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ETHICS AND MORALS OF IGBO APPRENTICESHIP SYSTEM: FOUNDATIONAL FACTORS OF ENTREPRENEURIAL FORMATION

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Abstract

The *Igbo* Apprenticeship System (IAS), popularly expressed through practices such as *Igba-Boyi* and *Imu-Ahia*, represents an indigenous institution for entrepreneurial learning, occupational training, socialization and intergenerational wealth creation among the Igbo of old southeastern Nigeria. Beyond its economic function, the system historically operated through an ethical framework that regulated relationships between masters, apprentices, families, customers and communities. However, contemporary transformations, including urbanization, commercialization, individualism, weak contractual safeguards and changing social values, increasingly challenged the moral foundations upon which the system depends. This study examines the ethical and moral principles underlying the *Igbo* Apprenticeship System, with particular attention on factors such as integrity, hard work, loyalty, reciprocity and respect that underpins the system. The main aim is to demonstrate how these virtues function not merely as personal qualities but as institutional mechanisms for trust, knowledge transmission, business continuity, social mobility and communal development. The study adopted a qualitative, interpretive and historical-textual methodology based on critical examination of relevant literature on Igbo society, African philosophy, ethics, apprenticeship and entrepreneurial learning. Findings indicated that integrity creates trust; hard work cultivates discipline and entrepreneurial competence; loyalty sustains reciprocal obligations; and respect facilitates mentorship, knowledge transmission and social harmony. The study recommended ethical reorientation, written apprenticeship agreements, reciprocal accountability, protection of apprentices' rights, preservation of indigenous values, and formal recognition of apprenticeship training and integration of ethical education into contemporary IAS practice. It concluded that the sustainability of IAS depends not only on

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economic capital but also on the preservation and constructive modernization of its moral capital.

Keywords: Igbo Apprenticeship System, Ethics, Morality, Integrity and Hard Work, Loyalty and Respect, Entrepreneurship, Igbo, Southeastern Nigeria.

Background of the Study

The Igbo Apprenticeship System (IAS) is one of the most significant indigenous institutions for entrepreneurial learning, occupational training and wealth distribution in southeastern Nigeria. Commonly associated with expressions such as *Igba-Boyi*, *Imu-Ahia* and *Imu-Oru*, the system involves the placement of a young person under the guidance of an experienced entrepreneur or craftsman for a defined period of practical learning. The apprentice acquires technical competence, business knowledge, and interpersonal skills and, ideally, the moral dispositions required for independent economic life. The significance of IAS extends beyond the acquisition of occupational skills. Contemporary studies (Afigbo, 1981) & (Cole, 1969) described it as an important mechanism of entrepreneurial development, human-capital formation and socioeconomic empowerment. Research (Agama, & Ohajonu, 2021) on entrepreneurial learning within IAS, for example, emphasizes learning through observation, participation and imitation rather than through classroom instruction alone. Similarly, recent empirical research (Basden, 1966) has found a relationship between apprenticeship incubation, business ethics and entrepreneurship development in old southeastern Nigeria. The moral dimension of the institution, however, deserves greater scholarly attention. An apprenticeship arrangement cannot function effectively through technical competence alone. The master must trust the apprentice with customers, money, business information and sometimes considerable responsibility. The apprentice, on the other hand, depends upon the master for instruction, protection, experience and eventual economic independence. The relationship therefore requires ethical norms capable of regulating conduct where formal contracts and institutional enforcement may be limited.

Historically, this moral structure was expressed through values such as *ezi omume* (good conduct), *ezi aha* (good name), honesty, diligence, loyalty, respect, reciprocity, justice and communal responsibility. These values correspond with broader African philosophical understandings of personhood and community (Menkiti, 1984), for example, argues that African personhood is substantially constituted through participation in communal life and the acquisition of moral qualities. His famous discussion places the communal world before the isolated individual, emphasizing that identity is formed through social relationships (p. 171). The ethical structure of IAS can therefore be understood as a form of moral capital. Financial capital enables a business to operate, but trust, reputation, loyalty and integrity make sustained cooperation possible. Where these moral resources deteriorate, apprenticeship can become vulnerable to exploitation, betrayal, conflict and premature termination. This concern is particularly important in the contemporary period. Recent research identifies the absence of written agreements and adequate legal safeguards as significant ethical vulnerabilities within IAS, exposing both apprentices and masters to possible exploitation. More recent studies posit that the contemporary relevance of IAS requires greater transparency, accountability, equitable compensation, community engagement and state involvement or political will. (Ekennia, 2000 p. 154). The central argument of this paper is therefore that the historical strength of IAS cannot be explained solely by its economic organization. Its durability is also connected to an ethical system that

seeks to transform the apprentice from a learner into a responsible entrepreneur and member of society.

