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The Igbo Trade Apprenticeship Scheme as an Indigenous Institution of Leadership Development in the Zaria Area of Kaduna State, Nigeria, 2003–2023

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Abstract

This study examines the Igbo Trade Apprenticeship Scheme (ITAS) as an indigenous institution of entrepreneurial leadership development in Zaria, Kaduna State, Nigeria, between 2003 and 2023. While existing scholarship has focused largely on ITAS in relation to entrepreneurship, wealth creation, enterprise development, and youth employment, limited attention has been given to its role in cultivating entrepreneurial leadership. Adopting a qualitative historical research design, the study draws on in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, complemented by relevant books, journal articles, theses, and documentary sources. Data were analysed thematically within the socio-historical context of Igbo entrepreneurship. Findings show that ITAS develops leadership capabilities through structured mentorship, experiential learning, delegated responsibility, ethical socialisation, character formation, and progressive exposure to business management. Mentors also continue to provide former apprentices with professional networks, strategic guidance, and support beyond the formal apprenticeship period, strengthening entrepreneurial resilience and business adaptability. The study demonstrates that ITAS is not merely an entrepreneurial training mechanism but an indigenous leadership development institution that systematically produces and sustains entrepreneurial leaders through intergenerational knowledge transfer and experiential learning. The study recommends greater engagement by policymakers, educational institutions, and leadership development organisations with relevant elements of ITAS in designing contextually grounded leadership development initiatives in Nigeria.

Keywords: *Igbo Trade Apprenticeship Scheme (ITAS); Entrepreneurial leadership; Indigenous knowledge systems; Zaria; Mentorship*

Introduction

Leadership is germane in every endeavour of man. In the business sphere, with clear objectives on customer satisfaction and retention, and profitability and sustainability of the firm today and in the future, effective leadership is much more of a sine qua non. The Igbo Trade Apprenticeship Scheme (ITAS) is an embodiment of informal moulding of its trainees in the nitty-gritty of business success, which ultimately transforms them into leaders, first in business and other spheres of life eventually. Apprenticeship is age-old with man from the time man began to live in organised society and engage in diverse occupations. For example, in the pre-colonial period, the famous Awka blacksmiths in Igboland were reputed to have apprenticed their kith and kin in the craft, and in the course of time, as they travelled, others learned from them too.[1]

In the contemporary period, across the world, there are different forms of apprenticeship training. In Europe, there are peculiar models of apprenticeship programmes in different countries. Switzerland, Wales, and Germany, for example, place high primacy on apprenticeship training and accordingly institutionalise it into the formal education system, thereby creating multiple routes to educational attainment. Apprenticeship, in most cases in these countries, is industry-specific for employment opportunities, with the existence of Public-Private Partnership arrangements, government active participation/ funding, and as a lifelong career platform, etc. The apprenticeship system in Germany, however, has the peculiarity of aiming to train participants to match employment opportunities in industries and trades, in addition to entrepreneurship. In these countries of Europe, apprenticeship training has been deep-rooted since the medieval period.

On the other hand, in Australia, apprenticeship education is a new phenomenon, serving as an alternative route to formal education, government-funded, and inclusive of present workers, trainees and apprentices, with a robust regulatory framework in place[2]. In the West African country of the Republic of Benin, informal apprenticeship training has long been prevalent in a plethora of crafts. However, in the 2005 reforms of apprenticeship training, dual apprenticeship, otherwise called certificate of professional qualification (CQP), which combines vocational training in TVET schools and apprenticeship training in craftsmen workshops, was introduced. The traditional informal apprenticeship, following the reform, received an upgrade as trainees, on completion of training with master craftsmen, undergo a national certification evaluation exercise.[3]

In Nigeria, among the various ethnic groups, there exists one form of vocational apprenticeship training or another. The Yoruba, for example, are reputed for craft apprenticeship training in vocations like motor mechanics, car panel beating/ painting, carpentry, masonry, tailoring/ embroidery, etc., where the apprentice family pays a token sum to the master-trainer to imbue the trainee with skills of the craft, and after a certain time period, the trainee is certified as relatively proficient and is issued with a certificate of completion to start his own enterprise.

