

## **APPRECIATION OF THE IGBO APPRENTICESHIP SYSTEM (*IMU-AHIA*) AS A MICROCOSM OF SOFT SKILLS**

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### **Abstract**

Apprenticeship is an arrangement whereby a child or an adult, male or female bonds himself or herself to serve and learn within a definite time from a master who undertakes to teach his or her trade to the apprentice. The aim of this paper is to critically appreciate the Imu-Ahia system of apprenticeship with a view to highlighting it as a microcosm of soft skills. Using critical analysis, the researcher x-rays the apprentice system, traces the origin, explains the processes, evaluates the features especially at it pertains to soft skill acquisition and finds out that apprenticeship has greatly helped in infusing soft skills into the youths. The system has also helped to provide a mentorship model as seen between masters and apprentice, giving them a purpose worthy of emulation so that apprentices can continue the trend when they are established. The researcher hereby recommends that the Imu-Ahia system of apprenticeship be adopted in the education sector as this would enhance young people's employability and thus increase their entrepreneurial prospects. This system does not only serve as a means of survival for the average man but also, it has proved to be a required elixir for the development of soft skills which is a sine qua non for survival in the 21<sup>st</sup> century work environment.

**Keywords:** Apprenticeship, Igbo apprenticeship system, imu-ahia, soft skills

### **Introduction**

The Igbo people are very enterprising people who live in the south eastern part of Nigeria. According to Osiri (2020), the Ndi-Igbo tribe are known to be among the most industrious people on the surface of the earth. They are the third largest and the most industrious ethnic group in Nigeria and are known for their perseverance, resilience, risk management, and business acumen. The entrepreneurial drive of the Igbo people cannot be disputed as the tribe has produced successful traders, manufacturers and entrepreneurs globally. In fact, Igbos has been entrepreneurial within and outside their society years before the advent of the Europeans. The Igbos had early exposure to business through their slave masters in the pre colonial era. Though, colonialism is highly linked with economic interest, its role in Igbo entrepreneurship is obvious from the perspective that it highly exposed the Igbos to legitimate trade and broadened their scope of entrepreneurial insights. Ottenberg as cited by Chinweuba and Ezeugwu (2017) in his observation holds this view and asserts that;

What was unique about the economic relations between the Igbo and Europeans is that they were intensive, continuous and of long duration. Through trade, first in slaves and later in palm products, the Igbo acquired many new items of material culture, new wealth, and new standard of values and prestige.

Iwara, Amaechi and Netshandama (2019) noted that this action kindled the entrepreneurship spirit of the Igbo people and galvanized them to quickly venture into various forms of entrepreneurship during the colonial era.

The Igbo apprentice system or *igba boyi* gained prominence at the end of the Nigerian-Biafran civil war in 1970 which left many Igbo people impoverished, unable to recover pre-war assets, especially those located in other parts of Nigeria. This training system evolved from the long-standing practice of sending younger family members to live with older relatives in other towns. The relatives supervised or provided education and trade whether formal or informal. In another way, as one becomes prosperous as an entrepreneur, he engages a younger member of the family or community to help in the business venture. This feature endures till date and explains the Igbo apprenticeship system.

*Imu-Ahia*, the Igbo apprenticeship system gradually became an informal system where established business owners take in young boys and train them in their line of business while they serve as apprentices. *Imu-Ahia* literally translated as ‘to learn marketing’ is an integral part of Igbo culture. The *Imu-Ahia* process in some Igbo villages begins with a formal traditional handing over ceremony between the young boy’s family, the ‘Oga’ and respected elders as witnesses. Here, the Oga states his expectations and assures the family of the boy’s welfare, while the family admonish the boy to remain faithful, honest and hardworking to his Oga. This system is built on the Igbo principle of “*umunna nwezuo aku, udo achia*” literally meaning ‘when every kinsman acquires wealth there will be lasting peace’. The implication is that the successful kinsman would endeavour to train younger members of the family hub or clan and guide them in his line of business so as to be successful like him. In so doing there will be a succession of successful businessmen. The *Imu ahia* system sought to develop the individual and in the process instil values and soft skills which strengthened and distinguished them in business. Soft skills in this context, refers to a broad set of skills, behaviours, and personal qualities that enable people to effectively exploit their environment, relate well with others, perform well, and achieve their goals. At the heart of Igbo apprenticeship system, are unique and major qualities of courage, perseverance and determination which enables the apprentice tackle risks, dilemma, loss, ugly experiences and enormous economic impediments as seen in the world of business. Forrest as cited in Chinweuba and Ezeugwu (2017) submits that these unique traits are part of the significant strength of the Igbos over every denial, hardship, discipline and risk proneness that goes with entrepreneurship. The need to appraise the Igbo apprenticeship system (*Imu-Ahia*) as a microcosm of soft skills gave impetus to this paper.

