



9. IGWEBUIKE ECONOMICS

Introduction

Igwebuikeconomics is the application of *Igwebuike* philosophy to economic development. It is, therefore, the product of two words: *Igwebuike* and economics. To understand *Igwebuikeconomics*, an understanding of the two words: *Igwebuike* and economics, that make up the compound word would be necessary. In relating *Igwebuike* with economics, economics provides the central context for the application for *Igwebuike* philosophy; and the word *Igwebuike* is descriptive, in the sense that it speaks of the kind of economics that we are dealing with here. It is an economics that is anchored on the African worldview that understands reality as inclusive, complementary and relational, and which places the interest and good of the human person at the centre of reality. It is a humanistic economics that concerns herself with the description and analysis of production, distribution and consumption of goods and services from a complementary perspective for the development of peoples. It understands economic realities not in terms of aspects, identities and static elements but thinks in terms of relatedness that systematically takes into cognizance the interactions of the different elements of social life, especially, economic structure, political structure, social structure and belief systems, with an awareness of the complexity and dynamism of relatedness. It is this relatedness of reality that has called for this complementary approach to economics that addresses problems complementarily and concretely rather than abstractly.

Imu Olu as a dimension of Igwebuikeconomics

The Igbo apprentice system popularly known as '*Imu-Olu*' (learning work) or '*Imu-Ahia*' (learning trade) or '*Igba boy*' (to serve) is a major factor in any discussion about Igbo commerce. Maleke (2018) describes it as an “apprenticeship system that purports established businessmen in a town, street or locale to pick up teenagers-young adults [the apprentice] from their homes and give them an informally formal, but raw and practical, cutthroat business education” (n.p). The teenager might be a relative, sibling or non-relative from the same region. He writes further that “The idea centers around taking them off the streets and the perilous tendencies of an idle mind to give them a purpose, so that they can continue the trend when they are established” (n.p).

Imu Olu as a system of commerce has been with the Igbo before the Nigerian Civil War, with which they created wealth across the Nigerian nation. After the Civil War, when the Igbo world was crumbled following the terrible legacy of the Biafra War, marked by great poverty, halting of livelihood, scarcity of funds and human capital and hopelessness,

it was the Igbo apprentice system that pulled majority of Igbo families out of poverty within two years after the war.

Arrangements and Dynamics of Imu Olu

The apprentice leaves his parents and comes to live under the care and supervision of an established business Igbo person who becomes his master. He takes care of his master for the agreed number of years, and does every chore that the master assigns him. He serves his master not only in the shop or in relation to the business but at home as well. He has no right to travel home without the consent of the master, even if the parents live in the same city. He must work hard to win the trust and favour of his master, as it is the master who would make an appraisal of his service. At the end of the apprenticeship, the master gives him a take-off fund to hire or purchase a shop, goods, equipment, where necessary and in some cases, accommodation for a given period of time. This take-off fund does not in any way mean that he ceases to collaborate with the master. The master still assists him with goods procurement to reduce overhead importation cost, knowing that the apprentice has a weak purchasing power.

Through different responsibilities, the master prepares the apprentice for the future. It is not in all cases that the master stays with the apprentice in the same shop or business premises. Having gathered some experience, the master can decide to open a shop elsewhere, different from the location where he might be. In this case, the apprentice manages the business branch for the master, representing him at business negotiations. This seeming independence of the apprentice in management does not only help the master expand his business and, thus, make more profit, it also helps the apprentice with an ownership mindset that gives room for trust, building of confidence and exposure, which are necessary for the apprentice if he must succeed in the future.

Once an apprentice graduates and is settled, he has a responsibility of doing for others back at home what his master has done for him. He, therefore, goes to the village and picks another apprentice who would serve him. Meanwhile, before his graduation, his master must have gone home and picked another apprentice who would learn the trade (Crescent 2019).