The ITAS is unique. The objective is to replicate entrepreneurs and enterprises through a wealth creation and sharing platform christened co-prosperity venture. It involves an established entrepreneur taking up a young person as an apprentice to be trained in business and thereafter settling him with seed capital to start his own business. At the end of the training, a diligent trainee turns out to be a guru in successful business management and, in a short time, begins to foray into establishing branches of the same trade line and sometimes seeks opportunities in other lines of business. In the process, he recruits other hands in the form of apprentices. The invaluable knowledge gained in the course of the apprenticeship training builds the trainee up to manage his business profitably and sustainably, and in no time, some of them begin to provide leadership for their families, market associations, community and religious associations, etc. In the course of time too, the very successful ones begin to foray into the international business arena, acquiring franchises and establishing partnerships with foreigners. In the early course of the youngster's business voyage, the master still provides some oversight, making available his goodwill, granting him credit and access to his network of business associates, among others. It is a co-prosperity venture indeed.

The ITAS is of immense socio- economic benefits to several stakeholders in Nigeria. Accordingly, it has received several research attention; however, focusing majorly on its origin, operational modalities, as a strategic instrument through which the Igbo bounced back from the devastation of the 1967 – 1970 Nigerian Civil War, its socio-economic contributions, challenges, and community development in the Igbo homeland and their business host communities, among others. Nonetheless, the leadership training and development attributes or characteristics embedded in the scheme have received little or no systematic attention in the form of research and, worse still, in relation to the Zaria area of Kaduna State within the time period of this study. Furthermore, leadership in any enterprise is key to success, as is the availability of other resources; the lack of essential leadership qualities in any enterprise is a big constraint to its success and effectiveness. This neglected area in the scheme is so critical and therefore worthy of examination. These gaps and the need to close them are the rationale for this study on a consistent and systematic basis on the ITAS and leadership training in the Zaria area of Kaduna State, 2003 – 2023.

Conceptual Clarifications

To understand the dynamics of ITAS and leadership training, it is important to clarify some key concepts that underpin this study.

Igbo Trade Apprenticeship Scheme

The Igbo Trade Apprenticeship Scheme (ITAS) is an ingenious, indigenous and culturally rooted "stakeholders' capitalism" of the Igbo people wherein a young boy, in most cases, is made to undergo an apprenticeship training under a Master (*Oga*) in trade, after which he is

certified proficient and settled to establish his own enterprise. This is different from venture capital, which is a tenured investment. The scheme is an institution that was generally guarded by customs, lineage and rituals. The apprenticeship system was boosted in Nigeria after the Nigerian Civil War. Many parents left with nothing after the war were forced to send their children (aged between 8 – 20 years) to survive as traders.[4] In this work, the concept of ITAS includes the variants of the scheme such as: *Igba-boi* (full-time apprenticeship), *Imu-ahia* (part-time apprenticeship), *Imu oru-aka* (learning of craft).

Training/Development

Training is mainly associated with humans, whether as workers, apprentices, interns in professional occupations, etc. The concept of human capital views workers as a prime asset of an organisation in the same way as financial capital. Investment in human capital through training and development expectedly yields significant returns for the organisation[5]. In this respect, acquainting employees with the right knowledge, skills and motivation gives an organisation a competitive advantage[6]. In this work, training and development mean the same thing and are used interchangeably. In consonance with this view, D. Y. Ali defines human capital development (training and development) as the training of people to develop their capability on their jobs.[7]

Training or development in this piece of work, therefore, entails on-the-job and off-the-job coaching, training, mentoring, counselling, supervision, and other measures taken by the master (mentor/trainer/oga) towards ensuring that the apprentice (mentee/trainee/nwa-boi) learns and imbibes business ethics, strategies, and tactics, among others that are tailored to moulding and sharpening the entrepreneurial potentials of the apprentice. The essence is to produce an effective business leader who will not just make profits but expand his business and make desired contributions to the replication of other upcoming entrepreneurs and their enterprises. The Igbo trade apprenticeship training objective is quite expansive; you are trained to be able to establish and run your own enterprise(s) effectively and profitably too, as well as train others to be successful entrepreneurs as well.

Leadership

Leadership is a multifaceted concept that has been variously defined across disciplines. Scholars have long acknowledged the difficulty of arriving at a universally accepted definition, owing to leadership's complexity and context-dependence.[8] Broadly, leadership may be understood as the capacity to influence individuals or groups toward the realisation of shared objectives. Contemporary definitions emphasise influence, guidance, vision, and the facilitation of collective effort.[9] Within the context of apprenticeship, leadership manifests in the master's ability to guide, mentor, discipline, and inspire apprentices, while transmitting not only technical skills but also values, work ethics, and entrepreneurial orientation. In this study, leadership is conceptualised as positive influence directed toward capacity-building

and goal attainment, particularly within the master–apprentice relationship. It is this form of leadership that underpins the effectiveness of ITAS as a system of entrepreneurship formation and socio-economic development.