Statement of the Problem

The Igbo Apprenticeship System has received considerable attention as an indigenous model of entrepreneurship and economic empowerment. Yet much of the discussion has concentrated on its economic outcomes business creation, employment, wealth generation and entrepreneurial development while comparatively less attention has been given to the ethical architecture that makes the system function. The contemporary transformation of IAS raises several questions. What happens when the trust upon which an apprenticeship agreement depends is weakened? What happens when masters fail to fulfill settlement promises? What happens when apprentices abuse confidential business information, steal from their masters or abandon agreements prematurely? Can the system survive when its traditional moral principles become disconnected from its economic practices? Recent scholarship confirms that these are not merely theoretical questions. Studies have identified exploitation, inadequate contractual protection, unfair treatment and other ethical difficulties within contemporary apprenticeship practices. The problem, therefore, is not simply whether IAS produces entrepreneurs, but what kind of entrepreneurs it produces and what moral framework sustains their relationships with others.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The main aim of this study is to examine the ethical and moral foundations of the *Igbo* Apprenticeship System and demonstrate their relevance to the sustainability of indigenous entrepreneurship. The specific objectives include:

- i. Examine integrity as a moral foundation of IAS.
- ii. Analyze hard work as an ethical obligation and entrepreneurial virtue in IAS.
- iii. Examine loyalty as a reciprocal principle governing master–apprentice relationships in IAS.
- iv. Analyze respect as a moral principle underlying mentorship and knowledge transmission in IAS.
- v. Identify the relevance of these values to contemporary IAS; and propose measures for preserving the ethical strengths of IAS while addressing contemporary abuses.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive and historical-textual methodology. It relies principally on critical examination of published works in African philosophy, *Igbo* studies, anthropology, ethics, entrepreneurship and apprenticeship studies. Relevant contemporary studies on the *Igbo* Apprenticeship System are also examined to connect traditional ethical principles with present-day challenges. The study is therefore conceptual rather than quantitative. It does not claim to provide statistical measurement of the frequency of particular ethical behaviors among apprentices or masters. Rather, it interprets the moral concepts that have historically shaped relationships within IAS and examines their continuing relevance. (Achebe, 1958). This approach is appropriate because several of the concepts under consideration such as *ezi omume*, *ezi aha*, *loyalty*, respect, communal responsibility and *Ofor na Ogu* are embedded in cultural and philosophical meanings that require contextual interpretation rather than numerical measurement.

Ethical and Moral Foundations of the *Igbo* Apprenticeship System

- i. **Integrity as Moral Capital:** Integrity constitutes one of the most important ethical foundations of IAS. In the *Igbo* moral vocabulary, related ideas include *ezi omume* (good conduct), *ikwu ọtọ* (uprightness), *ezi aha* (good name) and fidelity to accepted norms. Integrity in this context goes beyond simply telling the truth. It involves consistency between one's words, actions, obligations and relationships. A master who promises to train and settle an apprentice is expected to honor that commitment. Similarly, an apprentice who enters an apprenticeship agreement is expected to protect the master's business interests and fulfill the agreed terms. Uchendu's study of *Igbo* social organization demonstrates the importance of social relationships, economic activity, and division of labor, property and systems of status within *Igbo* society. His work provides an important anthropological basis for understanding why trust and reputation matter within indigenous economic relationships. (Uchendu, 1965). Integrity can therefore be described as moral capital because it creates confidence between individuals. A master can entrust an apprentice with money because he believes the apprentice will act honestly. A customer can patronize a business because the proprietor has established a good reputation. A family can entrust a child to a master because the master is considered trustworthy. This produces a chain: Integrity → Trust → Cooperation → Business Continuity → Communal Development. The opposite is equally true: Dishonesty → Loss of Trust → Conflict → Broken Relationships → Institutional Weakening.
- ii. **Integrity and *Ezi Omume*:** *Ezi omume* refers broadly to good or morally acceptable conduct. In the context of apprenticeship, it requires the apprentice to demonstrate honesty, diligence, self-control and responsibility. Menkiti's theory of personhood provides a useful philosophical framework here. His argument that personhood is developed through participation in communal moral life means that apprenticeship can be understood as more than occupational education: it is also a process of character formation (Menkiti, 1984, p. 171). The apprentice therefore becomes an entrepreneur not simply by learning how to buy and sell, but by learning how to conduct oneself within a network of relationships.
- iii. **Integrity and *Ezi Aha*:** Another important dimension is *ezi aha*, meaning a good name or reputation. In a relationship-based economy, reputation functions as an informal institution. A person may possess financial wealth but still lack social legitimacy if the wealth is believed to have been acquired dishonestly. Conversely, a person with a reputation for honesty can gain access to relationships, credit, partnerships and opportunities. This principle is particularly important for IAS because the system traditionally relies substantially on interpersonal trust. Where formal documentation is weak, reputation becomes a mechanism of informal accountability.
- iv. **Integrity and *Ofor na Ogu*:** The moral significance of *Ofor na Ogu* can also be used to interpret integrity in *Igbo* thought. *Ofor* is associated with legitimate authority, truth and moral order, while *Ogu* is commonly associated with innocence, moral justification and the condition of having acted rightly. Within this worldview, morality is not merely a private matter. Wrongdoing can disturb relationships among individuals and the wider community. Consequently, integrity becomes relational: the morally upright person is expected to contribute to social equilibrium. This interpretation should nevertheless be treated as a philosophical reconstruction rather than as evidence that every *Igbo* community historically understood *Ofor* and *Ogu* in precisely the same manner.