### Concept of Apprenticeship

Apprenticeship is taken to denote training programmes that combine vocational education with work-based learning for an intermediate occupational skill, and that are subject to externally imposed training standards, particularly for their workplace component. The International Labour Organization, (ILO) defined apprenticeship in its Apprenticeship Recommendation (R60, 1939) as “any system by which an employer undertakes by contract to employ a young person and to train him or have him trained systematically for a trade for a period the duration of which has been fixed in advance and in the course of which the apprentice is bound to work in the employer's service.” Okeke and Osang (2021) defined apprenticeship as a system for training a new generation of practitioners of a trade or profession with on-the-job training. These authors further explained that the apprenticeship practice is in three categories viz; the traditional model, the informal model and the modern apprenticeship model. The traditional model involves the transfer of family skill to the next generation of members, while the informal model though traditional in nature, have non-family members engage in the apprenticeship scheme. The modern apprenticeship scheme involves training of participants in vocational skills, well-structured programme of learning, fixed working/training hours and combination of vocational training with educational programmes.

Most of the training of the apprentices are done while working for an employer who helps the apprentices learn their trade or profession, in exchange for their input for an agreed period after they have achieved measurable competencies. Olulu and Udeorah (2018) asserts that

apprenticeship may be considered as a system of learning whereby an individual trained in a professional skill in a practical way through a structured program of on-the-job training. It usually involves acquiring knowledge, mechanical skills and the development of an attitude or discipline for a particular job. Indeed, apprenticeship enables the apprentice benefit from both theoretical and practical training.

### **The Concept of Soft Skills**

Soft skills are personality traits and behaviours which are displayed by one in different situations. They are abilities that make people better employees and open doors to many opportunities that are beneficial to the business. According to Mark McCormack (2016) Soft skills is a term often associated with a person's emotional intelligence quotient, the cluster of personality traits, social graces, communication, language, personal habits, friendliness, managing people, leadership, etc. that characterize relationships with other people. Soft skills, also known as life skills, complement hard skills to enhance an individual's relationships, job performance and career prospects. The World Health Organization (WHO) defined life skills as abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life. A famous simple definition of Soft Skills comes from the winner of the Nobel prize 2000 for Economics James Heckman: "Soft Skills predict success in life". Soft skills can be learned and developed with practice and experience. Today's business is all about people, it warrants portraying your business in a positive and impactful way. The need for soft skills is captured by Cinque, (2015) who identified a cause-effect correlation between soft skills and positive personal and professional achievements of people. In this context soft skills are skills which help people take rational decisions, solve problems, think critically, build powerful relationships, build resilience in the face of setbacks and carry out businesses in a productive manner.

They are not only necessary for work/business, they are essential for everyday life. Cinque (2015) noted that soft skills are so important not only for the labour market but for a complete human being to achieve happiness in life. Therefore, in order to acquire soft skills the support of more experienced people (mentors) who have already achieved remarkable results is fundamental. The established entrepreneurs, the mentors who can personally support and take care of the individual growth and learning, are considered particularly powerful in the process of development of these skills.

### **Igbo Apprentice System *Imu-Ahia* as a microcosm of Soft Skills**

In Igbo land, young men are engaged to learn a trade of business; *Imu-Ahia* which refers to the Igbo apprenticeship system. Iwara et al., (2019) noted that the scheme also known as Igba-Boi, Igba-boyi or Igba-Odibo, describes a process in which a potential entrepreneur or mentee, in most cases at the early age of 12–25 years, is enrolled either by the parent, family member or themselves under a Master/Mistress, an experienced entrepreneur (mentor), to learn the desired trade. Boyi' is the Igbo translation derived from the English word 'boy', and it signifies a young person, boy or girl, learning a business under a mentor. According to Ejo-Orusa (2019) the Igbo apprentice system is an extension of their entrepreneurial make-up where a strategic training process is utilised to train mostly young men of Igbo stock into entrepreneurial ventures by established entrepreneurs locally known as Oga. Ukwueze (2021) affirms that the Igbo Apprenticeship system (*Imu-Ahia/Igbaboyi*) is an unpaid enterprise, incubator model that avails people the opportunity of learning a trade or business within a stipulated range of years (5-8), and at the end of the apprenticeship tenure, the trainee gets cash infusion and assistance to start up their own businesses. Maleke (2018) describes it as an apprenticeship system that purports a responsibly established businessmen [the nurturer] in a town, street or locale to pick up teenagers-young adults [the apprentice] from their homes and give them an informally formal, but raw and practical, cut-throat business education. The Igbo entrepreneur is a person who seeks opportunities to make profit through innovativeness, creativity, customers' satisfaction and efficient utilization of scarce resources by coordinating the use of the factors of production. Thus, he or she is creative, passionate and result driven.