Igbo Trade Apprenticeship Scheme in Historical Perspective

The Igbo Trade Apprenticeship Scheme (ITAS), no doubt, is rooted in the Igbo cultural attributes of commonality, resilience and enterprising nature. This is acknowledged by many scholars and seems innate to the Igbo ethnic group. But if it may be asked, what are those unique enterprising attributes of the average Igbo man that make him seem to have a sort of "Midas touch" in business incubation, establishment and expansion? Olutago acknowledged that the Igbo have been quite successful in many business ventures across Nigeria's regions and borders. He saw the attainment of business success of the Igbo to be a product of their high level of solidarity.[10] Orugun and Nafiu identified some of these success attributes to encompass: the ability to cope in a dynamic environment; to organise, reorganise and forecast; delegate responsibilities; utilise business opportunities; apprenticeship training; energetic and hardworking spirit; courage; confidence; careful thinking; curiosity to learn; optimism; determination; independence; perseverance; risk-taking; transformational skill; and creative and innovative skill.[11]

On the history of Igbo business expansion beyond their immediate frontiers, which seems to be the progenitor of the trade apprenticeship scheme, Adeola and Ozigbo recorded that the Igbo were able to successfully engage in pre-colonial long-distance trade beyond their boundaries through the Aro traders and Awka blacksmiths.[12] In addition, they were disposed towards acculturation as they invested a good proportion of their income in their host communities as well as adapted to their ways of life and learned to speak their languages. While acknowledging the fact that pre-colonial business relationships existed between the Igbo and other ethnic groups within and beyond Nigeria, it could be safe to conclude that the outbreak of the Nigerian Civil War and its debilitating effects on the Igbo and their land was a major propellant for the ITAS to blossom.[13] Achebe captured the ugly effects of the war on the Igbo thus;

> Many people had lost all they owned. Loved ones in the thousands were reported missing by families. The worst had happened, and we were now forced into reorganising our thinking, expectations and hope. We (the former Biafrans) had to carry on despite the great disaster that was military defeat and learn very quickly to live with such a loss… Nigeria had not succeeded in crushing the Igbo people, but it had left us indigent, stripped bare, and stranded in the wilderness.[14]

O. Adeola and V.C. Ozigbo, [15] as well as Mefor, aligned with this thought of the aftermath of the 1967-1970 Nigerian Civil War galvanising the Igbo into greater entrepreneurship to eke a living[16]

The role played by the slave trade in the boosting of the ITAS was noted by some scholars. It was recorded that between the 15th Century and up to the 1800s, 320,000 Igbo were traded at Bonny and about 50,000 at Calabar and Elem Kalabari Isichei[17], Adamu[18], Lander & Lander.[19] This is a tremendous loss to the Igbo nation, and they were mainly able-bodied men. However, as devastating as it was to the Igbo, it yielded what could be termed unexpected benefits. Ohadike recorded it thus:

> "Unlike most African Communities, slaves from the Igbo ethnic group were exposed to entrepreneurship by their owners, trading commodities like spices, sugar, tobacco, and cotton for export to America, Europe and Asia."[20]

This action kindled the entrepreneurial spirit of the Igbo man and drove them into various types of entrepreneurial ventures in the pre-colonial era.[21] This, in no small measure, galvanised apprenticeship in enterprises involved in merchandising. Hitherto, apprenticeship was basically in crafts like blacksmithing, pottery and herbal medicine, as typified by Nkwerrre and Awka medicine men, among others. The colonial era consequently met the Igbo at the forefront of business entrepreneurship as exporters of palm produce, craftsmen, traders, merchants, cottage industrialists, etc. This culture has been sustained to the present 21st century through apprenticeship.[22] The exposure of the Igbo slaves to business activities by their owners was in no way accidental; the master-owners noted their innate entrepreneurial traits and accordingly decided to deploy them to where they would be best utilised.

It should be noted that the Igbo trade apprenticeship scheme is culturally dependent. The scheme is accordingly bolstered and sustained by the Igbo clan, kindred (Umunna) and lineage social units and even the in-law's unique relationship, which confers good relationships among families/ villages in Igbo culture and abhors harm to the other on account of marriage. These are some of the customary backgrounds of the scheme. People often criticise the scheme as lacking an institutional/ legal framework to guarantee the settlement of an apprentice at the end of the period of apprenticeship. As reasonable as that may sound, such individuals need to realise that the scheme is culturally rooted and that the people's traditions, customs and blood relationships, etc., have sustained the scheme for centuries. There may have been occasional breaches, especially regarding apprentice settlement; but those who breach this obligation, without reasons beyond their control, suffer the consequences directly or indirectly. Apprenticeship among the Igbo is culturally rooted and age-old, with some holding the view that it is innate in them.

