



THE CULTURE OF APPRENTICESHIP AMONG THE IGBOS IN NIGERIA: A CALL FOR A PROPER LEGAL FRAMEWORK

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ABSTRACT

The Igbo apprenticeship system is a deeply ingrained socio-economic and cultural practice within Nigeria's Igbo ethnic group. It serves as a vital mechanism for wealth creation, skill transfer, and poverty alleviation among the Igbos. Additionally, it enables young individuals to acquire entrepreneurial skills and capital to establish their own businesses after a period of tutelage under a master. Despite its significant contributions to the Nigerian informal economy and its role in fostering indigenous entrepreneurship, this traditional system largely operates outside the purview of formal legal regulation. This research aims to critically examine the existing legal vacuum surrounding the Igbo apprenticeship system, identify the challenges and vulnerabilities inherent in its informal nature, and advocate for the establishment of a comprehensive legal framework. Employing a doctrinal research methodology, this study analyzes the customary practices, identifies potential areas of conflict and exploitation, and explores the imperative for legal recognition. Findings in this research indicate that the absence of a formal legal framework exposes both apprentices and masters to risks, including breach of contract and exploitation, thereby hindering the system's full potential and sustainability. The study recommended a formal regulation of the Igbo apprenticeship system in Nigeria. This formal regulation is suggested to involve a reduction of the Igbo Apprenticeship contracts to writing and defining the rights and obligations of the parties. The study emphasised the need to involve relevant stakeholders, the Federal and State governments, to ensure its continued relevance and contribution to national development.

KEYWORDS: *Igbo Apprenticeship, Legal Framework, Igba-Boi, and Regulation*

1. INTRODUCTION

The Culture of Apprenticeship among the Igbos in Nigeria has a rich historical background that has played a significant role in shaping the Igbo people's entrepreneurial spirit and economic development. The Igbo apprenticeship system, known as the "Igba-Boi" system, is a traditional model for training and equipping young Igbo entrepreneurs for the business world.¹ This system is

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¹ J. C. Anago, 'The effectiveness of Igbo Apprenticeship Model in Nigeria: How Can these Master-Servant Intersection Improve Youth Employment in Nigeria's Informal Sector' (2023) 3 (6), African Journal of Business and Economic Development 23.



founded on the Igbo philosophies of communality, co-prosperity, and interdependence.² The apprenticeship system involves the transgenerational transfer of entrepreneurial skills and the reproduction of business champions.³

During the pre-colonial and colonial periods, the Igbo people were known for their entrepreneurial activities, which were largely facilitated by the apprenticeship system.⁴ The system enabled the Igbo to acquire skills and expertise in various vocations, such as trading, manufacturing, and craftsmanship.⁵ The apprenticeship system was characterised by three stages: cognitive, associative, and autonomous.⁶ The Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970) had significant consequences on the Igbo apprenticeship system, as it disrupted the transgenerational transfer of entrepreneurial skills.⁷ However, the post-Civil War economic revival saw the Igbo people rebuilding their businesses and reviving the apprenticeship system.⁸ There are three variants of the Igbo apprenticeship scheme: Igba-boi, Imu Oruaka, and Imu Ahia.⁹

The Igba-Boi variant of the scheme is strictly an apprenticeship scheme.¹⁰ Under this scheme, a parent or guardian, in agreement with their child or ward, chooses a line of business. They then approach a successful entrepreneur in that line of business for informal training.¹¹ The Master, thereafter, orally spells out his terms and conditions for the intended apprenticeship.¹² An oral acceptance of those terms and conditions by the parent or guardian, with their child or ward, gives rise to the handing over of the apprentice to the master on the basis of trust and credibility.¹³ The handover process is consolidated with traditional rites during which prayers are said with the use of kolanuts and palm wine, or traditional rituals are performed.¹⁴ During the apprenticeship

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³ F.N. Ongele, 'Apprenticeship and the Economy of Nigeria: The Igbo Example, 1970-1999' (2023) 1(1) *Performance: Journal of Law and Humanities* 11.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ O. Okwuowulu, 'Igbo Apprenticeship System: A Panacea for Small and Medium Scale Enterprise Development' (2022) 8 (1) *International Journal of Social Sciences and Management Research* 41.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ G.C. Osita, 'The Igbo Apprenticeship System (Igba Boyi): A Keystone of Entrepreneurship and Socio-Economic Development in Nigeria' (2024) 7 (3) *International Journal of Law Management & Humanities* 1619.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ C. Okoli, and M. Agwu, 'The Impact of Igbo Apprenticeship System on the Economic Growth of Imo State, Nigeria' (2018) 6 (10) *International Journal of Economics, Commerce, and Management*, 37.