These uniquely resilient entrepreneurs of the Igbo extraction often manage to find success. In fact, Adichie, (2014) noted that the 1967 secession of Igbo people from Nigeria which led to civil war was foisted out of fear that Nigerian economy may collapse with the exit of the Igbo entrepreneurial touch. This apprenticeship system achieved a notable global importance after the Civil War of 1967. By the end of 1970's, money and human capital were scarce, the hope of Biafra (predominantly Igbo) was lost and means of livelihood were stunted. After the desolation of the Civil War and its terrible legacy of scattered grounds in Eastern Nigeria, the Igbos resorted to trading, through the apprenticeship system to improve their living standards.

For a very long time, this system has existed in the Eastern part of Nigeria wherein traders or artisans adopt youths for apprenticeships. These apprentices learn from hands-on experience and are finally set up to run their businesses with seed funding furnished by the person who mentored them. Ejo Orusa and Mpi (2019) submit that after the introduction of Western education to Nigeria, the Nwaboi Apprenticeship System became the norm for young people who did not have any type of formal education but it progressed to include those who had primary school education but the bar later shifted to include those with secondary education but could not proceed further. The training is usually done on a more personal level compared to formal education, and so incorporates social grooming, values and ethics development. The boys go through this training at a young age and become young experts on both the hard and soft skills required to run a successful business. This practice has been the secret to the introduction and the achievement of significant business hierarchies and networks founded by the Igbos. At the end of the learning years, the boy becomes as good as his master. Through the different responsibilities that the master places on the apprentice, the master prepares him for the future. In what seems like a tough time, the master exposes the apprentice to a future reality that is tough and can only be overcome through hard work. It is not in all cases that the master stays with the apprentice in the same shop or business premises, having gathered some experience, the master can decide to open a shop elsewhere, different from the location where he might be. In this case, the apprentice manages the business branch for the master, representing him at business discussions and importation with trade partners. This seeming independence of the apprentice in management does not only help the master expand his business and thus make more profit, it also helps the apprentice with an ownership mindset that gives room for trust, building of his confidence and exposure, which is necessary for the apprentice if he must succeed in the future. At the picking up point and settlement point, there are no written documents or court papers to sign. It is done in trust. According to Neuwirth (2018) the interesting thing is that nothing is in writing, it's all done on trust and credibility. The boy's family would usually come together and meet with the master at the commencement of the arrangement. And at the end of the apprentice period, the master will also bring the boy home and settle him in the presence of his family. So the circle continues as the apprentice graduate also trains his own boys or interns in the business as well and they learn at his feet. Such arrangement has enabled Ndi Igbo to dominate trade in this part of our world. Adeola (2021) noted that the system has successfully nurtured young adults into gainful employment, trading, and entrepreneurship for decades. Today, *Imu-Ahia* has evolved to become a cultural legacy not only within the Eastern region of Nigeria but also the nation at large. The businesses of the Igbo entrepreneurs where the apprenticeship system is practised include:

- i) Transportation and Haulage Business
- ii) Handset and Computer Repairs
- iii) Trading(All kinds of Products)
- iv) Auto-spare Parts Dealership
- v) Car Mechanics, Vulcanizing, Welding
- vi) Repairs and Maintenance of Electrical &Electronic Appliances

