

# THE IGBO APPRENTICESHIP SYSTEM “NWA BOY/IGBA BOI” AS A REFLECTION OF IGWEBUIKE PHILOSOPHY

By

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## Abstract

Among the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria, one of the agelong means by which wealth is generated is the Igbo apprenticeship system, commonly known as “Nwa boy or igba boi”. This is a situation where a young boy or man is mentored in a particular trade by another person who is already well established in the trade for a specified period, after which he gives him the capital to start his trade. After this, the mentor goes on to train another person, and even the mentee later on becomes an Oga or mentor and begins to train others. In so doing, no one is left behind, and wealth is evenly distributed among the people. In light of this, this paper argues that the Igbo apprenticeship system is a perfect reflection of the Igwebuiké Philosophy. Hence, the paper, adopting a critical analytical approach, attempts a critical reflective exploration of the Igbo Nwa boyi apprenticeship system and the Igwebuiké Philosophy. The paper answers three core questions: What is Nwa Boy/ Igba Boi (Igbo apprenticeship)? What is Igwebuiké's Philosophy? How does the Igbo apprenticeship system reflect the Igwebuiké Philosophy? The paper relies on secondary sources such as books, online journal articles and the internet. The study is significant as it offers insight into the entrepreneurial mindset of the Igbo as seen in the “Nwa Boy” apprenticeship model and how it reflects the Igwebuiké Philosophy.

**Keywords:** Nwa Boyi, Igba Boi, Igbo Apprenticeship System, Igwebuiké Philosophy

## Introduction:

The Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria are widely recognised for their entrepreneurial acumen, a trait prominently demonstrated through the "Nwa Boyi" or "Igba Boyi" apprenticeship system. This system has long served as a cornerstone of Igbo economic resilience and achievement. The Igbo Apprenticeship System, or *Igba-Boi*, is a culturally grounded and distinct economic practice that has significantly contributed to the entrepreneurial development of the Igbo in southeastern Nigeria. It operates through a structured mentorship arrangement, where young apprentices, referred to as *Nwa Boyi*, are trained by established business owners, known as *Ogas*. Although informal, the system is highly organised and sustained by trust, kinship ties, and communal support (Nnonyelu et al., 2023).

Within this system, the mentor imparts foundational knowledge of the trade to the apprentice over a mutually agreed period, providing not only practical skills and experience but also, in most cases, start-up capital. This process fosters discipline, adaptability, and resilience in the apprentice, preparing them to operate independently under the terms agreed upon with their

mentor (Ugwu, Njeze, & Oluka, 2023). A closer examination of the system’s structure and internal dynamics helps to explain its effectiveness as a vehicle for wealth creation and upward social mobility in Igbo society. The Igbo Apprenticeship System operates through a verbal agreement, followed by a multi-year training phase, and culminates in a settlement period during which the mentor supports the apprentice with resources to establish their enterprise (Nnonyelu et al., 2023).

The Igbo Apprenticeship System gained increased prominence following the Nigerian-Biafran Civil War of 1970 (Ongele, 2023). Rooted in the Igbo ethos of communal solidarity and mutual support—encapsulated in the maxim *Onye aghana nwanne ya* ("let no one be left behind")—the system became instrumental in the collective restoration of Igbo economic life. After the war, Igbo individuals were left with a mere twenty pounds (Achebe, 2012), regardless of their previous wealth, and were largely excluded from federal economic structures and corporate ownership during the indigenisation period. In response, the Igbo turned to hard work (*igba mbo*) as the primary path to economic recovery and advancement. Even before the war, the Igbo had long embraced the ethic of industriousness, as reflected in the proverb *aka aja aja na-ebute onu mmanu mmanu* ("soiled hands bring about an oily mouth"). This cultural orientation towards resilience and labour persisted despite adversity (Ogbujah, 2022). As Basden aptly observed, wherever the Igbo find themselves and regardless of the conditions, they quickly adapt and establish a significant socio-economic presence (Basden, 1966, as cited in Ogbujah, 2022).

Among the Igbo, the *Nwa Boi* apprenticeship system serves as a beacon of opportunity, guiding aspiring entrepreneurs toward self-reliance and economic independence (ThankGod, 2024). Central to this system is the deliberate cultivation of an entrepreneurial mindset—one marked by vision, innovation, and a readiness to take calculated risks (Nwankwo, 2015). The structure of the system promotes equitable wealth distribution and inclusive economic participation. This paper argues that the Igbo apprenticeship system exemplifies the *Igwebuiké* philosophy, which is rooted in the African principles of solidarity and complementarity. *Igwebuiké* emphasises the idea that collective strength surpasses individual effort—a notion deeply embedded in the communitarian ethos of Igbo society. It reflects a worldview in which unity, cooperation, and mutual support are essential for societal and economic advancement.