¹⁰ M.C. Ezeajughu, (2021). 'The Igbo Apprenticeship System: Nigeria's Gateway to World Business Dominance' (2021) 5(3) *International journal of research culture society*, 46.

¹¹ G.E. Chinweuba, and E.C. Ezeugwu, 'The ontological foundation of Igbo Entrepreneurship: An analytical Investigation' (2017) *Journal of Philosophy, Culture and Religion*, 17.

¹² T.U. Anigbogu, I.C. Onwuteaka and I.M. Okoli, 'The IGBO Man Perspectives of Apprenticeship and Entrepreneurial Development in South-eastern Nigeria: Implications to Economic Growth' (2019) 4 (10), *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Applied Science* 90.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*



training, the apprentice lives with the master and serves him for the years agreed upon.¹⁵ At the expiration of the years agreed on, the master is expected to provide financial support and establish the apprentice in the same or a similar line of business.¹⁶ The penultimate act of the Master is expected to see the apprentice through to the final destination of ‘Settlement’.¹⁷ From the point of settlement, the apprentice’s status changes; he becomes a business owner and owns the business handed over to him by his master.¹⁸

The Imu Oruaka variant of apprenticeship is usually skilled or craft-based.¹⁹ Under this arrangement, the apprentice is enrolled through an informal process for a period of 2 to 5 years to learn a craft from a successful or skilful craftsman.²⁰ Unlike the Igba-boi training, which is free, the Imu Oruaka does not require living with the master; it is a paid apprenticeship scheme.²¹ Under this scheme, the apprentice's parents/sponsors pay an agreed sum of money to the master as training fees for the apprentice.²² Customarily, the apprenticeship enrolment process is witnessed by tradesmen within the environment in which the trade or craft is to be learnt, and accompanied by alcoholic drinks from the apprentice's parents/sponsors for entertainment.²³ At the end of the training, the master only blesses the apprentice and provides a technical guide until the apprentice becomes stable in the business.²⁴

The Imu Ahia variant of apprenticeship is similar to the Igba-Boi apprenticeship system, but usually involves people with close or family ties.²⁵ An established businessman under this scheme picks up an acquaintance or family member as an apprentice for training.²⁶ The trainer-businessman, as the master, thereafter establishes the apprentice in a business similar to his own at the end of the apprenticeship.²⁷ The variants of the Igbo apprenticeship system discussed above are still in existence and have proven to be a key factor in the success of Igbo entrepreneurship and the development of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Nigeria.²⁸ The system enables the

¹⁵ O.C. Iwueke, S.A Halima, and P.N. Oparaku, ‘Apprenticeship Training System and Business Sustainability in Anambra State, South East Nigeria’ (2020) 7(1), *International Journal of Innovative Research in Social Sciences and Strategic Management Techniques*, 184.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ U.H. Chukwu, R.I. Ugochukwu, and M. Njoku, ‘Igbo apprenticeship system in the modern world: Challenges and prospects’ (2024) 23 (01) *World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews*, 237.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ C. Okoro, and V. Onyejiuwa, ‘The Contribution of Igbo Apprenticeship System to Social Inclusion in Nigeria’ (2019) 34 (2) *Journal of Social Development in Africa*, 101.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ O. Okwuowulu, ‘Igbo Apprenticeship System: A Panacea for Small and Medium Scale Enterprise Development’ (2023) 8 (1) *International Journal of Social Sciences and Management Research*, 41.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ O Adeola, *Indigenous African Enterprise: The Igbo Traditional Business School (I-TBS)* (1st end, Emerald Publishing Limited 2021) 3.



acquisition of skills, the sharing of resources, and the development of collaborative entrepreneurship.²⁹ It also promotes self-employment and job creation among the youth in the Igbo region.³⁰ Additionally, through social engineering, the culture of prudence, individualism, innovativeness, trust, intimacy, submissive apprenticeship, and perseverance is promoted and passed on among the Igbo people.³¹

The system now faces challenges that require innovative legal solutions to ensure its continued relevance and impact among the Igbos and Nigeria.³² Some of these problems include: a lack of a comprehensive legal framework specifically addressing apprenticeship in Nigeria, and the non-use of formal agreements.³³ exploitation of apprentices, which is most often evident in cases of non-settlement after several years of service,³⁴ and instances of the subjection of apprentices to servitude and occasional abuse in the homes of their masters.³⁵ Additionally, no formal certificate is issued for successful completion of the training³⁶ and the apprenticeship system lacks government support.

