

REPOSITIONING THE IGBO ENTREPRENEURIAL APPROACH OF IGBA BOI IN AN ERA OF AI-POWERED TECHNOLOGY

Evaristus Ifeanacho, PhD
Department of Religion and Human Relations
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
eo.ifeanacho@unizik.edu.ng; 08139035530

Abstract

In the traditional Igbo context, hard work is given a pride of place. That has resulted in evident boost especially in commercial enterprise. More so, the communitarian mentality of onyeaghala nwanne ya (don't leave your brother/sister behind) helped in a near chain approach their entrepreneurial ventures that gave rise to igba boi (apprenticeship) It is a community-oriented system of mentorship in business ventures. Consequent upon the fact the Igbos practiced extended family system, thus the spirit of extended assistance through apprenticeship is highly promoted. In that regard, the i ga (Master) has nwa-bi i (apprentice) who he devotes his time in guiding in a particular trade. The apprenticeship last for an agreed number of years. At the end, he settles the nwa-bi i with a huge sum of money in order to help him kick-start his own business. The nwa-bi i now assumes full responsibility of his own business. In some case, the master further assists him by giving him some goods in hire purchase. But recently, the practice of igba boi is gradually fading away because many young people are desirous of quick money and that has even resulted in some umu-boi (apprentices) duping their masters. Recently, digital technology has graduated to the different forms of Artificial Intelligence (AI). The obvious effect is that AI-powered technology has continued to permeate human affairs in all its ramifications – economy, healthcare, education, industry, and even commerce etc. The researcher through qualitative methodology investigates on the necessity of having a re-orientation in the Igbo entrepreneurial approach in order to get attuned to the AI-powered technological landscape. The research exposes the inner content of AI, and how it is going to change the Igbo entrepreneurship style of igba boi.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, entrepreneurship, *igba boi*, e-commerce, AI-commerce

Introduction

The traditional Igbo person is hardworking. That is why in the olden days a man's wealth is measured by the size of his yam barn. Definitely, the abundance of yam harvests depicts the sweat and energy put in during the time of planting season. To that effect, there is always the struggle to outweigh the other during the time of cultivation with the hope that if the god of fertility blesses human effort, then one can experience bountiful

harvest. But the skill of Igbo people is not limited to agriculture. With the passage of time, there came the advent of commerce and industry. In this context originated the famous method of apprenticeship called *igba-boi* that gained momentum after the Nigerian civil war. It helped in no small measure not only in wealth creation but also in promotion of resourcefulness. It really changed the face of the entrepreneurial approach by the Igbo people. The system of *Igba-boi* catapulted the business skill of Igbo people into the global sphere.

Since culture is dynamic, there is always the need for positive improvement. In this era of AI Artificial Intelligence (AI) powered technology, it is important to think on how to reposition the *Igba-boi* system so as not to be overtaken by such speedily spreading AI-based technology. At a time when machines begin replace human beings in their work and even do it with clinical efficiency what will be the fate of *Igba-boi* entrepreneurial system? When e-commerce becomes more widespread *igba-boi* will gradually disappear into oblivion. What will be the alternative for the sustaining the *igba-boi* system? More still, evidence already abound of attempt at replace *nwa-boi* with the use of sales-girls because of attendant problems currently associated the *igba-boi* entrepreneurial approach. What actually will be the way out in order to salvage the entrepreneurial approach of *igba-boi* or let it metamorphose into a better approach?

Examining entrepreneur/entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship is rooted in the old French word *entreprendre* meaning to undertake. So literally entrepreneur refers to one who undertakes or manages a business affair. In that vein, Rumball (1989), maintains that it was the French economist Richard Cantillon who described the entrepreneur as someone who is not only able to identify opportunities but more so takes risks towards realizing those opportunities. To that effect, an entrepreneur was seen as the organizer of production, the risk taker in investment, commercialization of inventions. On another note, Mbaegbu and Ekienabor (2018) opine that it came into use during Middle Ages and was used to describe a person performing diverse roles. Katz and Green (2009), define the entrepreneur as someone who initiates and owns an organization with particular motive of earnings and growth, and with a manifest tendency to innovative behavior. The entrepreneur as noted by Kent, Sexton, and Vesper (1983) has the management functions of coordinating, organizing and supervising of production. In the process of supervising the entrepreneur with the knack for innovation discovers new methods of putting together factors of production and perfection of old methods with an aim of introducing new goods and services, and opening up new markets. All in all, there are various understandings of entrepreneur. Meredith, Nelson, & Neck (1996), sums them up by presenting the entrepreneur as any person who has the ability to see and evaluate business opportunity and takes advantage of it even if it means relocating his place of abode in order to actualize his mission and profit from the venture. In more practical terms, Nwachukwu (1990) describes an entrepreneur as one who has the ability to create a business, nurse it to growth and profitability or take over an existing nonperforming

