills such as running and nurturing businesses and building value chains. Most importantly the apprenticeship system as practiced in Igbo land has served as a valuable means, through which wealth is generated, sustained and transferred from the older generation to the younger generation. Therefore, this paper is aimed at analyzing the apprenticeship system in Igbo land, highlighting on the various stages involved in it and how it has helped in the sustenance and transfer of wealth from one generation to another. It also pointed out the challenges facing the apprenticeship program in Igbo land today. Recommendations were made for an extensive examination of the program by relevant government agencies to help boost the Nigerian economy.

Keywords: Apprenticeship, Wealth, Igbo, Business, Apprentice

Introduction

Though the colonial administrators introduced a formal system of apprenticeship especially as regarding the blacksmith industry in Awka during the colonial era, it faded

off with the demise of colonial rule. The apprenticeship system in Igbo land could therefore be traced back to the pre-colonial era when hunters went on hunting together with young boys (sometimes their sons) who assisted the hunters and as well learnt the ropes of the hunting profession from their masters in the process. Therefore the apprenticeship system has been a long standing practice in Igbo land as far back in history as one could trace, but it was adopted into trade and business by the Igbo in a manner by which wealth is sustained and transferred from one generation to another.

Initially the interest in acquiring formal education in Igbo land was very low especially as regarding the male child. This is mainly because by the world view and mentality of Igbo people, the value and the worth of a man is measured by his ability to take up financial responsibilities. Materialism therefore, becomes the main factor in determining a man's development. Thus, in training a male child, emphasis is laid most essentially on developing and empowering him materially and financially as early as possible in life so he could begin to take up responsibilities in the family. So once a boy finishes primary school (in most cases the boy does not finish primary school) as long as he is able to write his name, he is sent off on apprentice to serve and learn a trade under a master who is most times a family relation or a friend from the same community with them. After serving and learning for a relatively long period of time the master would settle and establish him along the same line of trade.

The apprenticeship system in Igbo land is a mechanism by which wealth is transferred and sustained from one generation to another through a mentorship process. It is actually a dual sided process; the apprentice is mentored and trained in the art and science of the trade/business by his master while the master would be assisted in his business by the apprentice who at some point begins to stand in, in the absence of his master. Normal age range for leaving the home

for apprenticeship is mostly between the ages of 7 and 10. This is because within this age range it is easier to control and mould them, thus beyond this age range the possibility of being taken on apprenticeship begins to reduce. The years of mentorship ranges between 10 to 15 years depending on what the agreement was between the parents and the master.

Literature Review

According to Ekésiobi, and Dimnwobi, (2020), apprenticeship is acknowledged historically as one of the oldest methods of transmitting skills and human knowledge. Put differently, it is recognized as a combination of both practical and theoretical knowledge. According to Olulu and Udeorah (2018), apprenticeship is regarded as a means of training people to learn a trade or craft for their future wellbeing and livelihood. Olulu and Udeorah (2018) noted that apprenticeship practice could be divided into three categories which include the traditional, informal, and modern apprenticeship model. Undergoing apprenticeship training further enables the absorption of extensive skills and erudition in a particular trade or craft under the guidance of an expert. The aim is to accelerate the career of an apprentice towards developing into an accomplished tradesperson.

Apprentice and Apprenticeship have been variously defined by different scholars. Apprentice refers to a person who learns a job or skill by working for a fixed period of time, for someone who is very good at that job or skill (Merriam-Webster.com). According to Nnonyelu, (2020), apprentice is one, in most cases, a teenager or young person who elects, or is persuaded to undertake or acquire practical, and in some cases, theoretical knowledge in a specialised area of interest, or occupation he/she would want to go into in future, or earn a living from. Apprentice refers to a person who has agreed to submit himself/herself within a period of time under the

tutelage of a master/mistress, with the aim of acquiring practical, hands on, experience, and mastering the nitty-gritty of a trade, vocation or profession. In some other climes, apprentice is seen somewhat differently, as a young person between the ages of 14 and 24 who is enrolled in and attending school, in case he/she has not completed secondary education, and enrolled in an apprenticeship programme. The Brazilian characterization of apprentice highlights the different ways apprenticeship is perceived and treated in different societies.