- v. **What is *Ikenga*?** *Ikenga* in traditional *Igbo* society is a profound philosophical symbol representing inner strength, or dynamic force that portrays the power of the will and kinetic energy, bravery, and individual achievement, especially in entrepreneurship and personal accomplishment. It is a wooden carving given to a young man during his transition to adulthood, or upon graduation from apprenticeship system embodying his destiny and guardian spirit referred to as his *chi*. This definition leads us to what is *Chi*? In *Igbo* philosophical thought, *Chi* is a fundamental metaphysical concept referring to the personal spiritual principle or divine life-force associated with an individual. It is commonly understood as the person's spiritual companion, source of vital power, and mediator between the individual and the Supreme Being, (Chukwu Okike Abiama) at birth to enable him or her fulfill his or her purpose in life. Therefore *Chi* is closely connected with questions of destiny, personality, agency, success, and human existence. A useful way of understanding *Chi* is that it expresses the *Igbo* conviction that human life involves an interaction between divine/spiritual influence and human effort. This is captured in the well-known *Igbo* maxim "*Onye kwe, Chi ya ekwe*"—"when a person agrees/commits himself, his or her *Chi* agrees." The maxim does not necessarily mean that human beings can achieve everything through effort alone; rather, it emphasizes the complementary relationship between personal determination and spiritual destiny. (Okoro, 2008, pp. 61–63).
- vi. **Relationship between *Chi* and *Ikenga*?** *Chi* is an individual spiritual guardian and destiny guide from the Creator (Chukwu Okike Abiam), while *Ikenga* is the physical and spiritual symbol of your personal strength, hard work, and power to achieve success. In *Igbo* tradition, both concepts work together to shape a person's life, but they serve very different purposes.

Theory of Hard Work and *Ikenga* in IAS: The Theory of Hard Work in *Igbo* Cosmology can be understood as the philosophical principle that human beings are expected to actively participate in the realization of their existence through labor, determination, courage, enterprise and responsible action. In traditional *Igbo* thought, the human person is not conceived simply as a passive recipient of destiny. Rather, the individual possesses agency and is expected to act upon the possibilities available to him or her. (Simon Ottenberg, 1968). As a result, hard work occupies a significant place in *Igbo* cosmology because it expresses the human capacity for agency, self-realization, and achievement. In *Igbo* thought, the individual is not expected to remain passive before destiny but is encouraged to exercise initiative, perseverance, courage, intelligence, and enterprise. Thus, the relationship between *Chi* and human action may be understood as a dynamic interaction between metaphysical possibility and practical effort: human will → effort → perseverance → achievement, with *Chi* providing the metaphysical context within which human life unfolds. Scholarship on *Igbo* thought similarly identifies a close relationship between *Chi* and *Ikenga*, presenting them as dimensions that connect the immaterial and material aspects of human existence and emphasize individual achievement within an egalitarian social order. The *Igbo* maxim "*Onye kwe, Chi ya ekwe*" ("if a person agrees/is willing, his or her *Chi* agrees") provides an important philosophical basis for understanding the place of effort in *Igbo* cosmology.

The maxim suggests that human beings possess the capacity to participate actively in determining the direction of their lives. As the author observes, the expression is associated with the conception of the individual as capable of influencing his or her fortune through personal initiative. Nevertheless, the maxim should not be interpreted simplistically as meaning that hard work automatically guarantees material success. *Igbo* cosmology also