Major Igbo Businesses in Zaria Area of Kaduna State, 2003 – 2023

Igbo in the Zaria area of Kaduna State are involved in a plethora of businesses. However, their business activities within the period could be vividly seen in the areas of automobile motor spare parts, clothing and other apparel, pharmacy and patent medicine stores, building materials, educational institutions, transportation, electronics, office equipment, stationery, and allied businesses, among others. In the course of these businesses and other human activities, the Igbo interact with their host communities and other migrant ethnic groups and foreign nationals in Zaria, providing goods and services to them on a win–win basis. It may equally be stressed that the Igbo play vital roles in the provision of other services in the economy of these areas of Kaduna State. There are several Igbo professionals in the areas of law, building construction, engineering, fashion and design, health care delivery (medical doctors, nurses, dentists), catering and fast food and other allied professions. In the educational services sector, they own a number of private primary and secondary schools.

The economic activities of the Igbo in terms of trading within the period of 2003 – 2023 in Zaria majorly centred on Pharmacy and Patent Medicine, Automobile Motor Spare Parts, Building Materials, Telecommunications/ Electrical materials, Timber and Agro-allied business; and Provisions, Stationery and related businesses. In the Zaria area, the core of Igbo businesses is located in the Sabon-Geri part of the town on account of the age-old Hausa traditional settlement pattern where the city is a reserve of the indigenous Hausa people, and Sabon-Geri is for settler ethnic groups. The Igbo are involved in several businesses, but they are seemingly in the commanding heights in motor spare parts, electrical/ electronics, building materials, timber, clothing/ women apparel and pharmacy/ patent medicine stores in Zaria. These businesses, though, are largely within the Sabon- Gari area but are more visible on Crescent Road, Park Road, Timber Shade and the newly built Sabon-Gari ultra-modern market, where Igbo traders in wears/ apparels and pharmacy/ patent medicine are largely domiciled and in a commanding position. A handful of Igbo traders are found within the Samaru area, especially the Samaru Ultra-Modern Market. In the city, there are Igbo traders in patent medicine and other petty businesses, but the core of Igbo entrepreneurs and their businesses are in the Sabon-Gari part of Zaria.[23]

There is equally a good proportion of Igbo businesses in the Samaru area of Zaria and other new settlements. It is an established fact that Igbo people are mercantilist, with their ubiquitous entrepreneurship visible everywhere in Nigeria, and in this particular case, Zaria. Igbo entrepreneurship goes together with their trade apprenticeship. The migration of the Igbo outside their homelands predates colonialism, though boosted by colonialism, especially in the Zaria area of Kaduna State. Therefore, the evolution of Igbo trade apprenticeship training in the ancient town of Zaria is rooted in the emergence of Igbo traders in the area and consequently quite entrenched.

Business Leadership Training Attributes of the Igbo Trade Apprenticeship Scheme in Zaria Area of Kaduna State, 2003-2023

The Igbo Trade Apprenticeship Scheme is a business leadership training informal school that moulds participants into becoming successful entrepreneurs imbued with different leadership skills to weather through any harsh business environment. The scheme creates leaders in business, and examples abound everywhere. It is a big practical school; though, some people underestimate and denigrate it.[24] A good amount of literature and primary data collected in the course of fieldwork attest to this attribute of effective business leadership knowledge derivable from the scheme. There is no gainsaying that for an entrepreneur to transform his/her inventive or innovative ideas and/or maintain stable growth in his/her venture, a reasonable level of skills is essential. The economic activities of the Igbo all over the country have accounted for the excellent interpretation of their skills. In Nigeria, the Igbo took over the South West economy from the British, not from other tribes and never by force or with arms but by economic skills and strategies built through a progressive business mind.[25] These necessary levels of skills are business leadership skills and are built or acquired through the trade apprenticeship scheme. ITAS provides business leadership training to the apprentices in a whole gamut of ways. A few will, however, be discussed, as the training itself has the building of business leaders as a core objective. Orugun and Nafiu, citing Onuoha, B.C., tabulated the skills (technical, business management and personal entrepreneurial) required for doing business in the table below:

Table 1: **Technical, Business Management and Personal Entrepreneurial Skills**

Technical skills	**Business management**	**Personal entrepreneurial skills**
- Writing - Oral communication - Monitoring environment - Technical business management - Technology - Interpersonal - Listening - Ability to organise - Network building - Coaching - Being a team player	- Planning and goal setting - Decision making - Human relation - Marketing - Finance - Accounting - Management - Control - Negotiation - Venture launch - Managing growth	- Inner control/discipline - Risk taker - Innovative - Change oriented - Persistent - Visionary leader - Ability to manage change

Source: Orugun, J.J. and Nafiu, A.T., "An Exploratory Study of Igbo",159.