business to turn it around or discover a new market for existing goods and services in order to live by profit.

For Scarborough (2014) entrepreneur is one who creates a new business in the face of risk and uncertainty for the purpose of achieving profit and growth by identifying significant opportunities and assembling the necessary resources to capitalize on them. Sharma (1999) defines entrepreneurs as the owners of the business who contribute the capital and bear the risk of uncertainties in business life. He organizes, manages, assumes the risks and takes the decisions about the enterprise.

On the other hand, Harper (1996) saw entrepreneurship as the main force of the economy and defined it as an activity search of profits aimed at identifying and solving specific problems in structurally complex and uncertain situations. Low (2001) went further to defined entrepreneurship as the process of identifying, evaluating and capturing an opportunity. In sum, entrepreneurship embraces some central functions what border on: creating an enterprise by innovation or penetrating into new market in order to live by profit. Herbert and Link (1989) affirm that while there are several definitions of entrepreneurship, the central ideas of the concept incorporate uncertainty and risk taking, innovation, perception and change (Herbert and Link, 1989).

It is important to note that there are various branches of entrepreneurship namely micropreneur and megapreneur. In 1999, Inegbenebor and Osaze differentiated various grades of entrepreneurship on a continuum from craftsman entrepreneurship to opportunistic entrepreneurship which establishes large scale enterprises. The craftsman entrepreneur is often referred to as a *micropreneur*. Exposing its inner content, Ibekwe (2023) maintains that micropreneur is an entrepreneur who operates a small-scale business with a limited number of employees, often relying on technology and digital platforms. Unlike traditional entrepreneurs, micropreneurs typically focus on niche markets and leverage their expertise to deliver specialized products or services. Further still, micropreneurs embrace a more agile and flexible approach. They leverage their skills and expertise to create small-scale ventures that cater to specific customer needs. Hinchliffe (2020) explains that megapreneurs are entrepreneurs who with a desire to build a business start small. Through hard work, perseverance and a preparedness to take a risk based on extraordinary determination and unquestioning belief they build those business into large, often global enterprise. In fact, exposing the concept of megapreneurship it is observed that it is a visionary approach that transcends conventional business boundaries. Nonetheless, megapreneurs are individuals who not only build successful enterprises but also leave an indelible mark on the world through innovation, impact, and a commitment to transformative change (<https://www.kapitalbit.com/strategic-and-commercial-approach-with-technical-understanding/>)

Igba-boi: its inner meaning

According to Okonkwo (2022), *igba-bi i* is a “locally generated venture capital” that

requires a business owner who takes an apprentice and 'settle(s)' him at the end of a term of engagement by assisting in setting him up in a business through cash infusion, the payment of rent or offering of goods to the apprentice to sell and share in the profit.” This is consolidated by the fact of *igba mb?* (struggle, diligence) divested of every slothful attitude. In this entrepreneurial venture, it is a gainful struggle that increases one's income and in the end creates wealth. For Chinweuba and Ezeugwu,

To overcome this disdainful condition, the Igbos tend to engage in economic struggle (*igba mb?*) displaying a resounding entrepreneurial initiative, skill, ambition, competition, enterprise and hard work. Consequently, the Igbo embrace entrepreneurial ventures as a means of dominating nature, achieving economic reliance, satisfying their competitive innate drive for achievement, leaving human imprint, and improving the quality of human life. (2017:17)

