

# Apprenticeship System, an Eroding Culture with Potential for Economic Anarchy: A Focus on Southeast Nigeria

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**Abstract:** *apprenticeship system has over the years helped in employment generation and improvement of the leaving standard of the Igbo people in the past, but the interest in the scheme appear to be dying, thereby necessitating this study to examine the causes of this dying trend in Southeast and proffer solutions. The concept of apprenticeship was examined, along with the unique Igbo apprenticeship system. Also, the role of apprenticeship in skill acquisition and job creation was examined. This study adopted a survey research design. The study area is southeast Nigeria, with the study covering five states of the region. The population was 500. The source of data for the study was a structured questionnaire. The method of data analysis was purely descriptive; using a combination of mean and frequencies. The study concluded that the unprecedented unemployment statistics in Nigeria can only get worse in the aftermath of the Coronavirus pandemic, and therefore the need to encourage youths to embrace apprenticeship as a viable way forward. Among others, the study recommended that the government should partner private organizations for a public-private arrangement to create more modern apprenticeship centres suited for the 21<sup>st</sup>-century economy.*

**Keywords:** Apprenticeship System, Southeast Nigeria, Skill acquisition and Job creation

## INTRODUCTION

Nigeria has a burgeoning youth population, with an alarming rate of unemployment. Fajobi, Olatujoye, Amusa and Adedoyin (2017) opine that Nigeria is one of the countries in the world with the highest rate of unemployed youths. Regularly, more people are graduating from different secondary and tertiary institutions to join the already too crowded unemployed population. The economy of the country was just recovering from the economic recession witnessed between 2016-2017 and growing at a Gross Domestic Product of approximately 2%. This figure is presently blighted by the recent outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic in the world and indeed, in Nigeria. As a result of the pandemic, businesses have been shut down, movements have been restricted at some point, global oil prices have plummeted and economies of the world are presently in a quagmire. This may make the unemployment figures to be staggering in the coming weeks, months and even years, as big companies may close shops, aids from different international agencies may cease coming as almost everyone is struggling. This could throw the entire Nigerian economy into catastrophe.

Nigeria is divided into six geopolitical zones; North East, North West, North Central, South East, South-South and South West, with the most entrepreneurial and industrial of them all being the people from the region of South East (SE). The people from this zone are predominantly people of Igbo extraction and their contribution to the Nigerian economy through different business activities are immense. Aligning with this thought, Orugun and Tunde (2014) posit that the Igbo entrepreneurial and business activities remain the backbone of the Nigerian economy. Even in Lagos (South West) which is adjudged to be the economic nerve centre of the country, 74% of all investments belongs to Igbo people (Maliga, 2013). Past studies on business and entrepreneurial activities have recognized the people from southeast to be way above people from other regions in terms of entrepreneurial sagacity (Chukwuezi, 2001; Ukaegbu, 2003; Igbo, 2006; Agozino & Anyanike, 2007; Orugun & Tunde, 2014; Onwuka, 2015; Obunike, 2016; Obi, 2016).

The millions of businesses run by the Igbo people contribute massively to employment generation and social stability in the region. This is because they employ millions of people to supervise their different business endeavours, thereby gainfully employing the youths in the region and making for peace in the region. International Labour Organisation (2012) posits that unemployment is among the biggest threats to social stability in many countries. Businesses, therefore, through the creation of employment, make for social stability and growth and a lot of these businesses have been created in the past through the apprenticeship system (Imu'ahia, Imu Olu). Apprenticeship, as it is practised in Nigeria, is a system which affords people most especially from poor homes and with less education the opportunity to learn a trade or skill, then at the end, such people are settled by their masters, parents and relatives to start-up their businesses. When they start up theirs, there is always this urge to bring others up just the same way they were brought up. With this system, many business empires have been created in the past with many business moguls in the region and outside being products of this system.

Apprenticeship has over the years been a major source of closing the skill gap in the region and source of employment. Fajobi, Olatujoye, Amusa and Adedoyin (2017) aver that it is a major active engagement in economic activities. The apprenticeship made

many Igbo families take their financial destinies into their hands after the civil war when they were handed over just £20, irrespective of how much they hand in their account and the value of their properties (Kanu, 2019). This policy of the then Federal Government gave a fillip to the embrace of apprenticeship as the only way forward by the people. However, this system which has been a saving grace appears to be dying off gradually with many youths reluctant to go into it again.