- vii) Fashion Design, Tailoring, Hair Dressing& Shoe Making
- viii) Draughts man ship, Building Construction, Electrification, Plumbing
- ix) Carpentry& Furniture Making

x) Film Making, Photography

The concept of soft skills is compatible with many of the principles which Igbo societal interaction is founded. In the acquisition of soft skills, *Imu-Ahia* or *Igba-Boy* concept works in the sort of manner that enterprise proprietors, the *ogas* groom apprentices to study the commercial enterprise, the way it works, the secrets and the techniques. They are appraised based on not just work ethics while learning and growing the masters businesses but on performance in non – business related areas like respect for the master’s spouse /family, decorum, innovation, creativity among others. Ukwueze (2021) noted that Igbo apprentices also do other domestic chores in the house like washing cars, ironing and cleaning whenever they are not in shop. In essence, the system is modelled in such a way that the apprentice lives with his master so as to acquire the necessary approach, subtlety and decorum required for the trade or profession, usually for an agreed number of years after which the master settles the apprentice by setting up a business for him, and sustains the required guidance up until certain level of business maturity. It is the acquisition of these soft skills that make graduates of Igbo apprenticeship scheme entrepreneurs instead of job seekers.

*Imu-Ahia* system of apprenticeship aims at providing opportunities for the trainee to acquire soft skills, because some apprentices are accountable for sales and store management where honesty, responsibility and work ethics are core principles. Osiri, (2020) aver that the Igbos do not joke with the values of sacrifice and hard work, integrity and honesty, kindness and co-prosperity, and truth and guidance. The mentors therefore instill these into their mentees knowing full well that these are attributes that sustain an enterprise despite the ‘hard’ technical skills. Ichoku (2019) in agreement assert that the Igbo apprenticeship scheme has the best practical business networking (team work), less vulnerability to business uncertainties, reduction of market search-related transaction costs, the creation and utilization of social capital (trust), access to collateral-free credit, collective business expansion and job creation. About two years before the end of the apprenticeship, the master allows the apprentice to work with sparse supervision, which is likened to an examination. After the allotted time for the training has elapsed, a graduation rite would be held for the *Nwa-boyi* (the individual that learnt the trade). Then depending on the performance and relationship with his mentor, the apprentice would additionally be given a lump sum for his or her services through the years. The cash is meant to be used to start a business for the *Nwa-boyi*. This version is how most Igbo businesses begin.

Apprenticeship is a relevant education and training pathway to balance technical, soft, and social skills. In affirmation, Ukwueze (2021) affirms that the Igbo apprenticeship system serves as a preparatory ground for higher function and offers a more practical platform for coaching and training. Orugun and Nafiu (2014) submit that this system of apprenticeship brings about respect, humility and loyalty between the master and the apprentice thus fostering peace and unity among brothers. Udegbe (2013) in the same vein stated that some of the observed attributes in the Igbo businesses are ability to cope in a dynamic environment, ability to organize, reorganize and forecast, ability to delegate responsibility, ability to utilize business opportunities, energetic and hard-working spirit, courage, confidence, critical thinking, creative and innovative skill, determination and perseverance. The aforementioned constitute a potpourri of soft skills.

### Conclusion

The Igbo apprenticeship system, *Imu ahia* is a microcosm of crucial soft skills needed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The Igbo people believe in purposeful hard work, and personal effort, this stems from their world-view which is inculcated in them from birth as a guiding principle and a

drive towards entrepreneurial performance. It enables the training of young people in various skills despite their educational background. It can also be referred to as “passing down the mantle” hence making young people well established after a stipulated period of time of about 5-7 years. The apprentice does not receive business training only but acquires subtlety, finesse and etiquette that define the uniqueness of entrepreneurs of Igbo stock. The system assures the best match between the skills they need and the training of young people. This system is not meant to inculcate hard, technical or business skills only, but at the same time makes it possible for mentors to equip their mentees with these crucial skills to withstand the rigours of the business terrain of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The distinctive feature is that these attributes are acquired *pari passu* with the training. This era in the life of the country needs individuals who can think, not just about a specific task but have the ability to think through problems and develop solutions. There is need therefore to adapt this aspect of Igbo apprenticeship system in our education especially technical education in order to produce graduates with the required blend of skills to survive in the contemporary entrepreneurial world.

### **Recommendation**

In addition to careers advice, schools should make students and parents; see the possibility to undertake an apprenticeship. This could include organising, in cooperation with business organisations and enterprises, school visits to enterprises, teachers spending time in a local enterprise to observe its apprenticeship scheme, and apprentices coming into schools to talk to pupils. *Imu-Ahia* system of apprenticeships enhances young people’s employability and this increases their entrepreneurial prospects. This helps to ease their entry or re-entry to the labour market and provides an opportunity to combine work with the acquisition of a vocational qualification.

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