This *igba bi i* is strongly founded on the “Igbo philosophies of communality, co-prosperity and interdependence, the model is characterized by the transgenerational transfer of entrepreneurial skills and the reproduction of business champions”. (Oyewunmi, Oyewunmi and Moses, 2020). Inasmuch as the Igbos work assiduously and put in every form of ingenuity to create wealth and also help others to prosper, it is usually based on moral principles. Honesty and maintenance of one's integrity are the pillars of their conduct even in business ventures. Hence, the Igbo saying, *ezi afa ka ego* (good name is greater than silver and gold). That is why parents can go long way to cross examine their children whenever they come home with any foreign material. Inability to explain its source of the material will merit the child a merciless lashing with cane. In the end, he/she is compelled to send back the item from where he/she got it. Chinweuba and Ezeugwu (2017) gave a detailed exposé of how the traditional Igbo people detest ill-gotten wealth of any sort thus,

wealth acquired through dubious means and circumstances does not earn intrinsic respect in Igbo land. As such, wealth acquisition is expected to tow the means of hard work, integrity and honesty. In fact, the Igbo assertion of *akị luo i nị okwuo ebe o si* (when wealth gets home, it declares its source) depicts Igbo probe for sources of wealth that enters the community. Even in this present epoch when global forces of westernization have disorganized some Igbos into reproachable ventures, the true Igbo communities still revere wealth made through honest means (*akị akpalu na i zị kwị i tị*) and repudiate ill-gotten wealth or money (*aji ego*). It is generally believed among the Igbos that ill-gotten wealth is a curse rather than blessing. Thus people are reluctant to associate with people whose source of wealth is suspected to be questionable. This is more so when it is money made through charms (*i gwị ego*) and shading blood (*ego i bara*). (p.19)

Tracing the historical foundation of Igba-boi

The Igbo traditional set up of the earlier generation places high premium on integrity and training of young people. The extended family system makes the training of children a joint affair. Everyone takes part in it. No one turns aside in the sight of

misbehavior; rather a child is instantly corrected or even punished by anyone that is present in the occasion of any misconduct. The parents usually thoroughly cross-examine a child that comes home with any foreign item. Such a child must explain every detail of how he came about such item. Where he/she is unable to give a reasonable explanation, he/she is mandated to return the item to its owner. This is the usual Igbo context in the training of young people.

At the early time, many parents did not see the importance of education especially for their male children. Consequently, some easily sent out their young children to business apprenticeship (*igba boi/igba odibo/imu-ahia*) in order to be guided by their master (*Oga*) in learning a trade with the aim of being stabilized in a particular trade after few years. Later, there was emphasis on education and many embraced education and enrolment to *igba boi* gradually dropped. Nevertheless after secondary or tertiary education many also went back to business apprenticeship on account of the dearth of white collar job.

In the recent generation of parents and young people, there came a new trend and a shift in mentality occasioned by some environmental trappings fueled by the get-rich-quick syndrome. Parents gradually began to abdicate their responsibility towards their children. Sequel to that, the inculcation of moral and social values began to suffer neglect. Hard work and giving primacy to integrity came to be relegated to the background. Hence, ill-gotten wealth was celebrated. The so-called 419 syndrome (**419 scam** is technically known as “advance-fee fraud”, and is named after the article numbered 419 in Nigerian criminal code, which deals with fraud), drug trafficking, promotion of illicit wealth disseminated by the film making industries, and a more recent one which is Yahoo Yahoo and Yahoo plus founded on indiscriminate electronic and internet robbery and hacking of accounts became the order of the day. With this, virtue of patience that accompanied commercial spirit of *igba-bi i* sharply turned to inordinate ambition to by the young people to get rich overnight in popular parlance called *ego mbute* (quick money).

The research will delve into the exposition of *ikpa ego* and *ibute ego*, the various contexts that have nourished the tendency of *ibute ego* among our young people, the leadership spirit that is needed to overturn this ugly situation for a mental redirection of our young people.