Therefore, this paper, adopting a critical analytical approach, attempts a critical reflective exploration of the Igbo Nwa boyi apprenticeship system and the Igwebuiké Philosophy. The paper answers three core questions: What is Nwa Boy/ Igba Boi (Igbo apprenticeship)? What is Igwebuiké's Philosophy? How does the Igbo apprenticeship system reflect the Igwebuiké Philosophy? To answer these questions, the paper is divided into three sections: The first section is focused on the exploration of the Igbo apprenticeship system, Nwa Boy/Igba Boi. The second section is focused on the exploration of the Igwebuiké Philosophy. The third section is a critical analysis of the Igbo apprenticeship system and how it reflects the Igwebuiké philosophy. The study is significant as it offers insight into the entrepreneurial mindset of the Igbo as seen in the “Nwa Boy” apprenticeship model and how it reflects the Igwebuiké Philosophy.

### **The Igbo People of Southeastern Nigeria.**

At the time of European contact in the 1830s, the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria were estimated to number around five million. They primarily resided in villages and small towns, with a societal structure that was communal, stateless, and patriarchal (Ekwe-Ekwe, 2006a; 2006b; Horton, 1972, as cited in Onyeozili & Ebbe, 2012). Igbo society functioned as a

*gemeinschaft* community, characterised by close personal relationships rather than formal state institutions. The Igbo are often described as embodying “The King in Every Man” (Henderson, 1972, in Onyeozili & Ebbe, 2012), a phrase that underscores their rejection of centralised kingship and allegiance to a singular authority. Instead, the highest spiritual authority was the Earth-God, whose power was universally recognised across Igbo communities. Authority at the familial level resided in each married man, who served as the head of his household. In the absence of centralised political structures, governance in Igbo society was exercised through various decentralised institutions, including age-grade associations, title societies, *Dibia* (traditional healers), oracles, and secret societies (Uchendu, 1965; Ottenberg, 1958, in Ekwe-Ekwe, 2006a; 2006b). These institutions were instrumental in maintaining social order and cohesion, serving as mechanisms of control, justice, and communal regulation.

The Igbo did not embrace capitalism in its conventional Western form; rather, they practised communal ownership of land, typically managed through extended family or kinship structures. Central to their social philosophy was the principle of mutual responsibility, often expressed through the ethic of being one’s “brother’s keeper,” which reinforced communal solidarity and collective well-being. Although councils of elders existed at the kindred level to guide decision-making, the Igbo lacked a centralised regional or national political assembly, maintaining a fundamentally stateless society (Onyeozili & Ebbe, 2012). A defining feature of Igbo society was its emphasis on achieved rather than ascribed status. Social standing was determined by individual merit and accomplishment rather than lineage or inherited privilege. This meritocratic orientation fostered a cultural climate in which personal success was highly valued, and failure was socially discouraged.

Consequently, the Igbo cultivated a culture defined by ingenuity and creativity, evident in their material practices, daily life, and broader societal contributions. The community’s emphasis on personal achievement and collective responsibility significantly influenced their legal and judicial systems, approaches to crime prevention, and mechanisms for addressing wrongdoing. Leadership was structured along gerontocratic lines, with authority vested in elders who had earned communal respect through demonstrated wisdom and accomplishment (Onyeozili & Ebbe, 2012). This decentralised yet participatory model of governance shaped the nature of Igbo law and social relations, promoting stability and cohesion through communal engagement rather than centralised power.

### **An Exploration of the Nwa Boi Apprenticeship System in Igbo Land.**

The *Nwa Boi* apprenticeship system represents a highly effective and enduring model of wealth creation among the Igbo people, one that has persisted across generations (Ugwu, 2023). According to Nwoga et al. (2024), it is a structured trade apprenticeship in which an established entrepreneur agrees to mentor a novice, referred to as an apprentice. The mentor imparts practical knowledge and trade skills to the apprentice over a predetermined period. In this arrangement, the apprentice is known as *nwa boi*, while the mentor, often referred to as *oga*—a colloquial expression denoting respect and authority—is the business owner guiding the training. The success of this system rests on mutual trust and the apprentice’s discipline and obedience (Nworah, 2023; Yar’Adua et al., 2023).