International Labour Organisation defines apprenticeship as systematic long term training for a recognized occupation taking place substantially within an undertaking or under an independent craftsman, governed by a written a contract of apprenticeship, and is subject to established standards. Also according to OECD – ILO, apprenticeship is an effective mechanism for a seamless transition for young people to move from school to the world of work. Lee (2012), as well defined apprenticeship as a “... unique form of vocational education combining job learning and school based training for specifically defined competences and work processes, regulated by law and based on written employment contract with a compensatory payment, and standard social protection scheme.” Usually, certification follows the expiration of training where relevant certificates are awarded to successful apprentices. The foregoing definitions seem to exclude the type of apprenticeship prevalent in Igbo land that are not affiliated to, or derived from Schools, or Colleges. Amucheazi and Orji look at “apprenticeship as a job that includes training.” This is too sweeping a definition, as it includes everything in employment circles as apprenticeship, whether it is training on the job, or off the job. In several societies, in Europe and America, emphasis is now on school and work based

apprenticeship system, although the current trend is moving towards company based model where the industry influences the pattern, character and content of apprenticeship, (Vareto, 2017). It is however Gonnon's definition that seems to mirror, or at least embrace apprenticeship, as it has been practised in Nigerian type societies, where he contends that apprenticeship is a mode of learning that focuses on acquiring specialised skills pursuant to getting young adults ready for work and society, (Gonnon, 2011). Generally, Gowlland (2014), notes that apprenticeship provides the apprentice specific opportunity to get a foot in the door for future employment.

Harriett, (2006), notes that the apprenticeship system in the south -west (predominantly Yoruba) region reveals an interesting divergence. Here the apprentice, upon completion of their apprenticeship pays the master a "freedom fee" buys drinks and stages 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 case 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, leaves 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 their family are in the same city (Achebe, 2012). Igbo apprentices also do other domestic chores in the house like washing cars, ironing and cleaning whenever they are not in shop. They are appraised based on not just work ethic while learning and growing the masters 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 takeoff fund which they use for shop rent, goods, equipment (if needed) and in some cases, accommodation for a given period of time. Maliga (2013), notes that this does not in any way present collaboration with the master despite being a competitor. In fact, in some cases due to the apprentice's weak buying power, a master can assist with goods procurement for apprentice to help them reduce overhead importation /exportation cost.

Stages of the Apprenticeship program in Igbo land

The first stage of the apprenticeship program is in the household of the master. For the first two to three years, the apprentice stays in the house where he helps out with house chores and running of errands. This is the stage where the young apprentice is instructed and tested on some virtues that are very essential for his future in the apprenticeship program. These virtues include submission, obedience and trustworthiness (integrity). Within the first three years the young apprentice should be able to prove himself on these virtues, failure in this, may likely amount to being sent back home. It is after successfully scaling through this stage that the apprentice graduates to the next stage which involves going to the shop.

This second stage of the apprenticeship program is where the apprentice is exposed to what the master's trade/business is all about. He is then introduced to the trade items or goods; he feels them and begins to assist in loading and off-loading, packing and arranging the goods. This stage lasts for about six to eight years. This is the longest stage of the program and it is during this stage that the apprentice learns some important business principles such as book/stock keeping, accounting, marketing, bargaining, and discipline. Taking stocks is one of the first things learnt at this stage. He learns to take note of goods that are about to go out of stock, the quantity that is left, the goods that are frequently

demand and the ones that are about to expire, if they deal on goods that expire. Under accounting he takes note of the prices of the goods both prices at which they are bought and the prices of which they are to be sold, as well as what the profit margin is. They keep record of the number of goods that were sold and the price at which they were actually sold. Marketing is the key business principle an apprentice learns, through it, they acquire the skill of being able to convince a prospective client to patronize their goods. In Igbo language it is referred to as “*osọ ahịa*” which means to run around in search of clients/customers, it involves a lot of talking and persuasive abilities aimed at drawing the attention of a prospective buyer and introducing him/her to the goods of his/her choice at a favourable price both for the buyer and the seller. When they get a customer that needs a commodity that is not in stock, they don't let the customer go, rather they try to bargain a favorable rate with them and then collect the commodity from another trader that has it and sell to the customer and then make their own cut.

This is where they learn bargaining skills, because they would have to sell the goods a little bit above the normal price so as to pay the owner of the goods and then make their own cut. This bargaining skill is quite crucial for them because even when they are selling their own goods, if they are good at it, they stand the chance of making extra profit. The aim in bargaining is to convince the client to buy above a given rate.