The underlying philosophy of *Igba-boi*

To understand the philosophy of *Igba-boi*, one has to align it with the concept of *ikpa ego* which is punctuated with patient hardwork; as contrary to *ego mbute* which is characterized with an impatient desire to gain wealth by any means at all. This process of *ikpa ego* is corroborated by the phenomenon of *igba-bi i* (business apprenticeship). According to Okonkwo (2022), *igba-bi i* is a “locally generated venture capital” that requires a business owner who takes an apprentice and 'settle(s)' him at the end of a term

of engagement by assisting in setting him up in a business through cash infusion, the payment of rent or offering of goods to the apprentice to sell and share in the profit.” This is consolidated by the fact of *igba mb?* (struggle) divested of every slothful attitude. In this entrepreneurial venture, it is gainful struggle that increases one's income and, in the end, creates wealth. For Chinweuba and Ezeugwu,

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Pentecostal prosperity gospel that centred on cross-less Christianity, in the inhumane amassing of wealth by most of our political leaders speedily began to collapse the social values of hard work, patience, honesty and integrity associated with *ikpa ego*. To that effect, inordinate quest for wealth culminating in *ego mbute* (quick money) began to assume the centre stage in the mentality of the young people. This has begun to increase in geometric progression because the recent dimension has been nourished by cybercrime.

Artificial Intelligence: understanding its basics

According to Encyclopedia Britannica (2023) artificial intelligence is “the ability of a digital computer or computer-controlled robot to perform tasks commonly associated with intelligent beings.” As described by Copeland (2024), it is the general category that refers to all machines or software capable of performing tasks commonly associated with intelligent beings, including learning, reasoning, problem solving, perception, and using language. It more so has to do with the whole system of computers as well as programming which can perform mental work (Schroer 2023). Artificial intelligence basically involves machine learning. Machine learning coined by Arthur Samuel is a branch of artificial intelligence in which a computer “learns” how to do its task by analyzing either a set of training data or its success and failures in prior iterations of its task or both. It actually focuses on the using data and algorithms to enable AI to imitate the way that humans learn, gradually improving its accuracy (<https://www.ibm.com/topics/machine-learning>). For example, a text recognition program using machine learning might be “trained” with a set of millions of examples of text. In observing the data, the machine will learn the patterns that make certain letters so that it can recognize those letters in different fonts, handwriting, or other applications.

Machine learning is of two kinds namely supervised and unsupervised machine learning. According to Jaudet (2022) supervised machine learning begins with humans defining categories and “coaching” an algorithm toward correct solutions and pattern recognition by tagging training data with correct solutions. It uses labeled datasets to train algorithms to predict outcomes and recognize patterns. Most common examples: Google uses the human inputs we give to its reCAPTCHA program (e.g., those puzzles that test if you are human by asking you to “find the boxes with crosswalks or traffic lights in this picture”). On the contrary, unsupervised machine learning discovers its own patterns (without human coaching or input) within a given data set and then utilizes those patterns to solve problems.

It is important to know that there are different levels of Artificial intelligence namely Artificial Narrow Intelligence (ANI), Artificial General Intelligence (AGI), and Artificial Super Intelligence (ASI). **Artificial narrow intelligence** or Weak AI refers to systems which are specialized in solving one or a few problems within the same domain and can perform individual, automated, and repetitive tasks. These applications are

“narrow” in that computational intelligence is used for a very specific task or set of tasks. In fact, ANI is presently the only type of artificial intelligence that exists in public use today. It is used in numerous areas, such as Email spam filters / social media monitoring tools for dangerous content, internet searching, online shopping and advertising, digital personal assistants, machine translation, smart homes, cities, and infrastructure, security features in cars, autonomous vehicles, navigation, cybersecurity, as well as healthcare, transportation, manufacturing, agriculture, and public administration (Jambrek 2024:77).

Artificial General Intelligence (AGI) also referred to as Strong or Deep AI is the ability of an intelligent system to understand or learn any intellectual task that a human being can understand. The goal of general artificial intelligence is to create systems that would be able to understand the world like any other human being and provide solutions to the problems they face. The goal is to create humanoid machines (robots) that would become capable of self-control, self-adjustment, and self-understanding (Jambrek 2024:78). However, AGI remains to a great extent theoretical. Artificial general intelligence (AGI), or strong AI—that is, artificial intelligence that aims to duplicate human intellectual abilities—remains controversial and out of reach. (<https://www.britannica.com/technology/artificial-intelligence/Is-artificial-general-intelligence-AGI-possible>). Such humanoid robotic form is highly unlikely without radical technological advancements. The reality is that AGI will more likely take the form of vast datacenters or be distributed across networks of computers. **Artificial Super Intelligence (ASI)** is the third level of AI development. It is a hypothetical software-based artificial intelligence (AI) system with an intellectual scope beyond human intelligence. At the most fundamental level, this super intelligent AI has cutting-edge cognitive functions and highly developed thinking skills more advanced than any human (<https://www.ibm.com/topics/artificial-superintelligence>).