The precise origins of the *Nwa Boi* system remain unclear, as scholars have yet to establish a definitive historical account of its inception. However, ThankGod (2024) suggests that its roots lie at the intersection of necessity and ingenuity, emerging as early Igbo traders sought to develop a skilled class of artisans and merchants to support their expanding commercial ventures (Onyema, 2019, in Jennifer). Ndubuisi Ekeke suggests that Igbo apprenticeship

system is a product of the aftermath of the civil war that led to economic disenfranchisement of the Igbo (Okpara, 2023). The post civil war economic policy of the Federal Government, he suggests, was brainchild of the collective resolve to carry everyone along (*onye aghala nwanne ya*) - the entrepreneurial ideology that sustained Igbo apprenticeship. It is indeed from these earliest forms, the apprenticeship system extended beyond vocational instruction to include the transmission of core values such as integrity, resourcefulness, and communal solidarity, offering a holistic model of training. Over time, the Nwa Boi system evolved in response to changing socio-economic conditions. What began as an informal mentorship within kinship networks gradually matured into a more structured and codified system, featuring defined initiation rites, behavioural expectations, and clear trajectories toward business autonomy (Okafor, 2018; Okeke, 2014, in ThankGod, 2024). Historical developments such as colonial influence and the forces of globalisation further reshaped the system, refining it into the robust and adaptive institution observed today (Okoro, 2020, in ThankGod, 2024).

There are three primary forms within the Igbo apprenticeship system: *Igba-boi* (business apprenticeship), *Imu Oru* or *Imu Oruaka* (learning a craft), and *Imu Ahia* (learning a trade) (Agozino & Anyanike, 2007). Further to these categories, there are three core traits essential for apprentices to succeed in the initial phase: willingness to learn, resilience, and trustworthiness (Okeke & Osang, 2021). These qualities are critical in determining whether an apprentice proceeds beyond the first three months or is dismissed. Those who advance typically exhibit a keen interest in mastering foundational skills such as client negotiation, recognising business opportunities, cultivating strong customer relations, and understanding transactional processes.

At the heart of the Igbo apprenticeship system lies the relationship between the *Nwa Boyi* (apprentice) and the *Oga* (mentor). This relationship is typically established through familial ties and community networks, as families seeking economic advancement for their children often appeal to successful local entrepreneurs to accept them as apprentices (Olewu, 2023, as cited in Antai et al., 2024). Upon agreement, the *Oga* undertakes the responsibility of training the apprentice in the practical and managerial aspects of running a business, including customer relations and daily operations. This relationship transcends a purely transactional arrangement; it is underpinned by mutual respect, loyalty, and commitment. The *Oga* frequently assumes a quasi-parental role, overseeing not only the apprentice's business development but also their general welfare and moral guidance (Onwuejeogwu, 1981, as cited in Antai et al., 2024).

The apprenticeship period in the Igbo entrepreneurial system typically spans five to seven years and is organised in progressive stages, each marked by specific roles and expectations. In the initial phase, the *Nwa Boyi* is introduced to the fundamentals of the trade, primarily through observation and the performance of basic tasks (Antai et al., 2024). As the apprenticeship advances, the apprentice gradually assumes more complex responsibilities, gaining practical experience and deepening their operational knowledge (Gessler, 2019). This phased structure facilitates a comprehensive understanding of the business, equipping the apprentice with the competence required for independent enterprise. The process is rigorous and immersive, often demanding long hours and considerable discipline, but it functions as a crucial rite of passage into entrepreneurship (Antai et al., 2024).

Upon successful completion of training, an apprentice who has demonstrated commitment and competence is formally "settled" by the *Oga*. This settlement marks the transition to independent entrepreneurship and involves a ceremonial celebration during which the *Oga* provides seed capital and other forms of support, such as continued mentorship or business guidance (Nwoga et al., 2024). As Antai et al. (2024) explain, settlement serves both as

compensation for years of service and as an investment in the apprentice's future. The scale of the settlement is influenced by the mentor's financial capacity, the apprentice's performance, and the nature of the business. This process underscores the communal ethos of the *Igba-Boi* system, reinforcing bonds of solidarity and promoting intra-community economic growth.

At the core of this system is the principle of *Onye aghala nwanne ya*, meaning "may you never abandon your brother" (Yemisi, 2021). This sentiment emphasizes the fact that the Igbo apprenticeship model reflects a deeply rooted philosophy of mutual support and collective advancement (Ogbujah, 2022). In his words:

In the spirit of Igbo, *onye aghala nwanne ya*, everyone gains something, and no one is left behind. No one is super-rich or super-poor. The Oga (entrepreneur) recruits and trains apprentices to help build his business empire. In the end, he proportionally shares out his fortune to the apprentices, thereby empowering them to be entrepreneurs in their own right. This continuous scheme of recruiting, training and settling of apprentices is a phenomenal economic empowerment system that has positively impacted all the nooks and crannies of Igboland (Ogbujah, 2022, p.121)

The above reflects a foundational cultural ethos among the Igbo people of Nigeria, which holds that an individual's wealth is inherently communal. This worldview obliges successful individuals to share the knowledge and means of wealth creation with others in their community, thereby fostering collective economic balance and social cohesion (Yemi, 2021). This practice has been interpreted as an indigenous model of stakeholder capitalism—one that prioritises the well-being of the community, workers, consumers, and the environment alongside shareholder interests (Ekekwe, 2021; Nworah (2023). They argue that the Igbo have long embodied the principles of stakeholder capitalism through the *Igba-Boi* system, well before it gained recognition in contemporary economic discourse.