According to a respondent;

> These skills and much more in practical terms are what the scheme, in an unstructured manner, imbibes in apprentices of the scheme through their mentors (masters) and, by extension, the business association. This explains how a primary school or a secondary school leaver (even dropouts), after diligently undergoing the training and settling with seed capital, could within a short time progress from being the owner of one shop to two or more shops. These business gurus, with time, expand to other cities on the same business line and gradually diversify to other areas of business, becoming an importer and exporter, franchising some products from overseas, and even becoming a licensee to produce some of the products hitherto a sole distributor locally in Nigeria and these exploits are kudos to their apprenticeship training. Igbo apprenticeship training programme could be likened to a higher institution of learning, and a successful trainee could be seen as equivalent to a first-degree graduate in Business

> Management/ Entrepreneurship or even Economics. I am indeed proud to be a product of this ingenious training scheme.[26]

Visioning Capacity

The art of visioning where the enterprise aims to be and operate is the primary role of the originator of the business. In the Igbo apprenticeship training, the apprentice imbibes this strategy early enough from the master and the trade environment that as soon as he is settled, the young entrepreneur knows where he is driving the business to and where he expects the enterprise to be in ten years, for example. This leadership attribute is very germane to business success; otherwise, an entrepreneur will be groping in the dark. The Igbo apprenticeship scheme is a veritable way of moulding leaders even beyond the sphere of business, and from the very beginning the young minds begin to dream of the height of business, among others.[27] The leadership features of the scheme cannot be over-emphasised; it made me, for example, to be reckoned with as a leader in business and other spheres of life.[28]The training is expansive in nature and builds trainee-apprentices not just to be good in business matters but also in other life skills and the discipline and ability to foresee business.[29] The Igbo trade apprenticeship scheme has an in-built mechanism for fashioning out good leaders in business and the society at large. This visioning capacity is a critical element for business growth and sustainability.

Tenacity and Resilience

One of the critical attributes the scheme imbues in participants is tenacity and resilience. This is essential for enduring success as the business environment is not always rosy. This disciplined mindset differentiates graduates of the scheme from others who foray into business, whose thinking is that of business eldorado, which seldom is the case. Without equivocation, entrepreneurs who passed through the scheme diligently could be likened to an iroko tree that withstands harsh business periods and flourishes during favourable economic times exceedingly.[30] Emphasising the role of apprenticeship in building trainees' leadership capacity and resilience spirit, Levenson Akahalu, from personal experience, stated thus:

> "The knowledge that is helping me today in the leadership of the Igbo community in Zaria as its President General is basically gained through the apprenticeship scheme, as I only went through basic education of First School Leaving Certificate (FSLC) and of course over the years I have been consistent here, otherwise, there were periods of business downturns especially during crises to warrant one closing shop and relocating".[31]

Indeed, the Igbo trade apprenticeship training develops leaders in every facet of life for those who are serious, obedient and diligent, making them resilient, but the trade learning of 6 months to 1 year is like short-term courses. While that route of practical entrepreneurship

education could be said to be helpful but not as much as apprentices who spent years on full-time training. The full- time apprentices are exposed to the nitty-gritty of business, standing strong like an "iroko tree", whereas the short-term learners only get the peripherals. However, in the business arena, there is opportunity for further learning, as business is a continuous institution of learning.[32] The researcher cannot disagree. It is just like in the military where there are short-term service and full-time trainees, and ostensibly due to limitations in the training of the short-term service officers, their career advancement is limited.

Adeola and Ozigbo, attesting to the business leadership development characteristics of the scheme, wrote:

> "The Igba-boi business apprenticeship model is about development; it is about employment; it is about capacity building; it is about improving the standard of living of the people".[33] The Igbo apprenticeship system has also ensured for a very long time the transfer of power, leadership, and ownership of business organisations from older generations to younger generations.[34]

These assertions go to attest to the resilience apprenticeship training confers. This is in no small measure evident in the phenomenal growth of Igbo entrepreneurs from very small beginnings, and even in remote communities, they persevere to prosper.