All in all, CHatGPT summed up Artificial Intelligence as thus:

ANI represents specialized artificial intelligence for specific tasks, AGI denotes general intelligence with human-like abilities, while ASI is a hypothetical superior intelligence that could surpass the best human minds in all areas. It is important to note that we are currently in the ANI phase, while AGI and ASI are still theoretical concepts that pose challenges and questions for the future development of artificial intelligence (Jambrek 2024:81).

The noticeable effects of Igba-boi on the entrepreneurial landscape

Igba-boi has made a remarkable impact in the entrepreneurial landscape of the Igbo people. Anikwe (2025) made a reasonable exposition of some of those noticeable impacts as:

i. Generating wealth

The United Nations Development Programme empowers young minds to champion

a more sustainable, inclusive and peaceful future through capacity building, mentoring, financial support, and by strengthening global networks through outreach, advocacy, and thought leadership (<https://www.undp.org/governance/youth-empowerment>). This process of empowerment leads to tapping the resourcefulness and helps them in wealth creation. According to Anikwe (2025) through the system of *Igba-boi*, Igbo entrepreneurs successfully create thousands of self-reliant young entrepreneurs. It is a rotational approach in the creation of wealth. When one is assisted in the process of wealth creation, he makes effort to assist others. In that manner, the chain of wealth continues in an unbroken succession. Evidently, the system is sustained when the beneficiaries make effort to generate employment for others, thereby reducing poverty and promoting entrepreneurship.

ii. Business mentorship

The system provides mentorship from experienced entrepreneurs. It involves the offering of guidance and support to the *nwa-boi* in order to help him to navigate successfully in the business world. It is an all-round business mentorship that also schools one on how to endure hardship and how not to be extravagant in spending but to always plan well with an eye on maximizing profit. It empowers the apprentices to start and manage their own businesses. More so, resilient spirit is inculcated in the apprentice so as to be able to weather the storms of challenges that could rear up their ugly

iii. Communal growth

Since the entrepreneurial approach of *igba-Boi* promotes the circulation of wealth, there is an evidence of co-prosperity. Consequently, such attitude promotes community development among the Igbo because there is always the propensity of letting the wealth rich home (ak? lu? lu?). The mentor sees it a moral duty to train and settle the new apprentice in order to sustain the system.

iv. Social mobility

Social mobility refers to the movement of an individual's social status in society. Its movement can either be upward and downward depending on what they are experiencing, whether they progress or diminish on the social strata. The system of *igba-boi* can be a pathway to social mobility, as apprentices gain skills and knowledge that lead to improved economic opportunities. That evident progress becomes an upward movement in social mobility. Since the Igbos always aspire to higher status, one's ability to excel as a successful apprentice eventually places him higher than his mates. On the contrary, if one misbehaves especially by steal from his master, or indulge in other related corrupt practices, he could be abruptly dismissed. Such unfortunate condition could lead to downward movement in social mobility.

v. Access to business networks

In today's business landscape networking serves a great deal is boosting the business. In fact, networking in business refers to the process of establishing and nurturing relationships with other experienced entrepreneurs who share common interests, goals, or industry affiliations. It involves actively seeking opportunities to connect with others, both online and offline, to exchange information, collaborate, and expand one's professional circle. However, networking is not just about making connections; it is about cultivating meaningful relationships, sharing knowledge, and creating opportunities. (<https://www.nexford.edu/insights/power-of-networking>)

Apprentices gain valuable connections with customers, producers, and other business professionals. Such connections create a solid foundation for them when they begin their own. Such business network is built on and nourished by trust.