Discipline is another business principle learnt during this stage, here they are taught how to save and to spend far less than they earn. A given amount of money is stipulated for the apprentice to spend on feeding daily, in spite of any situation the apprentice is constrained not to spend above that. With this he learns the discipline of self-control and moderation which is quite valuable in business.

The third and the final stage of the apprenticeship

program is where the apprentice begins to play the role of an administrator and a manager. At this point, there are now younger apprentices learning under him. This is the period when the master could let him stand in for him while he is absent. This stage lasts between a year and three years. The apprentice is able to play this role now because of the training and discipline he has acquired in the first and second stages. At this point he knows and has the contacts of their suppliers, clients and partners. He is allowed by the master to get involved in some aspects of decision making process of the business.

The sustenance of wealth through Apprenticeship

The learning process of the apprenticeship system is mostly by observation and experience. The apprentice observes as the master achieves business success and makes profits and also observes as he makes wrong business decisions and incur losses, he then takes note as he learns the dos and the don'ts. The apprentice gains experience as he gets involved in the day to day running of the business, he makes his own mistakes and gets punished, achieves targets and gets praised and sometimes rewarded, learning a lot in the process.

Thus, at the end of the apprenticeship program the master is expected to settle and establish the apprentice by either giving him some money to start up his own business or starting up the business for him by stocking a shop for him. Hence by this process, a master has been able to reproduce himself by mentoring and establishing a younger person to start up another wealth creation venture. This is why in Igbo land which is where the apprenticeship system is dominant; most businessmen do not go beyond their family circle or at most their community to take boys for apprenticeship, leading to a situation whereby there are clusters of wealthy personalities in various communities in Igbo land. This is as a result of the apprenticeship system through which

businessmen keep reproducing themselves and sustaining wealth in their families and communities.

This apprenticeship training is actually a program in the real sense of it. This is because these businessmen as masters keep enrolling the young boys as apprentices either one after the other or one batch after another depending on the amount of resources at their disposal. Each person or batch goes through the three stages of the program and at the end are sent forth into the business world to start up with a wealth creation venture. This program was to a large extent effective and deserves extensive examination by appropriate government agencies to see how it could be incorporated into the educational system as it has the potential of reinvigorating Nigeria's educational system making it more practical and empowering. It as well has the capacity to rejuvenate Nigeria's economy.

It is pertinent to note that the most essential part of the apprenticeship system is not when the master settles and establishes the apprentice but during the stages (especially the first and second stages) when the apprentice imbibes the various virtues, abilities, skills and principles of business. These are the essentials because that is what the training is all about. A trained person can start up a business almost with nothing, which sometimes is the case, when a master due to one reason or the other fails to settle and establish an apprentice. The unsettled and unestablished apprentice who is properly trained may wander about for a short period during which he may be able to get a loan or raise a certain amount of cash through assisting a friend in his shop with his marketing and bargaining skills, acquired during the apprenticeship program and with that, start up his own business. And because he has been trained he can actually grow the business from that start-up stage to a big business venture. So, the training is what turns an apprentice into a master and not the amount of money he is settled with.

Thus, when critically examined, it would be observed that the apprenticeship system practiced predominantly among the Igbo is a form of entrepreneurship program/school which young Igbo boys attend. This is true when the quality of training in terms of knowledge, skills and experience which they are exposed to, is considered. The training is actually very effective because it is not just classroom experience but a practical real life experience as they learn on the job. It is a school of its own because the boys through the process learn the rudiments of business and are trained to become economically independent and stable, being able to make meaningful contributions to the society. Again, the apprenticeship program is quite profitable for the apprentice in terms of the time spent. If a boy leaves home for the apprenticeship program at the age of seven by the age of twenty-one he would have been settled by his master and by the age of thirty-one, he would have been able to stabilize and start handling heavy responsibilities in his family and community.

But a young man who went through formal education at that same age may still be struggling to find his feet. This is therefore the rationale behind the apprenticeship system in Igbo land. It tends to be both time and cost effective both for the apprentice himself and the parents who send their boys for the apprenticeship program.

The challenges facing the Apprenticeship program in Igbo land

Sadly, this apprenticeship system in Igbo land has virtually died off. There are a number of reasons for this unfortunate development. First was that as time went on, formal education became more and more accepted not just as a norm but as being essential for a balanced business venture. So even those that want to go into business would first of all finish their secondary education, some even go as far as

finishing their university education, before venturing into trade.