2. APPRENTICESHIP SYSTEM AND THE LAW OF CONTRACT IN NIGERIA

After the Nigerian Civil War, there was economic hardship in the eastern region of Nigeria. Following this development, several parents were forced to send their children, mostly between the ages of 8 and 20 years, to survive as traders.³⁷ Through this process, the apprenticeship system was further leveraged on by the Igbos to revitalise the economy of the Eastern part of Nigeria and build an independent and sustainable socio-economic and financial structure.³⁸ Historically, the age range for apprenticeship enrolment among the Igbos are predominantly from ages 8 to 20. In recent times, the practice has involved apprentices between the ages of 14 to 21.³⁹

The enrolment of underage children in apprenticeship schemes raises critical concerns regarding child rights and the legal implications under Nigerian law, particularly in relation to the Child Rights Act and the law of contract in Nigeria. The Igbo apprenticeship system is characterised by

²⁹ A E Oyewunmi, O A Oyewunmi and C L Moses, *Igbo-Boi: Historical Transitions of the Igbo Apprenticeship Model* (1st end, Emerald Publishing Limited 2021) 13.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ I O Iwara, *The Igbo Traditional Business School (I-TBS): A SWOT Review Synthesis* (1st end, Emerald Publishing Limited 2021) 39.

³² Ibid.

³³ N. Nnonyelu and C. Onyeizugbe 'Reimagining Igbo Apprenticeship: Bringing It Up to Speed with Contemporary Realities' (2020) 5 (3) *European Journal of Business and Management Research* 1.

³⁴ U.H. Ejiofor and U.S Otika, 'Exploitation of apprentices, with some cases of non-settlement after several years of service' (2024) 1(1) *Journal of Business and African Economy* 87.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ D. L. Mpi, 'Encouraging micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMES) for economic growth and development in Nigeria and other developing economies: the role of 'the Igbo apprenticeship system' (2019) 6 (1) *The Strategic Journal of Business & Change Management* 535.

³⁷ C.M. Ezeajughu 'The Igbo Apprenticeship System: Nigeria's Gateway to World Business Dominance' (2021) 5 (3) *International Journal of Research Culture Society*.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ O.F Ogbogu, and A. Emeka 'Apprenticeship in Igbo Land and Venture Success in Anambra State' (2025) 13 (1) *International Journal of Innovative Social Sciences & Humanities Research*



its informal nature, where young apprentices, through their parents, relatives or guardians, enter into agreements with master craftsmen or business owners to learn a trade. The practice of enrolling underage children poses ethical and legal challenges. The Child Rights Act of 2003 in Nigeria explicitly prohibits child labour and mandates that children should be protected from economic exploitation.⁴⁰ Section 18 of the Act prohibits a child from entering into a contract, except for a contract for necessities. A child under the Act is also defined to mean a person below the age of 18 years.⁴¹ Additionally, for a contract to be valid under the law of contract in Nigeria, all parties must have the legal capacity to enter into such a contract. This raises questions about the enforceability of apprenticeship agreements involving underage children in an Igbo apprenticeship scheme. Such contracts may be deemed void or voidable, leading to potential legal disputes and undermining the integrity of the apprenticeship system.

3. APPRENTICESHIP SYSTEM AND THE LABOUR ACT IN NIGERIA

The principal legal framework in Nigeria, which regulates employment relationships, including those involving apprentices, is the Labour Act.⁴² Under the Act, a parent or guardian, with the apprentice's consent evidenced through a written contract, may apprentice a young person aged between twelve and sixteen for a term not exceeding five years.⁴³ This privilege is also extended by the Act to individuals aged sixteen or older to enter into apprenticeship contracts.⁴⁴ The Act provides a mechanism to establish a person's age through an authorised labour officer, ensuring that the correct age-related provisions are followed before an apprenticeship contract.⁴⁵

All contracts of apprenticeship must be in writing and attested by an authorised labour officer⁴⁶ and must be entered into with the mutual consent of the parties.⁴⁷ Through the attestation process, the labour officer must verify that the apprentice is medically fit and consents to the apprenticeship contract without coercion. He must also attest that all other contractual provisions, including remuneration, welfare during illness and holidays, align with the provisions of the Act.⁴⁸

If, upon the completion of the stipulated term of apprenticeship, an apprentice is retained by his master without a new agreement for wage payment, the apprentice is entitled to recover wages at the normal current rate comparable to similar work performed.⁴⁹ Disputes arising out of apprenticeship contracts or between the parties to such a contract, or relating to the power and

⁴⁰ Child's Rights Act 2003, s. 28.

⁴¹ Child's Rights Act 2003, s. 277.