Envisioning strategies for the survival of *igba-boi* in era of AI

The *igba-boi* entrepreneurial landscape is currently flaunt with challenges that need to be faced headlong. If not it risks extinction. However, sticking to old methods may lead to gradual disappearance of *igba-boi*. For instance, with the arrival of mobile phones, writing and posting of letters in post offices is no more in vogue. And workers in the post offices who were not farsighted, lost their jobs. Similarly, photographers that were shortsighted also folded their business with the widespread use of mobile phone. To that effect, farsightedness is needed in order to think out other methods of reclaiming or reinventing AI-powered *igba-boi* system. Such disposition can increase the chances of its survival in the AI-driven entrepreneurial landscape. Some strategies that could be adopted include but not limited to:

i. Repositioning *igba-boi* in the face of digital technology

Anikwe (2025) observes that *igba-boi* system is gradually responding to the digital Revolution. The system is gradually transitioning into e-commerce and tech-driven enterprises while maintaining the traditional master-apprentice structure. In other words, the *igba-boi* system is evolving and adapting to the digital revolution. Nowadays, we are beginning to see the principles applied in digital commerce, including online platforms. Successful Nigerian digital entrepreneurs are growing their businesses using the mentorship-based approach.

ii. Anchoring on digital marketing methods

The success of micropreneurial ventures in the current dispensation depends so much on the employment of digital marketing. The micropreneurs can more effectively reach their target audience through the use of digital platforms. In this way, the online presence will diminish the fatigue of the apprentice who can now engage larger group of customers through the use of digital channels. More so, the risk of traveling for the purchase of goods is highly reduced through such online micropreneurial engagement.

iii. Creating an Online presence

When micropreneurs create or make use of professional website, it will go a long way to manifest their expertise. In that way, the target audience will be able to get more insight into the business. Through the use of website, micropreneurs are able to provide much valued content to the public. A nicely crafted website will offer relevant information which can easily appeal to customers. In fact, according to Miracle (2024), “as times change, the *Igba-Boi* system is evolving. Younger generations are taking it beyond the typical trade. While it traditionally involved markets and trade, some Igbo mentors are now guiding apprentices in tech startups, real estate, and other modern industries. The Igbo spirit of resilience and shared success is expanding, adapting to new realities while keeping the heart of *Igba-Boi* intact.”

iv. Employing Social Media platforms

Social media platforms remain veritable but also functional means of creating interconnectedness. By utilizing these platforms, micropreneurs can easily get to wider range of customers and advertise their goods. By anchoring on platforms like Twitter, Instagram, Facebook etc., they can gainfully engage their followers and bring their expertise to the public domain with limited cost. Such publicity will not only boost but also attract and increase traffic to their online store.

v. Improving Productivity

In the current AI-powered economy that powerfully enhances productivity and marketability, it is of great importance that *igba-boi* has to change pattern in order not to be left behind. Filippucci F. et al., (2024) maintain that “as productivity increases in activities that are exposed to AI, a number of market forces are set in motion: the relative prices of products resulting from these activities decline fast and the level and composition of demand changes, also reflecting the increases in real incomes resulting from productivity growth” (p.21). based on this the entrepreneurial system of *igba-boi* must have to embrace the use technology tools, like productivity apps and project management software, which will go a long way in enhancing the efficiency and organization of micropreneurs. Such technological tools when properly utilized in the *igba-boi* system will engender a giant leap in economic progress.

Conclusion

The *igba-boi* apprentice system achieved a powerful impact in the business landscape of Igbo people. It went a long way in greatly enhancing the Igbo economic growth, social responsibility, and entrepreneurship. It was structured a way of ensuring steady and rotational economic growth through the fundamentals of mentorship which is eventually solidified with capital allocation that at the end generates wealth creation that goes to boost sustainable economic resilience. Regrettably, in some cases, the spirit of get-rich-quick syndrome has done untold harm to this noble entrepreneurial approach resulting the massive theft and even in some worst-case scenario killing the master. This

has resulted in the use of sales girls in most cases.

However, with the spread of AI-powered technology, there comes the need to think ahead. Consequently, the research has posited some necessary steps that could be taken in order for this *igba-boi* to respond urgently to the signs of the time. This response will surely modify the *igba-boi* system to stand the test of time. Failure to do that, it will entirely be eroded and great will be the damage and regret.

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