recognizes destiny, fortune, limitations, and circumstances beyond individual control. Consequently, the principle expresses a balance between human agency and metaphysical contingency. The individual is obliged to act, but the outcome of action cannot always be completely controlled. This understanding becomes clearer in relation to *Chi* and destiny. *Uchendu* (1965) presented economic activity, labor, social organization, and worldview as interconnected dimensions of *Igbo* life. The importance attached to productive activity demonstrates that human beings are expected to actualize their capacities through participation in economic and social life. *Ekennia's* interpretation further connects *Chi* with human self-realization, arguing that *Chi* provides possibilities through which individuals can realize themselves, while the principle of *Onye kwe, Chi ya ekwe* emphasizes the importance of activating those possibilities through personal action. Destiny, therefore, is not necessarily an excuse for inactivity; rather, human potential requires practical effort for its realization. It is within this framework that *Ikenga* becomes particularly important. *Ikenga* symbolizes personal strength, achievement, enterprise, accomplishment, and the capacity to overcome obstacles. Its significance demonstrates that aspirations must be translated into action. While *Chi* may be understood as representing an individual's metaphysical potential or destiny, *Ikenga* symbolizes the strength and determination through which that potential is pursued. Hard work, consequently, becomes the practical expression of *Ikenga*. The relationship may therefore be conceptualized as: *Chi* → potential and destiny; *Ikenga* → strength, will and achievement; hard work → practical exercise of will; success → personal and communal advancement (Green, 1964).

Hard work in this context extends beyond physical labor. It encompasses discipline, perseverance, creativity, courage, entrepreneurship, and responsible application of one's abilities. These qualities are evident in traditional occupations such as farming, trading, craftsmanship and, particularly, apprenticeship. The *Igbo* Apprenticeship System exemplifies this philosophy because the apprentice is expected to learn through observation, participation, discipline, persistence, and practical engagement. Through sustained effort, the apprentice transforms acquired knowledge and skills into economic independence and social usefulness. Therefore, the *Igbo* conception of hard work is both metaphysical and ethical. It reflects the belief that human beings possess capacities that ought to be actualized rather than neglected. *Ikenga* gives symbolic expression to the will to accomplish, while hard work constitutes the practical discipline through which accomplishment becomes possible. The theory does not promise that every effort will produce identical outcomes; rather, it insists that meaningful achievement requires active participation in one's own becoming. In this sense, hard work is an ethical manifestation of *Ikenga* and a practical mechanism through which human potential, personal achievement and communal development are pursued.

Hard Work as an IAS Philosophical Model: The Theory of Hard Work in *Igbo* Cosmology can be understood as a philosophical model which holds that the realization of human potential requires active personal agency expressed through labor, perseverance, courage, enterprise, and moral responsibility. Within *Igbo* thought, human effort operates in relationship with *Chi*, understood as the individual's spiritual principle or personal agency, while achievement is symbolically associated with *Ikenga*, representing strength, accomplishment, enterprise, and the actualization of human capacity. Thus, success is not conceived merely as the passive fulfillment of destiny; rather, destiny becomes meaningful through purposeful human action. Applied to the *Igbo* Apprenticeship System (IAS), the philosophy of hard work becomes institutionalized as a practical process of human, moral, and economic formation. The

apprentice acquires knowledge primarily through observation, participation, practice, discipline, and sustained engagement with the master. The process may therefore be represented as observation → participation → practice → discipline → mastery → independence → mentorship. Through this progression, the apprentice develops not only occupational competence but also patience, perseverance, commercial discipline, customer relations, market knowledge, financial prudence, loyalty, respect, and the capacity to endure temporary hardship for future economic independence. (Isichei,1969).

The theory may be explained through four interconnected dimensions. Metaphysically, hard work is situated within the relationship between *Chi*, destiny, and human agency. Personally, it emphasizes will, courage, perseverance, and disciplined action. Economically, it manifests through productive labor, entrepreneurship, skill acquisition, and business mastery. Communally, it extends individual success into social responsibility through settlement, mentorship, wealth circulation, and the training of subsequent generations. Accordingly, the philosophical model can be represented as: *Chi* (Destiny) → Human Will → Hard Work and Perseverance → Skill Acquisition → *Ikenga*/Achievement → Economic Independence → Mentorship and Wealth Circulation → Community Development → National Development. The significance of this model for IAS lies in its understanding of apprenticeship as more than vocational training. It is a mechanism for transforming individual effort into productive capacity and subsequently converting personal achievement into communal benefit. The apprentice is ideally not trained to remain permanently dependent on the master but to attain sufficient competence to establish an independent livelihood and, eventually, become a mentor to others. In this sense, the system reproduces both economic opportunity and social responsibility across generations. (Nwoye, 2011,pp1-20). The central proposition, therefore, is that hard work constitutes the motivating principle, apprenticeship provides the institutional mechanism, entrepreneurship represents the immediate outcome, and communal development constitutes the broader social purpose. The theory consequently links Igbo metaphysical ideas of human agency with the practical operation of IAS, demonstrating how labor, discipline, skill, achievement, and reciprocal responsibility can function as interconnected principles of economic and social development.