⁴² Chapter L1 Laws of the Federation of Nigeria 2004.

⁴³ Labour Act, s. 49(1).

⁴⁴ Labour Act, s. 49(3).

⁴⁵ Labour Act, s. 49(4).

⁴⁶ Labour Act, s. 50.

⁴⁷ Labour Act, s. 49(5).

⁴⁸ Labour Act, s. 50(2) (a) (b).

⁴⁹ Labour Act, s. 51.



jurisdiction to hear and determine any question arising from the same, are to be referred to the magistrates' or district courts in the areas where the issues arise.⁵⁰ The Minister of Labour, under the Act, reserves the right to promulgate regulations regarding various aspects of apprenticeship contracts.⁵¹ The regulation may specify mechanisms to supervise the overall apprenticeship process, including the qualifications required for employers.⁵² It may also outline the form and content of contracts, registration procedures, and limitations on the number of apprentices per period.⁵³ If the provisions related to apprenticeship procedures are not complied with as provided for by the Labour Act, offences related to non-compliance are penalised by the Act.⁵⁴ For example, it is an offence under the Labour Act to remove an apprentice (aged between twelve and sixteen) from Nigeria without the Minister's written authorisation, as well as to employ an apprentice on an unattested contract for more than six months.⁵⁵

Notwithstanding the provisions of the Labour Act on the apprenticeship system, a significant gap exists between legislative intent and the practical realisation of the Act's provisions, as there is no evidence of the implementation or application of the Labour Act's provisions to the Igbo apprenticeship system. Furthermore, institutional weaknesses, such as inadequate staffing, insufficient training, and a lack of effective monitoring mechanisms, further compound enforcement difficulties. Reports from non-governmental organisations and empirical studies indicate that many local administrative bodies lack the necessary resources to effectively implement the provisions of the Labour Act, particularly in remote areas characterised by traditional systems.⁵⁶ Moreover, the entrenched nature of informal employment in the apprenticeship sector makes it difficult for statutory provisions to reach the grassroots level, where local cultural practices often overshadow formal legal procedures.

The integration of the Labour Act into the Igbo apprenticeship culture can facilitate the recognition of apprenticeship as a legitimate pathway to entrepreneurship. The Act can encourage the establishment of formal apprenticeship programs that not only focus on skill acquisition but also promote entrepreneurial thinking and business management skills

4. APPRENTICESHIP SYSTEM AND THE SMALL AND MEDIUM SCALE ENTERPRISES DEVELOPMENT AGENCY OF NIGERIA ACT

⁵⁰ Labour Act, s. 49 (6).

⁵¹ Labour Act, s. 52 (a-h).

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Labour Act, s. 53.

⁵⁵ Labour Act, s. 53 (a) (b).

⁵⁶ 'Upgrading informal apprenticeship A resource guide for Africa' Report of the International Labour Office <https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/@africa/@roabidjan/documents/publication/wcms_171393.pdf> accessed 18 March 2026, H. Ejo-Orusa 'Reinventing the 'Nwaboi' Apprenticeship System: A Platform for Entrepreneurship Promotion in Nigeria' (2019) 8 (9) International Journal of Advanced Research in Management and Social Sciences 98-130.



The Small and Medium-Scale Enterprises Development Agency of Nigeria (SMEDAN) Act was established in the year 2003. It was established to create a broader ecosystem that supports the growth, training, and skill development of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Nigeria. A recent report on SMEs in Nigeria indicates that SMEs contribute significantly to more than 46% of GDP and 84% of the employment workforce.⁵⁷

Though the SMEDAN Act does not directly address apprenticeship, its programs are vital for developing an apprenticeship program to support a skilled workforce capable of driving economic growth and innovation in Nigeria. For example, SMEDAN outlines the Agency's responsibility to provide and facilitate technical and managerial training to small and medium-scale industries.⁵⁸ Apprenticeship programs are a common method for delivering such training, as they allow individuals to learn practical skills on the job while also receiving theoretical instruction. Additionally, the SMEDAN Act established a liaison between research institutes, local fabricators, and small and medium-scale industries.⁵⁹ This collaboration can lead to the development of apprenticeship programs that are tailored to the specific needs of different industries, ensuring that apprentices gain relevant and up-to-date skills.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

The evolution of apprenticeship as a socio-cultural and economic institution among the Igbos in Nigeria necessitates a review of modern labour law and the legal framework available for the practice of the Igbo apprenticeship system. Following this review, this paper recommends a dual legal framework to regulate the Igbo apprenticeship system in Nigeria. This legal framework includes policy drafting and regulatory oversight. The suggested legal framework above is proposed to address existing gaps and to facilitate the harmonisation of traditional apprenticeship practices with the statutory requirements of the Nigerian legal environment.