The present generation view apprenticeship scheme as a venture for people that do not have the head for proper formal education, others view it as an avenue to help the less privilege in the society. Coupled with the urge to make quick money syndrome prevalent today, youths prefer to go into Taxi driving, bus and motorcycle driving rather than waste time in learning a trade or a skill. The attitude of masters towards apprentice in the past have not been helpful, also as some masters maltreat apprentices under their care. Also, some masters are afraid to take on an apprentice in some instance because of bad experiences where people under them have made away with their money or investment. All these factors seem to be contributing to the dying culture of apprenticeship in the region, a situation, if not checked, could prove catastrophic to the economy of the region and the social stability of the states within the region. It is against this backdrop that this study was necessitated to broadly look at apprenticeship and the role it plays in skill acquisition and employment generation. It is also the objective of this study to look at contributors to the dying culture of apprenticeship and to proffer solutions where necessary.

## CONCEPTUALIZATION OF RELATED TERMS

### Apprenticeship

When someone learns a skill under the tutelage of another, it could be said to be the act of undergoing apprenticeship. So, apprenticeship has to do with the act of learning something from someone more knowledgeable and experienced in the area concerned. Aligning with this definition, Adekola (2013) posits that apprenticeship is the process of learning/skill acquisition through enlistment with a master craftsman. It is a system of training a new generation of practitioners of a structured competency, a basic set of skills (Werner and Desimone, 2006). Hence, for something to be termed an apprenticeship scheme, it has to be knowledge or skill cantered. That is, someone must be learning something while another is responsible for teaching.

At the beginning of any apprenticeship, there is always an agreement. The agreement could be formal or informal agreement. That is, the apprentice or their parents or guardian may come to terms with the master or the representative about the duration and terms of the agreement. Adeyeye (2009) and Omole (2004) state that basically, apprenticeship involves a contractual relationship between a master craftsman and a trainee. The trainee is trained for prescribed work processes by practical experience under the supervision of the master craftsman through formal or informal mentoring.

Most business owners in the past went through one form of an apprenticeship or the other. Hence, it is a source of employment and livelihood for many. It is a source of livelihood, means of being employed and a way to actively engage in economically worthwhile ventures especially in the informal sector of the economy (Udu, 2015). Many areas of endeavour require training to be an expert in it. Some of the areas where apprenticeship is involved include blacksmith, welding, trading, block moulding, motor mechanics and repair, barbing, electronics repair, catering, baking etc (Olulu & Udeorah, 2018).

### Igbo Apprenticeship System

The Igbo apprenticeship system is a system of apprenticeship where a master agrees to train another person, this training comes in different forms. Some come at no cost to the apprentice, this is called "Igba-boi". In Igba-boi, the apprentice learns a line of trade and comes to leave with the master, the master takes care of the needs of the apprentice during the duration of the agreement, and the apprentices, in turn, helps out the master in other areas apart from the training business. The agreement period here is usually between 4-8 years, at the end of the agreed period, the master settles the apprentice and the trainee sets out to establish a business for himself or teams up with the master. Olulu and Udeorah (2018) state that in Igba-boi, the family of the apprentice does not pay any fee for the training and at the agreement, the trainee (apprentice) is allowed to establish his own.

Another form of Igbo apprenticeship is "imu ahia" or "imu oru". In the former, the apprentice learns a trade at a fee, while in the later, the apprentice learns a skill or handiwork, a fee is also attached to it. The agreement period in these types is usually shorter than what is obtained in Igba-boi. In this system, the apprentice pays a premium or a training fee to the trainer (master) (Crescent, 2019). In differentiating imu-olu or imu-ahia with igba-boi, Olulu and Udeorah (2018) opine that unlike Igba-boi where mentees arrange a contract to have a complete training circle for free, imu-oru or imu-ahia is not done for free. In this, the apprentice is expected to pay a ransom to their master to acquire skills. The contract lasts for a shorter period in comparison with igba-boi. The Igbo Igba-boi model is a process whereby someone is being trained in the act of entrepreneurship at no cost (Agozino & Anyanike, 2007) while imu-aha entails training in the act of entrepreneurship, but at a cost to the trainee.