Hard Work and Character Formation: Hard work occupies a central position in the ethical foundation of the *Igbo* Apprenticeship System (IAS), where labor is understood not merely as a means of earning a livelihood but also as a process of forming character. Through apprenticeship, the learner is expected to cultivate punctuality, endurance, discipline, patience, perseverance, responsibility, and willingness to learn. These virtues enable the apprentice to develop the personal qualities necessary for economic independence and responsible participation in society. The significance of hard work has both economic and moral dimensions. Economically, it produces skills, competence, productivity, and entrepreneurial capacity. Morally, it demonstrates discipline, commitment, and responsibility. Socially, it prepares the individual to contribute meaningfully to family and community. This understanding can also be related to the symbolism of *Ikenga*, which is associated with personal endeavor, strength, achievement, and accomplishment. *Uchendu's* (1965) discussion of Igbo social organization similarly highlights the importance of labor and economic activity within Igbo society.

Hard work within IAS also develops the virtue of delayed gratification. The apprentice may undergo years of learning, service, and discipline before attaining economic independence through settlement. This process teaches the individual to sacrifice immediate comfort for long-term competence and success. Such training is particularly relevant to

entrepreneurship, which ordinarily requires persistence, continuous learning, adaptation, discipline, and the ability to overcome failure. (Uchendu, (1965). Hard work is also connected to the moral legitimacy of wealth. In the ethical understanding underlying IAS, wealth acquires greater social value when it is obtained through productive and legitimate means rather than fraud, theft, exploitation, or deception. Consequently, economic success cannot be separated completely from the character of the person who achieves it. An entrepreneur may accumulate wealth and still fail morally if that wealth is acquired through harmful or dishonest practices. The ethical conception of hard work therefore incorporates values such as *ezi omume* (good conduct), *ezi aha* (good name or reputation), honesty, courage, discipline, responsibility, generosity, and respect for communal norms. The ultimate ideal is not simply the accumulation of wealth but the formation of a person who is productive, morally upright, socially responsible, and worthy of respect. Thus, within IAS, hard work functions simultaneously as a means of economic advancement and an instrument of character formation, linking entrepreneurship with integrity and communal responsibility.

Hard Work and Community/National Development: Hard work in Igbo thought is not merely an individual means of acquiring wealth; it is embedded within family, kinship, trade, and community life. Uchendu (1965, p. 22) shows the close relationship between labor, economic activity, division of labor, and Igbo social organization, while Green (1964) demonstrated how productive and social activities were integrated within Igbo village life. Thus, economic achievement carries a communal rather than purely individual significance. Within the Igbo Apprenticeship System (IAS), the fruits of hard work are expected to extend beyond personal prosperity. A successful apprentice is ideally expected to establish an independent livelihood and subsequently create opportunities through employment, sponsorship of apprentices, assistance to relatives, philanthropy, and community development. Consequently, hard work contributes to self-reliance, entrepreneurship, skills development, employment creation, wealth circulation, and ultimately national development. However, *Igbo* philosophy does not reduce success to a simple equation of hard work equals success. Human agency operates alongside destiny and the metaphysical influence of *Chi*. The principle *Onye kwe, Chi ya ekwe* emphasizes human willingness and initiative, while acknowledging the wider metaphysical order within which human striving occurs (Okeke et al., 2017). Hard work therefore represents the individual's responsibility to act and persevere, while the final outcome remains subject to broader metaphysical realities. Thus, the theory connects hard work, self-reliance, communal responsibility, and national development, transforming individual effort into productive capacity and, ultimately, collective prosperity.

Hard Work, Ideal Wealth and Social Capital in IAS: In *Igbo* cosmology, human beings are generally understood as active participants in the realization of their potential rather than passive recipients of destiny. Although *Chi* provides a metaphysical framework for human existence, individual effort remains essential. Hard work therefore represents the exercise of human agency through perseverance, skill development, courage, and purposeful action. The relationship may be expressed as *Chi* + human agency + perseverance → realization of potential. This does not imply that hard work guarantees wealth in every circumstance; rather, it emphasizes that potential requires corresponding effort for its actualization. (Cole, 1969). The concept of *Onye*, or the human person, further reinforces this active orientation. Individual worth is partly demonstrated through contribution to family and community. Consequently, qualities such as responsibility, self-discipline, independence,

usefulness, courage, and the ability to provide for dependents are associated with productive living, while persistent idleness may attract social disapproval. Within the *Igbo* Apprenticeship System (IAS), these values are cultivated through discipline, practical learning, endurance, and participation in the master's enterprise. The *Igbo* conception of ideal wealth also extends beyond private accumulation. Wealth acquired through legitimate enterprise may enhance social status, but its broader value lies in the responsibilities it enables the successful person to undertake. These include supporting relatives, assisting younger people, sponsoring apprentices, fulfilling communal obligations, and contributing to community development. The apprentice therefore learns not simply how to make money but how to work, save, negotiate, build relationships, endure difficulties, and eventually establish an independent enterprise. In this respect, wealth becomes a means of social responsibility and wealth circulation rather than merely personal consumption. (Jones,1963).