Networking with Integrity and Capacity

The networking practice as a business strategy has been one of the secrets of business success among Igbo entrepreneurs. The apprenticeship scheme's success is often viewed in the context of the seed capital trainees receive at the end of training; though it is a factor, the opportunities successful apprentices as young entrepreneurs receive through networking with integrity and capacity are enormous. The networking opportunity the training provides that is webbed in integrity and capacity is critical, as the apprentices are exposed to a network of suppliers, customers, regulators and trade associations which they leverage maximally depending on their level of honesty and capacity in terms of turnover. The intrinsic value in networking of the Igbo traditional apprenticeship system has become the bedrock of Igbo entrepreneurship success stories. In the context of the above conclusion, it is not difficult to fathom that the apprenticeship system, which is seen as being foundational to Igbo entrepreneurship successes, is built on leadership training and, in this instance, business leadership that not only produces entrepreneurs but positions them on the path of successful business growth, profit and sustainability through networking.

This is the magic behind Igbo entrepreneurship expansion and dominance in Nigeria and beyond. It is not necessarily the seed capital given to apprentices at the end of training, though an important element, particularly in a country where access to capital from formal

financial institutions is very limited to the informal sector participants of the economy and poverty level is high. It is gratifying to note, and to the credit of the leadership characteristics of the scheme, that Igbo entrepreneurs who successfully passed through the apprenticeship training have found avenues of raising capital among themselves. This is nothing but a product of business leadership acumen prevalent in their training.[35] Writing on the Igbo and Entrepreneurship in Nigeria, Nnaocha, while expounding on the reasons behind Igbo success in business, wrote:

> One outstanding quality of the Igbo is the entrepreneurial skill they are imbued with. The Igbo entrepreneur has these sterling proficiencies such as inventive, fearless, sensible, pragmatic, ingenious, determined, resourceful, logical, reasonable, consistent, risk-taker, visionary, team player, persistent, adaptive, strategist, focused, flexible. These traits in an average Igbo man across the country have accounted for their excellent entrepreneurial achievements.[36]

While aligning with these traits of the Igbo entrepreneurs, it must, however, be stated that they are honed through apprenticeship training. This capacity for inventiveness and resourcefulness, for example, could be seen in the ability to overcome the challenge of access to finance by leveraging the goodwill of master-mentors to obtain goods on credit from suppliers, which, of course, the new entrepreneur must maintain through integrity and capacity for high business turnover. Igbo entrepreneurship has played out well as a result of their support system, rallying around each other towards ensuring that their successes are multiplied and broadened. A successful Igbo has chains of "boys" he has trained and settled and always makes sure he supports them until they are fully established and can stand on their own businesses.[23]

It is therefore noteworthy to reflect that the leadership-building components of the Igbo trade apprenticeship scheme still go on between the master (mentor/oga) and his settled apprentice (ex-mentee/nwa-boi) till the latter is firmly established and very successful. It is the pride of every Igbo entrepreneur that an apprentice who served under him well and settled not only establishes his own business but engages other apprentices to further train in business leadership and does better exploits business-wise than him. In fact, the master business entrepreneur deliberately and strategically builds a family of business associates and confidants in the future with his erstwhile apprentices. In some cases, the bond between the master and his former apprentices, now business tycoons, seems more solid than even the relationship existing between some of them and their blood relations.[37]

Strategic Knowledge and Customer Relationship Management

Another core element in Igbo apprenticeship leadership building involves the strategic knowledge the apprentice gains coupled with the intricacies of effective customer

relationship management. That the customer is king to the average Igbo entrepreneur is not a euphemism, as it is to most service providers in Nigeria, but what he must practice and live by always to earn a living. This strategic knowledge is quite germane to the widely acclaimed Igbo business success. In fact, young people from relatively wealthy families now opt for the leadership building/molding aspect of the scheme, pay the entrepreneur a token amount of money to get "dyed in the wool" of business strategies, innovativeness, tenacity, customer relationship, vision, risk-taking, expansion and change management, networking, etc. inherent in the apprenticeship training. At the end of the 6-month to 1-year intensive training on the "basics", they establish their own businesses and are still being overseen by their former master trainers, who still provide them with some business information, guidance and networks, etc.