### Skill Acquisition

The main aim of apprenticeship schemes is to impart skill and knowledge on the trainee. That is, skill and knowledge acquisition is the hall of all apprenticeship schemes. Therefore, both can hardly be divorced. Apprenticeship scheme is the main avenue for skill development in the informal sector. People receive training through the scheme and are gainfully employed through it (Adeyeye, Falola, Waribo & Akinbode, 2015).

It is the greatest avenue of informal skill acquisition in Nigeria. Fajobi, Olatujoye, Amusa and Adedoyin (2017) explicate that apprenticeship in the informal sector is very popular in most urban centres in Nigeria, they account for about 85% of skills training and transfer in most parts of the country. In Nigeria, as in other African countries, most people have traditionally acquired their skills, knowledge and attitudes from institutions other than formal schools (Haan, 2006; ILO, 2009). Youths engage in apprentice training in Nigeria as a means of skills development and employment (Atuwokiki, 2013).

In the world of work, apprenticeship has been a smooth means of inculcating requisite skills and trades to would-be employees/employers of labour (Udu, 2015). It is a system of training a new generation of practitioners a set of skills and competencies in executing a task or trade (Werner & Desimone, 2006). Therefore, it is an important route to skills acquisition in most African countries including Nigeria (International Labour Organization (ILO), 2009).

### Apprenticeship and Job Creation

Job creation is essential for the social stability of many countries, hence, government and its agencies try to employ her citizens. However, it has been observed over the years that the government cannot provide all the jobs needed to employ people, hence, private individual through various means create job opportunities for people. One of such ways private and government have provided jobs through knowledge acquisition and skill development is through apprenticeship. The contract of apprenticeship is designed to create job and entrepreneurship that will enhance personal income, national economic growth and development (Achugo & Chigbo, 2014). Obi and Agha (2012) posit that it creates new businesses, and new businesses, in turn, create new jobs, intensifying competition, and increase productivity. Therefore, the productive capacity of individuals and courtiers are enhanced through apprenticeship endeavours.

### METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a survey research design. The study area is southeast Nigeria, with the study covering five states of the region. The population is 500; 100 from each of the five states. 50 businesses owners and 50 unemployed youths were randomly selected for the study. The instrument for data collection was structured (Likert Scaled). The instrument was put through validity test using face and content while the reliability was ascertained using Cronbach Alpha technique for determining internal consistency. The method of data analysis was purely descriptive, using a combination of mean and frequencies.

**Table 1: Factors responsible for the dying apprenticeship culture from Business Owners**

S/N	Questionnaire Items	SA	A	D	SD	UN	Mean	Pos
1	Lack of trust in the apprentices.	15	11	13	11	-	3.60	3 <sup>rd</sup>
2	Previous bad experience from an apprentice.	14	13	9	14	-	3.54	5 <sup>th</sup>
3	Parents do not release their children again.	11	19	20	-	-	3.82	2 <sup>nd</sup>
4	Lack of money to settle the apprentice when it is time.	-	26	4	20	-	3.12	7 <sup>th</sup>
5	It is expensive to get and maintain an apprentice	17	7	5	6	15	3.10	8 <sup>th</sup>
6	I do not like the idea of apprenticeship.	-	19	-	8	23	2.30	10 <sup>th</sup>
7	Lack of support from the government to maintain apprentice.	10	18	12	10	-	3.56	4 <sup>th</sup>
8	Bad attitude of apprentices.	9	14	16	11	-	3.42	6 <sup>th</sup>
9	It is cheaper to hire sales girls or boys in the business.	20	14	6	4	6	3.84	1 <sup>st</sup>
10	Fear of the trained apprentices to grow more than the master	-	8	17	20	5	2.56	9 <sup>th</sup>