Hard work also functions as a pathway to social mobility. Through apprenticeship, individuals with limited initial access to formal capital or elite educational opportunities can acquire human capital, commercial knowledge, social networks, and eventually financial capital. IAS consequently transforms labor and mentorship into mechanisms for economic advancement. Historically, such processes were particularly significant in *Igbo* economic reconstruction following the Nigerian Civil War, when entrepreneurial activity and apprenticeship contributed to the rebuilding of livelihoods and businesses. The concept of social capital is especially important to this process. Relationships between masters, apprentices, customers, families, and wider business networks provide access to knowledge, trust, opportunities, markets, and resources. Thus, apprenticeship does not merely transfer technical skills; it transmits relationships and networks that can support future enterprise. Nevertheless, the theory should not romanticize hard work or treat it as the sole explanation of entrepreneurial success. Contemporary IAS operates within conditions shaped by capital availability, infrastructure, education, government policy, technology, markets, regulation, insecurity, and social networks. Its philosophical significance therefore lies in understanding hard work as a fundamental expression of active self-making: the individual strives to develop personal potential, attain legitimate prosperity, build social relationships, and convert achievement into opportunities for others. The theoretical sequence can therefore be expressed as: *Ikenga* → Human Agency → Hard Work and Perseverance → Skill Acquisition → Economic Independence → Social Capital and Mentorship → Wealth Circulation → Community Development → National Development. Thus, within IAS, hard work is the engine of personal development, ideal wealth is wealth acquired and used responsibly, and social capital is the network of relationships through which knowledge, opportunities, and prosperity are reproduced across generations.

Principles of Loyalty (*Nkwanye Obi*) and Faithfulness in the IAS: Loyalty (*Nkwanye Obi*) is a significant ethical principle underlying the *Igbo* Apprenticeship System (IAS), particularly in regulating the relationship between the master, apprentice, families, and the wider community. It may be understood as faithfulness, trust, commitment, and adherence to legitimate obligations rather than blind obedience. The *Igbo* maxim *Onye aghana nwanne ya*, commonly interpreted as "Let no one abandon his or her brother," expresses an ethic of solidarity, mutual assistance, and social responsibility that is relevant to the relational character of apprenticeship. Within IAS, loyalty is fundamentally reciprocal. The apprentice is expected to demonstrate honesty, commitment, confidentiality, respect, responsible performance, and dedication to learning. The apprentice should honor legitimate agreements, protect business information, avoid theft and fraud, respect customers, obey

reasonable instructions, and protect the reputation of the master and the enterprise. These obligations help establish the trust necessary for the transmission of commercial knowledge and responsibility. (Afunugo, et al.,2024). The master, however, is not merely the beneficiary of the apprentice's loyalty. The master also carries corresponding obligations. Genuine apprenticeship requires the provision of occupational training, mentorship, fair treatment, reasonable welfare, protection from abuse, and respect for agreed conditions. Where settlement or economic empowerment has been legitimately agreed upon, the master is expected to honor that obligation. An apprenticeship relationship becomes ethically defective when loyalty is demanded exclusively from the apprentice while the master treats the apprentice merely as a source of cheap labor.

This reciprocal character reveals the hidden ethical dimension of loyalty in IAS. Loyalty should be understood as a form of covenantal relationship founded upon mutual trust and accountability. It does not justify exploitation, humiliation, or unconditional submission. Rather, it creates a moral bond in which both parties are expected to fulfill legitimate responsibilities. Contemporary discussions of IAS have identified problems such as inadequate contractual safeguards, exploitation, unequal treatment, and insufficient accountability. Consequently, strengthening loyalty in contemporary apprenticeship requires protecting the rights and dignity of both the master and apprentice rather than simply demanding greater obedience from the apprentice. Loyalty also has an important relationship with business continuity and social capital. When an apprentice successfully completes training and establishes an independent enterprise, the relationship with the former master may continue through cooperation, referrals, business partnerships, mentorship, and other forms of networking. In this way, loyalty extends beyond the period of apprenticeship and can create durable commercial relationships across generations. Trust developed during apprenticeship therefore becomes an economic resource that facilitates business succession, knowledge transfer, and the expansion of entrepreneurial networks. (Magesa, (1997). The principle can consequently be represented as: Loyalty → Trust → Mentorship → Business Continuity → Net-working → Wealth Circulation → Community Development. The ethical significance of loyalty in IAS is therefore broader than personal allegiance. It provides a moral foundation for the transmission of knowledge, preservation of business relationships, protection of reputation, and continuity of entrepreneurial institutions. The apprentice's faithfulness creates confidence in the master, while the master's integrity gives the apprentice reason to remain committed to the relationship. Both parties thereby participate in a system of reciprocal obligation.