Policy Drafting

This entails revisiting and reforming existing apprenticeship policies to establish robust statutory frameworks that specifically address Igbo apprenticeship. Presently, the reliance on customary practices and informal contracts has created substantial legal ambiguity. This recommendation urges the federal and state governments to unambiguously define the status, rights, and obligations of apprentices in statutory terms to regulate the Igbo apprenticeship system. The suggested legal framework should consider areas like mandatory written agreement and registration of apprenticeship contracts, transparency in contractual terms, protection of apprentices' and masters' rights, clearly outlined criteria for eligibility for parties to the apprenticeship contract, mode of dispute resolution, and a system for certifying apprentices upon successful completion. The drafting process should involve wide consultations from labour law experts, traditional leaders,

⁵⁷ < <https://www.afsic.net/small-and-medium-enterprises-in-nigeria/> > accessed 18 March 2026

⁵⁸ Small and Medium-Scale Enterprises Development Agency of Nigeria Act (SMEDAN) s. 8.

⁵⁹ SMEDAN Act s. 8 (i).



apprenticeship associations, and representatives from communities where Igbo apprenticeship practices are predominant. The contributions of the mentioned stakeholders will help shape the proposed legal framework in areas that are culturally sensitive, enforceable, and that adequately reflect the socio-economic realities of apprenticeship in Igbo communities.

Furthermore, the proposed legal framework will instil modern principles of labour rights, similar to those promoted by the Nigerian Labour Act and other jurisdictions where apprenticeship regulation has been successfully integrated into their national labour law systems.

Regulatory Oversight

Another critical area to consider for legislative intervention of the Igbo apprenticeship system in Nigeria is regulatory oversight. Establishing a dynamic regulatory oversight mechanism to provide an operational backbone for the proposed legal framework is also important. The absence of formal or centralised oversight in apprenticeship matters has led to inconsistencies in the implementation of apprenticeship contracts and, consequently, violations of apprentices' rights. Thus, the creation of an independent regulatory body, possibly at both federal and state levels, is strongly recommended to oversee, monitor, and enforce adherence to the proposed apprenticeship legal framework and future agreements. A public registry is also proposed for recognised apprenticeship programs, regular reporting obligations, and to investigate alleged abuses of apprenticeship arrangements. Clear guidelines for accrediting apprenticeship programs and the periodic training of regulatory staff should also be provided for under the proposed legal framework. Additionally, initiation standards, documentation standards, registration, reporting standards, violation standards, sanctions and ways of resolving disputes arising or connected to the Igbo apprenticeship programme should be provided for the proposed legal framework.

In summary, the dual recommendations provided under policy drafting and regulatory oversight are aimed at re-legitimising the apprenticeship system among the Igbos under a clearly defined legal regime. The incorporation of culturally informed legal standards coupled with robust oversight and community integration presents a viable blueprint for reform. Federal and state governments are called upon to take urgent legislative action, drawing on empirical insights and consultations from stakeholders. Specifically, the enactment of a “National Apprenticeship Act” at the federal level, complemented by its domestication or adaptation at the state level, would mark a significant step forward in harmonising traditional apprenticeship practices with contemporary labour law requirements. This legislative framework should be construed as responsive to the unique socio-cultural dynamics of Igbo society, whilst ensuring compliance with fundamental labour rights and international best practices.

6. CONCLUSION

Providing a sound legal framework for apprenticeship programmes among the Igbos in Nigeria is an urgent issue calling for a modern labour law reform. This paper’s comprehensive examination



reveals that the traditional apprenticeship system, while historically significant, requires clear statutory reform to resolve existing ambiguities and to safeguard the rights of apprentices. Reform efforts through policy drafting and regulatory oversight provide an actionable framework to transition from customary practice to a legally standardised system. As demonstrated, the integration of these elements not only protects individual rights but also promotes economic growth by fostering a skilled and regulated workforce.

In conclusion, the proposed reforms present a significant opportunity for the Nigerian federal and state governments to modernise their approach to labour regulation in a manner that honours cultural heritage while ensuring legal compliance. The initiation of a National Apprenticeship Act, supported by robust monitoring and community engagement mechanisms, will be instrumental in securing a more just, transparent, and efficient apprenticeship system in Nigeria. Additionally, a formalized system will enhance trust and accountability and also position the Igbo apprenticeship model as a robust, legally recognized pathway to entrepreneurship and economic empowerment in the 21st century.