Neuwirth (2018) visited the Alaba International Market in Lagos dominated by the Igbo and observes that the Igbo apprenticeship system that governs Alaba International Market is the largest business incubator platform in the world and has produced more millionaires and billionaires than the entire Nigerian University economic system has produced. These millionaires: Innoson, Coscharis, Ibeto, Chikason, Ekenedilichukwu, etc., are not just millionaires, they make millionaires every year through the apprentice incubator platform. The system is such that there is always a millionaire waiting to be born (Ted, November 2018)

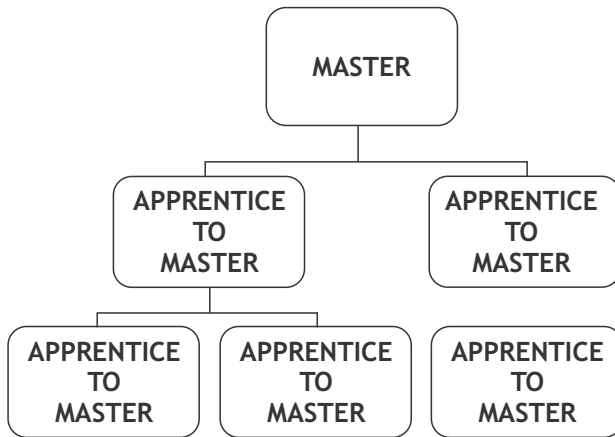


Figure 4: Igbo Apprenticeship Incubator Network

The Communal and Spiritual Dimensions of Imu Olu

In spite of the absence of clearly written laws to guide the relationship between the master and the apprentice, this system has succeeded over the years because, first, the apprentice treads with caution, knowing that if he fails or ruins his masters business, his own future would be ruined. He treads carefully in managing the affairs of his master and tries to prosper the master's business for he knows that his destiny is tied to the economic destiny of his master. This fear, according to Okoro (2018) engenders honesty as every established acts of theft, diversion of fund and flamboyant use of business finances terminates the arrangement. While the apprentice does his best to avoid the termination of the apprenticeship arrangement, the master is also careful to avoid a bad labeling from his community where he has picked the son of a brother or relation. To fail to keep to the terms of apprenticeship after the agreed number of years of service can incur the wrath of the community back at home. The Igbo apprenticeship system is not only an arrangement between the master and the apprentice, it is a community or family affair. Masters who are notorious for not settling their apprentice hardly get apprentice to work with them.

According to Okoro (2018), insincere masters run the risk of having their businesses ruined by the apprentice's personal deity, known as the Chi. This is why every master does his best to give a take-off package to the apprentice after the fulfillment of the agreed years of service. At this point of settlement the blessing of the master is more important than the financial package, because the financial package without his blessing ends in ruin (Kanu 2019).

Foundations of Igbo Apprentice Incubator Network

There are three fundamental principles that shape the Igbo apprenticeship system:

a. Igbo Social Construction of Reality

Among the Igbo of Nigeria, the life of a human person is circumscribed within the uwa (the world) (Kanu 2012a). In the contention of Oguejiofor (2010) “This unitary conception of reality pervades the Igbo world in a remarkable way” (p. 21). The Igbo, therefore, does not see himself or herself as an individual without noticing immediately the need for the other. No wonder he or she often warns the other: *onye aghana nwanne ya* (No one should leave his brother/sister behind) (Kanu 2012b).

b. Igbo Philosophy of Resilience

The Igbo world is not a bed of roses. It is a world of struggles that begins from birth, noticeable in the cry of a little child as soon as it is born. Circumscribed to the uwa (world), the human person is faced by difficulties and frustrations. This makes survival in a tolerable way a major concern for the Igbo, and it to a large extent determines the Igbo attitude to life. To face the struggles of life, the Igbo generate a corporate front, partnering with the other to avoid being overwhelmed.

c. Igbo Think-Home Philosophy

The Igbo have a saying that: *aku ruo uno* (wealth must reach home). If a person is known all over the world but not known in his home town then he is not known. If a person does not make an effort to return home, he or she is referred to as an *efuru efu* (the lost one). After the Nigerian Civil War, when the property and wealth of the Igbo in states outside of Igboland were seized by the Nigerian government, the Igbo philosophy of *CHERUO UNO*, (think home) became more important (Kanu 2014a). No matter where the Igbo travel to and the number of houses he builds elsewhere, he ensures that he has a home in his village. Home is home for them and so they are at home for the celebration of festivals like Christmas, New Year, Easter, New Yam Festival, etc. More interesting is that many who are not able to travel during these seasons have one association or the other to which they belong in the city where they live. Even when he dies, the corpse must be taken home. The corpse needs to get home to rest well (Kanu 2014b).