From this perspective, *Nkwanye Obi* is best understood as an ethic of reciprocal faithfulness rather than unilateral obedience. Its proper application requires honesty, confidentiality, commitment, fairness, protection, mentorship, and accountability from both parties. When these obligations are respected, loyalty strengthens the master–apprentice relationship and contributes to the reproduction of entrepreneurial knowledge, trust, opportunities, and communal prosperity. When loyalty is demanded without reciprocity, however, the moral foundation of apprenticeship is weakened. Thus, loyalty in IAS can be regarded as both an ethical virtue and a social-economic mechanism. It binds individuals to legitimate obligations, builds trust, facilitates mentorship and business succession, and sustains networks through which knowledge and economic opportunities are transferred from one generation to another. (Basden,1966).

Respect (Nsọpụrụ/Ùgwù) as a Moral Principle in IAS: Respect, expressed in *Igbo* thought through the concepts of *nsọpụrụ* and *ùgwù*, is one of the central moral principles that

regulate relationships within the *Igbo* Apprenticeship System (IAS). Apprenticeship is not merely a process of acquiring business skills; it is also a system of moral education through which individuals learn discipline, responsibility, cooperation and ethical conduct. Respect therefore provides the framework within which teaching, learning and entrepreneurial formation occur. (Asouzu,2007). In IAS, respect involves recognizing the dignity, experience, authority and legitimate rights of others. It is expressed through humility, good conduct, attentive listening, discipline and responsible participation. However, respect should not be mistaken for servility or unquestioning obedience. A contemporary understanding of IAS must distinguish legitimate authority from exploitation. The master's authority is valuable when it promotes learning and character formation, but it becomes morally problematic when it encourages abuse or oppression. Respect within IAS should therefore be understood as reciprocal recognition rather than blind submission. Kwame Gyekye argued that African moral life is rooted in communal relationships and mutual obligations. This perspective is relevant to IAS because apprenticeship traditionally connects the apprentice, master, family and community within a network of shared responsibilities. Respect therefore contributes not only to personal conduct but also to social harmony. (Kwame Gyekye,1997. pp. 115–143). In consonant to the above lines of reasoning, respect (Nsọpuru/Ùgwù) remains one of the most important ethical principles sustaining the *Igbo* Apprenticeship System. It promotes social order, moral formation, knowledge transmission and entrepreneurial development. Most importantly, respect should be understood as reciprocal rather than merely hierarchical. Apprentices owe respect to masters because of their experience, while masters owe respect to apprentices because they possess dignity, rights and future aspirations. The renewal of IAS therefore depends on preserving its moral strengths while correcting practices that undermine justice, equality and human dignity. In this way, respect can continue to serve as a foundation for trust, learning, character formation and sustainable entrepreneurship.

Theoretical Foundations of Respect: Respect performs several important functions within IAS.

- i. **Respect as Social Order:** Respect creates behavioral expectations between master and apprentice, thereby establishing an environment where teaching and learning can occur effectively.
- ii. **Respect as Moral Formation:** Through interaction with experienced adults, apprentices learn virtues such as humility, patience, self-control, responsibility and perseverance.
- iii. **Respect as Reciprocal Recognition:** Respect operates in both directions. Apprentices acknowledge the master's experience, while masters recognize the dignity and aspirations of apprentices. Honneth's theory of recognition (1995) supports this view by emphasizing the importance of mutual recognition in healthy human relationships. Honneth, A. (1995).
- iv. **Respect as Communal Responsibility:** The behavior of an apprentice affects not only personal reputation but also the reputation of the family, master and community
- v. **Respect as Metaphysical Responsibility:** In traditional *Igbo* thought, morality is linked to wider spiritual realities involving *Chi*, *Ala*, ancestors and *Ofor*, (Mbiti, 1969) was explained the interconnectedness of religion, morality and social life in African societies.
- vi. **Respect as Knowledge Transmission:** Respect creates trust, openness and cooperation, all of which are essential for the transfer of knowledge. Much of the knowledge transmitted through apprenticeship is tacit and practical rather than written. Wenger's

theory of communities of practice explains that learning occurs through participation in shared activities. (Wenger,1998).

This process may be summarized as: Respect → Trust → Openness → Knowledge Transfer → Competence → Entrepreneurship.