This development arose as a result of the challenges those who go through the apprenticeship program were facing when they get established in business. For the fact that they did not go through formal education, reading and writing as well as understanding some terms and performing some business calculations becomes an issue for them. So they resorted to employing and relying on those who have acquired formal education for assistance in these areas, to be able to manage their fast growing business empires.

But most of the times, these persons they rely on, do take advantage of their ignorance and exploit them heavily thus, it became necessary for young boys aspiring to become businessmen to acquire formal education before venturing into the business world.

As a result of this, another variation of the apprenticeship system emerged. This variation is still the apprenticeship system but with much modification; first is that the apprentice starts the program not at a tender age anymore because he has to finish his formal education, so if they are to start the apprenticeship program after their secondary education, they would be starting it at the later part of their teenage age or early twenties and if it is after university education, it would be in their mid-twenties. Therefore, at this age the apprentice is not really there to serve but mainly to learn and as a result the master only partly shoulders the responsibility for his upkeep while the larger part of the responsibility is shouldered by the family of the apprentice. The period of the apprenticeship program is then drastically reduced to between a year and six months to three years, and at the end the responsibility of the settling and establishing the apprentice is no longer on the master but on the family of the apprentice.

Suffice it to state that this modification to a great

extent watered down the effectiveness of the apprenticeship system. The reason is that the service aspect of the program which is almost removed is the major aspect of the training program, because the apprentice actually learns by serving. Therefore what the apprentice only does is just to stay, observe and asks questions, and given that the period is reduced to a few years, the impact made on the apprentice at the end of the program is by far less than what it used to be under the full apprenticeship program hence, by this modification the actual aim of the apprenticeship system which is the sustenance of wealth through capacity development and economic empowerment is no longer fully actualized.

Another reason for the fading away of the apprenticeship system in Igbo land is the quick money syndrome. Most young boys now want to make it quick and fast not wanting to go through the rigorous process of mentorship and learning which affords them the opportunity to acquire business skills for development. They are no longer patient enough to subject themselves under authority for the long period of apprenticeship, thus they now prefer to resort to internet fraud and all manner of illegal ventures in order to make quick cash. This development is rather unfortunate and inimical to development because wealth made through illegal means cannot be sustained.

Again one more reason why the apprenticeship system in Igbo land is dying off is because businessmen now prefer to employ the services of sales girls to taking young boys on the apprenticeship program. This proved to be more cost effective for them giving the fact that under the full apprenticeship system, all the cost of raising the apprentice from the tender age to the point where he is to be settled rests squarely on the master which include the feeding, clothing and accommodation of the apprentice. At the end the master would still need to settle and establish the apprentice. Thus

realizing the weight of the responsibility the businessmen now resorted to employing sales girls who they pay between N10, 000 to N20, 000 monthly. As a result of this the businessmen now get more involved in the day to day running of the business to make up for the services of the apprentices.

Conclusion

It has to be however noted that, it does not mean that the sustenance of wealth has faded away with the apprenticeship system. Rather the fading away of the apprentice system has reduced the sustenance of wealth from the community/kindred level to the family level. Under the apprenticeship system, a businessman could take an apprentice from anywhere within his community, some even take from outside their community as long as the boy is an Igbo. But with the fading away of the apprentice system, businessmen mainly focus on their immediate family ensuring that one or two of their male children are prepared even while they pursue their formal education to join the business and subsequently run the business in the absence of their father. By this means, wealth is still transferred and sustained from an older generation to a younger generation.

Recommendation

The apprenticeship system as discussed in this work has been quite successful among the Igbo businessmen. It is thus recommended that a model in the semblance of the apprenticeship system be developed and integrated into the educational system in Nigeria, especially in the higher institutions. It would require a framework that would provide for a hands-on experience in the field not just a laboratory experience but in real life situations while those employed as mentors would be on ground to guide and to instruct. This model would be for every field of study not just for a few,

thus this would help ensure that every field of study in Nigeria is quite relevant to the Nigerian society and market. This would also help increase the employability value of Nigerian graduates and as well, prepare them to be economically independent. This is exactly what is achieved by the apprenticeship system with the young boys who go through the program.

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