**Source: Field Survey, 2020**

Table 1 shows the factors pointed out by business owners as being responsible for dying interest in apprenticeship in the studied area. The mean of the individual questionnaire items is used for interpreting the data. The higher the mean, the higher the level of acceptance of that questionnaire item as being a factor. The threshold of acceptance of a questionnaire item is 3, that is, any questionnaire item with a mean of 3 is accepted as being a factor while any item with a mean of less than 3 is rejected as not being a serious factor. Judging from the positions of the questionnaire items using mean, the highest factor responsible for the dying apprenticeship culture as pointed out by the business owners is that fact that it is cheaper to hire sales girls or boys in the business rather than apprentice with a mean of 3.84. Second in the standing is parents refusing to release their children for apprenticeship

with a mean of 3.82. Following closely in the 3<sup>rd</sup> position with a mean of 3.6 is lack of trust in the apprentice. In the 5<sup>th</sup> position is lack of support from government to maintain apprentice with a mean of 3.56. Sitting in 9<sup>th</sup> position with a mean of 2.56 is fear of trained apprentice to grow more than the masters. The mean of 2.56 which is lesser than the threshold of 3 shows that the business owners brushed it aside as not being a factor. Similarly, in the 10<sup>th</sup> position with a mean of 2.30 is the business owners not liking the idea of apprenticeship 2.30.

**Table 1: Factors responsible for the dying apprenticeship culture from Unemployed Youths**

S/N	Questionnaire Items	SA	A	D	SD	UN	Mean	Pos
1	It wastes a lot of time.	15	20	5	7	3	3.74	3 <sup>rd</sup>
2	It is for those who cannot afford to go to school.	10	13	12	11	4	3.30	8 <sup>th</sup>
3	There are other ways to make money quicker.	23	20	7	-	-	4.32	1 <sup>st</sup>
4	Bad experience of people in the past.	12	13	5	17	3	3.28	9 <sup>th</sup>
5	The unpleasant attitude of masters.	16	10	7	10	7	3.36	7 <sup>th</sup>
6	I will rather learn online than go to someone to teach me.	17	17	6	10	-	3.82	2 <sup>nd</sup>
7	Lack of appropriate place to go and learn.	15	16	9	10	-	3.72	4 <sup>th</sup>
8	Discouragement from family.	-	20	14	16	-	3.08	10 <sup>th</sup>
9	I will rather do other things such as driving a taxi, commercial motorcycle that will give me instant cash.	14	15	6	10	5	3.46	6 <sup>th</sup>
10	It is for those who are not intelligent enough to go to university.	10	20	7	10	3	3.48	5 <sup>th</sup>

*Source: Field Survey, 2020*

Table 2 shows the factors responsible for less focus on apprenticeship schemes in the region as responded by the youths. Using mean and the position of the individual questionnaire items for the analysis, it shows from the Table that number one reason behind dying apprenticeship culture with a mean of 4.32 is the belief by the youths that there are other quicker ways to making money rather waste time in apprenticeship schemes. This is followed by the preference of youths to learn online rather than go to someone to teach them, with a mean of 3.82. in the 3<sup>rd</sup> position, with a mean of 3.74 is the belief that apprenticeship schemes on the average waste a lot of time. Occupying the 4<sup>th</sup> place in importance with a mean of 3.72 is lack of an appropriate place to go and learn a skill or a trade. In the 9<sup>th</sup> place in standing of factors responsible for dying apprenticeship culture is the bad experience of people in the past with a mean of 3.28. The factor with the least of importance is discouragement from family members with a mean of 3.08, putting it in the 10<sup>th</sup> position.

**Table 3: Suggestion on how to encourage youths to embrace apprenticeship again by the business owners**

S/N	Questionnaire Items	SA	A	D	SD	UN	Mean	Posi.
1	Support for businesses from the government.	10	23	5	9	3	3.56	7 <sup>th</sup>
2	Parents should encourage their children to go into apprenticeship.	12	21	10	5	2	3.72	4 <sup>th</sup>
3	Supporting apprentice to start up their business after the learning period.	30	15	5	-	-	4.50	1 <sup>st</sup>
4	Change of attitude from apprenticeship.	10	25	10	-	5	3.70	5 <sup>th</sup>
5	Reorientation of the youths on the need to learn a skill or trade to fend for themselves.	25	20	5	-	-	4.20	2 <sup>nd</sup>
6	Introducing apprenticeship in various levels of formal education.	10	15	5	10	10	3.10	10 <sup>th</sup>
7	Creation of modern centres for apprenticeship.	15	20	-	10	5	3.60	6 <sup>th</sup>
8	Encouraging public-private partnership in apprenticeship practices.	20	20	8	-	2	4.12	3 <sup>rd</sup>
9	Creation of clusters of apprenticeship schemes in various states.	13	17	-	15	5	3.34	8 <sup>th</sup>
10	Less emphasis on certifications and educational qualification.	-	27	13	9	1	3.32	9 <sup>th</sup>