Categories of Respect in IAS: Respect within IAS extends beyond the relationship between master and apprentice. It includes:

- i. Respect for *Chukwu/Chineke* as the supreme source of existence. Within traditional Igbo cosmology, Chukwu/Chineke is understood as the supreme source of existence. Religious respect may be expressed through moral conduct, prayer, thanksgiving and avoidance of sacrilege.
- ii. Respect for the master and legitimate authority.
- iii. Respect for elders as custodians of knowledge.
- iv. Respect for ancestors and inherited values.
- v. Respect for oneself through disciplined conduct.
- vi. Respect for fellow apprentices through cooperation.
- vii. Respect for customers through honesty and fairness.
- viii. Respect for family and community through good reputation.
- ix. Respect for nature and the environment.
- x. Respect for tradition and moral law, while critically rejecting practices that undermine human dignity.

Respect and Entrepreneurial Formation: IAS is fundamentally a learning institution that transmits both explicit and tacit knowledge. Explicit knowledge includes information such as prices, accounting methods and product identification. Tacit knowledge involves practical abilities such as negotiation, customer relations, market judgment and problem-solving. Such knowledge is acquired through participation rather than classroom instruction. Apprentices learn by observing, assisting, asking questions, making mistakes and gradually assuming greater responsibilities. Respect therefore plays an essential role because it encourages attentiveness, trust and openness between master and apprentice. (Afunugo, et al.,2024). When apprentices respect masters, they become more willing to learn. When masters respect apprentices, they become more willing to teach and mentor. Respect therefore contributes directly to entrepreneurial competence and business continuity.

Ethical Reciprocity and Contemporary Challenges: A defining characteristic of IAS is reciprocity. The master provides training, mentorship, experience and business exposure, while the apprentice contributes labor, loyalty, commitment and service. However, reciprocity must not become a justification for exploitation. Apprentices deserve humane treatment and genuine training, while apprentices also have obligations of honesty and responsibility. Contemporary challenges affecting the moral foundations of IAS include: weak contractual agreements, exploitation of apprentices, and failure of settlement obligations, apprentice misconduct, excessive individualism, gender exclusion, family disputes and limited participation. These challenges suggest the need for reforms that preserve the strengths of IAS while eliminating exploitative practices.

Integration of Hard Work, Loyalty, and Respect: These virtues function together rather than independently. Traditionally in Igbo philosophical heritage, ethical Principle, moral function, entrepreneurial outcome, hard work, discipline and productivity, business competence, loyalty, trustworthiness, sustainable partnerships, respect, social harmony and strong

commercial reputation are inter connected within the IAS operational system. Together, these virtues produce entrepreneurs who are both economically capable and morally accountable. IAS prioritizes moral development before financial success and delayed gratification. Apprentices endure years of service before receiving settlement, cultivating patience and long-term thinking. This is viewed as moral legitimacy of wealth. Wealth is considered honorable only when acquired through honest labor. Ethics of gratitude means that successful apprentices are expected to assist younger apprentices, creating a cycle of generosity. Communal accountability: Ethical failures affect not only individuals but also families and communities. Spiritual accountability: Many *Igbo* traditions regard dishonesty and betrayal as offences against the moral order upheld by ancestors and the earth deity.

Findings

The ultimate finding of the study is that IAS is sustained not by economic exchange alone but by a moral architecture of integrity, hard work, loyalty and respect. These virtues convert apprenticeship from mere labor into a process of character formation, entrepreneurial competence, social mobility and intergenerational wealth circulation.

Conclusion

The *Igbo* Apprenticeship System (IAS) is a key indigenous institution for entrepreneurial learning and economic empowerment in southeastern Nigeria. Its resilience lies in both economic value and an ethical framework that builds trust, transmits values, and links individual success with communal responsibility. This study highlights four core virtues: integrity, hard work, loyalty, and respect. Integrity fosters trust and reputation; hard work builds competence and discipline; loyalty ensures reciprocity and business continuity; while respect underpins mentorship, knowledge transfer, and social harmony. Despite its strengths, IAS faces challenges such as exploitation, weak contracts, unpaid settlements, misconduct, and exclusion. These issues require ethical reform rather than abandonment, through written agreements, accountability systems, welfare safeguards, dispute resolution, certification, and ethical education. Ultimately, IAS shows that entrepreneurship is not only about wealth creation but also moral formation, and its future depends on preserving its moral capital while adapting to contemporary realities.

Recommendation

The study recommends that the most appropriate reform strategy suitable for IAS is ethical reconstruction rather than wholesale replacement. That is preserving the indigenous moral principles of IAS while introducing written agreements, reciprocal accountability, rights protection, ethical education and institutional recognition. (*Afigbo, 1981*).

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