The success of Igbo entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship lies in this leadership training and development characteristic of the scheme more than in anything else. This explains why those who chose to foray into the field of business, even among the Igbo with seemingly innate business capacity without passing through the apprenticeship scheme, sooner or later, fizzle out of business as they lack the basic business strategies and tactics for success.[38] The objectives of ensuring and facilitating skill acquisition, mentoring, excellent customer relationships, and knowledge transfer in the scheme amount to leadership training, building and development, which naturally dovetails with a continuous business incubation circle or enterprise replication among the Igbo of South East Nigeria within and outside the country, and this is happening everywhere the Igbo are doing business, Zaria inclusive.[39] When an apprentice is settled by the master and, upon starting his own enterprise, with time and success in the business, begins taking up apprentices and nurturing them in business leadership.

The result is the multiplication of businesses, creation of business moguls and wealth sharing. This is made possible through strategic knowledge of the business and, of course, aided by excellent customer relationship management. For a primary or secondary school leaver, after five to eight years of training, turning out after some years of being in business to be in command of multi-million/billion-naira business is no doubt a business leader and kudos to the Igbo apprenticeship scheme on-the -job learning on customer relationship as "the customer is the business" simplicity.[40] Knowledge in strategy plus good customer relationship management are key leadership characteristics inherent in Igbo apprenticeship training.

Capacity in Management Functions

The ingenious business leadership training attributes of the scheme sharpen trainees on effective discharge of the basic management functions of planning, organising, staffing, directing and controlling. Without this, the entrepreneurs/ enterprises replication propensity of the scheme will be in jeopardy, for an entrepreneur must know basic management functions to run the business effectively and grow it to the level of taking apprentices and settling them

for enterprise replication to occur. The system is such that there is always a millionaire waiting to be born. It is a beautiful circle, with each circle preparing for the birth of a millionaire-who is either being ingratiated, incubated or funded.[41] Scholars like Wuam[42] and Omanchi[43] appreciated and posited that the Igbo apprenticeship scheme has the capacity of shaping the mental and intelligence quotient of the Igbo for business success. This is leadership building. The beauty of the Igbo apprenticeship lies in the building of men of business strategy and exploits. The master/ mentor trains the apprentice in his line of business or craft and, in the process, guides him in developing a number of skill sets like planning, organising, coordinating, controlling and decision-making that are essential in running a business effectively.

Therefore, closely looked at, the scheme is planned, envisioned and practised to be a proper entrepreneurship training and management development programme, although of an informal nature limited only by the expertise of the master and that of the learning capacity of the trainee apprentice.[44] It is within the blood stream of Ndi-Igbo to help each other, educate, tutor, and direct each other when it comes to business, craftsmanship, and apprenticeship in business; hence a typical Igbo man won't give you fish, rather he will readily teach you how to catch fish.[45] The early knowledge of basic management functions and putting them into operations reasonably underpins Igbo entrepreneurs' success and exploits. It is a known fact that what is not planned cannot be controlled, bringing to the fore the intrinsic relationship between planning and controlling. While taking up a new apprentice, the entrepreneur does a diligent background check on the character and industrious capacity of the youngster. This could be likened to what employers of labour in formal organisations do in recruiting staff.

SWOT Analysis

The leadership-building potential in the Igbo trade apprenticeship scheme could be viewed from the perspective of tutoring its participants on SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis as well as environmental scanning. This has been evidenced in a number of research endeavours. The research work that centered on the effect of the Igbo apprenticeship system and social capital in the new business creation process of immigrant Igbo entrepreneurs in Wukari, Taraba State, for example, concluded that "with empirical evidences the ITAS had contributed positively and significantly on the apprentice's confidence in starting their businesses, entrepreneurial (business) idea generation and modification, determination of apprentice's business location, impact on apprentice's customer relations management, business decision making which includes price decision, had helped apprentices significantly in securing and maintaining business suppliers, had contributed significantly in helping apprentices to know how to handle cultural and legal problems in their businesses and had contributed significantly to apprentices' business financing (book keeping)".[46] They are all critical success factors in business; indeed, the scheme could safely be described as a nurturer, builder and moulder of business leaders

continuously rooted in the culture of the people.[47] The micro study that centred on Wukari, Taraba State is akin to the present one, whose area scope centred on Zaria in Kaduna State, and the findings as captured above resonated well with the views of a good number of respondents in this study.