*Source: Field Survey, 2020*

Table 3 shows the suggestions by business owners on how to reawaken the apprenticeship spirit in the region. The mode of analysis here is mean and position of the mean. From the table, the number one thing pointed out by business owners that will help resuscitate the scheme is supporting apprentice to start up their businesses after the learning period with a mean of 4.5. Following this with a mean of 4.2 is the reorientation of the youths on the need to learn a skill or trade to fend for themselves. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> position with a mean of 4.12 is encouraging public-private partnership in apprenticeship practices in the region. However, in the 9<sup>th</sup> position in the hierarchy of factors to boost the scheme in the region as suggested by business owners is placing less emphasis on

certifications and educational qualification with a mean of 3.32. Among the suggestions, the least significant is introducing apprenticeship in various levels of formal education with a mean of 3.10.

**Table 4: Suggestion on how to encourage youths to embrace apprenticeship again by the youths**

S/N	Questionnaire Items	SA	A	D	SD	UN	Mean	Posi.
1	More emphasis on skills rather than on mere certificate	15	15	10	4	6	3.58	5 <sup>th</sup>
2	Issuance of certificate after the learning period.	10	20	7	10	3	3.48	6 <sup>th</sup>
3	Mandating youths to have a skill before they can be employed.	-	21	13	10	6	2.98	9 <sup>th</sup>
4	Creating new places for apprenticeship.	11	10	15	10	4	3.28	8 <sup>th</sup>
5	Change of attitude by business owners.	13	12	10	12	3	3.40	7 <sup>th</sup>
6	Making the learning environment to be friendly.	10	23	17	-	-	3.86	4 <sup>th</sup>
7	Creating modern areas of learning that will be relevant in the 21st century.	30	20	-	-	-	4.60	2 <sup>nd</sup>
8	Helping those that have gone through various apprenticeship schemes to start their business.	35	15	-	-	-	4.70	1 <sup>st</sup>
9	Given tax holidays to those who just graduated from various kinds of apprenticeship schemes.	20	24	5	-	1	4.24	3 <sup>rd</sup>
10	Introducing apprenticeship related courses and schemes in schools.	12	10	-	10	8	2.56	10 <sup>th</sup>

**Source: Field Survey, 2020**

Table for contains information on the suggestions proffered by youths in the region on ways to encourage apprenticeship scheme in the region. Standing in the first position in the hierarchy, judging by the mean of the questionnaire items is helping those that have gone through various apprenticeship schemes to start their businesses with a mean of 4.7. Coming in the second position is creating modern areas of learning that will be relevant in the 21st century with a mean of 4.6. A mean of 4.24 shows that the youths placed given tax holidays to those who just graduated from various kinds of apprenticeship schemes in the 3<sup>rd</sup> position. In the 9<sup>th</sup> position however is mandating youths to have a skill before they can be employed with a mean of 2.98 which is less than the benchmark of acceptance, therefore, it is rejected by the youths as a way to encourage the scheme. Also in the rejection bracket with a mean of 2.56 is introducing apprenticeship related courses and schemes in schools, placing this suggestion in the 10<sup>th</sup> place.

## Conclusion

The unemployment rate in Nigeria is alarming; a situation will be further compounded by the present economic albatross posed by Covid-19 pandemic. Many businesses might fold, throwing more youths into the employed bracket. This situation could be catastrophic if nothing is done by the government of Nigeria and the citizens. There is no enough government job to go around, neither are there enough private organizations to employ the army of the unemployed. Therefore, resuscitating apprenticeship culture which is more like self-help with a little government help seems to be one of the very viable alternative to solve the problem of unemployment in the country at large and in the southeast region in particular.

## Recommendation

Following the revelation from the findings of this study, it is recommended that:

- 1) The government should partner private organizations for a public-private arrangement to create more modern apprenticeship centres suited for the 21st-century economy.
- 2) Reorientation of the youths to embrace learning before earning, and also encourage parents to push their children towards apprenticeship programmes.
- 3) Support from government is also critical in setting up new businesses for those that have undergone various apprenticeship scheme through providing soft loans, seed capital, tax holidays and patronage for locally made products and services.

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