The ability to understand, read and appreciate your business strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats is a sine-qua- non for business growth and continuity. Likewise, environmental scanning is especially important when business is rough or during challenging times. Appreciating the importance of knowing your environment well, a woman entrepreneur stated thus:

> "My choice of Samaru Ultra-Modern Market in establishing this stationery and business centre business was due to its proximity to the Ahmadu Bello University main campus. Though the business is seasonal with 'peak and low periods', nonetheless, I appreciate the location."[48]

The leadership training and development attributes of the scheme are the sine qua non for Igbo business success, and those who miss this "university of business" and plunge into establishing enterprises sooner rather than later, abysmally fail in their quest. This is common, as the "overnight" entrepreneurs lack a basic foundation. It is highly desirable that, to commence any business, regardless of one's level of education, apprenticeship training is imperative. To be sustainable, you must know your business and the environment you operate in.[49]

Association and Community Development Leadership

One area where the leadership capacity of Igbo entrepreneurs who successfully passed through the apprenticeship scheme is rubbing off positively in Zaria and Kafanchan is in the leadership of trade, religious and community development associations. For example, Eze Richard Ogbonna, the current Eze Igbo Kafanchan, is a product of the Scheme. In the same vein, the present President General, Igbo Community Welfare Association (ICWA), Zaria, is an entrepreneur and a successful ex-mentee too. Both leaders only have basic education but are effectively leading a group made up of people from diverse professions, backgrounds and accomplishments. To attest to the leadership of Igbo entrepreneurs outside business, they are at the helm of affairs in a good number of neighbourhood Schools' Parents, Teachers and Religious associations. This is hinged on their forthrightness, value-for-money attitude, accountability and capacity to make things happen.[50]

It may be necessary to reiterate that the study in Kafanchan and Zaria areas on the leadership building attributes of the Igbo trade apprenticeship scheme vividly lends credence to the inherent potential of the scheme in moulding leaders in business and other spheres of life. Indeed, the whole gamut of training, mentoring and counselling in the course

of Igbo apprenticeship training is geared towards leadership building. Perhaps, the Igbo seem to be a tribe that places primacy on the role of leadership in every human endeavour, as typified in their business leadership training through their unique apprenticeship model. Ironically, some seemingly uninformed view the scheme as tantamount to slavery. This is far from it. The reality is that conscious efforts were put into designing the trade apprenticeship scheme apparently in consonance with the Igbo philosophies of resilience and hard work, and of course, their culture and worldview. An Igbo adage says that "nothing good comes easy". In this context, the scheme is designed to bring forth business leaders with deep and vast experience in the strategies, intricacies and tactics for business success, expansion and sustainability. The apprenticeship scheme is not slavery; rather, it is a systematic leadership and informal learning process that involves years of business mentorship and tutorship. In the Igbo community, a master or entrepreneur might have two, three or four people under his mentorship who are willing to learn and undertake leadership roles in business.[51] In due cognisance of the capacity of apprenticeship training in grooming leaders, there is a common saying among Igbo young entrepreneurs that it is "unnecessary to strive to earn a master's degree in business; you only need a master of business to imbibe from."

Conclusion

This study investigated the leadership development attributes of ITAS in the Zaria area of Kaduna State from 2003 to 2023. The findings reveal that the Scheme transcends being merely an economic survival or wealth-creation mechanism; it functions as a robust, indigenous institution for entrepreneurial leadership development. Specifically, the Scheme systematically equip apprentices with core leadership and management capabilities, including strategic visioning, resilience, ethical networking, and customer relationship management. Furthermore, the findings demonstrate that the mentor-mentee relationship extends well beyond the formal apprenticeship period, providing continuous strategic guidance that ensures enterprise sustainability and frequently prepares graduates for broader leadership roles within trade, religious, community associations, and much more. Furthermore, previous scholarship has predominantly framed the scheme within the narrow contexts of basic entrepreneurship, capital generation, and youth employment; this research empirically establishes ITAS as a structured, indigenous leadership development model. By documenting how informal, intergenerational knowledge transfer produces transformative entrepreneurial leaders rather than just business operators, this study provides a culturally grounded framework that can inform contemporary policy, institutional governance, and formal leadership development initiatives in Nigeria.

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23 Chief Blessing Obiesie, aged 52 years, Businessman, Interviewed in his business premises, Kaduna- Zaria Bye-Pass, Zaria, 10/07/2025. This view is corroborated by Joseph Ogueri, Aged 55 years, Businessman, interviewed in his business premises, Sabon-Gari Ultra-Modern Market, Zaria,11/7/25 and Innocent Mgbe, Aged 55 years, businessman, interviewed in his business premises, Samaru Ultra-Modern Market, Zaria, 4/11/25.

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