The Igbo apprenticeship system operates as a framework of both formal and informal indentured agreements that foster dynamic entrepreneurial communities across southeastern Nigeria. Originating among the Igbo people, this economic model is designed to promote sustainable livelihoods by investing in human capital through vocational training and mentorship (Agozino & Anyanike, 2007). It is a communal enterprise system in which established businesses cultivate new ones, often providing start-up capital and transferring client networks to apprentices upon graduation (Nworah, 2023). The model's core objective is poverty reduction through the widespread creation of economic opportunities (Ekekwe, 2021). Notably, the system has been described as one of the world's largest informal business incubators, supporting the development of thousands of ventures annually (Neuwirth, 2017) and significantly reducing youth unemployment in the Southeast region (Nworah, 2023).

Also, studies emphasise that the Igbo apprenticeship system remains the most entrenched and dynamic mechanism for promoting entrepreneurship in Nigeria (Ejo-Orusa & Mpi, 2019). It plays a critical role in the development of micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises, serving as a major catalyst for wealth creation, employment generation, poverty alleviation, and broader economic development. According to Nworah (2023), growing recognition of the model's effectiveness has prompted a renewed interest in indigenous approaches to economic empowerment. The Igbo apprenticeship system, in particular, has demonstrated resilience and impact, strengthening the Igbo economy and its people with minimal reliance on government support.

Ekekwe (2018, as cited in Opara, 2023) asserts that the strength of the Igbo apprenticeship system lies in its cultural valuation of mentorship and legacy. In communities such as Ohafia and Arochukwu in Abia State, Nigeria, a man’s social standing is often measured by the success of those he has mentored. In fact, in these communities, elders may deny a man the right to speak in the village square unless he can name apprentices he has successfully established. Supporting this perspective, Yemisi (2021) explains that when an Igbo entrepreneur attains success, it is customary to extend that wealth by mentoring a *Nwa Boi*. Upon completing his training and receiving settlement, the apprentice is expected to replicate the cycle by taking on a mentee of his own. Simultaneously, the original mentor typically recruits a new apprentice before settling the outgoing one, thereby sustaining a continuous chain of wealth creation. This cyclical system not only promotes economic expansion but also ensures a steady emergence of new entrepreneurs.

The Igbo apprenticeship system, handed down through generations, has had a profound and sustained impact on southeastern Nigeria (SEREDEC, 2024). It has contributed to high rates of entrepreneurship, as the region is renowned for its dynamic commercial sector, largely driven by former apprentices who have established successful enterprises. This continuous emergence of new businesses has fostered economic dynamism, spurring innovation and creating employment opportunities. The system also promotes community-driven growth by encouraging mentorship and collaboration, thereby building a robust support network for emerging entrepreneurs.

Additionally, it empowers individuals by equipping them with practical skills and financial backing, facilitating self-employment and economic self-reliance while helping to alleviate poverty. It promotes social mobility by offering opportunities based on merit, allowing individuals from diverse backgrounds to rise economically through dedication and talent. Importantly, the system also serves as a vehicle for cultural preservation, transmitting core Igbo values such as diligence, respect, and communal solidarity to future generations.

### **Towards an Understanding of Igwebuike Philosophy.**

Igwebuike's philosophy is a conceptual framework developed by Professor Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu, a prominent figure in contemporary African philosophical discourse. According to Kanu, the origins of Igwebuike are rooted in a profound sense of wonder experienced by African traditional thinkers as they contemplated the nature of their immediate environment. This reflective engagement with their surroundings, which they understood as intrinsically linked to the broader cosmos, laid the foundation for philosophical inquiry. Their sustained wonder gradually gave rise to a distinct philosophical orientation, characterised by a relational and communal structure of thought (Kanu, 2019). As Kanu (2017) further explains:

Igwebuike's philosophy is based on the Igbo African worldview of complementarity, that is, the manner of being in African ontology (Kanu, 2017). It is a worldview in which individuating differences must work towards a corporate existence where the 'I' does not stand as the 'I' of this kind, difference does not divide, nor does it constitute a threat, but rather unites and gives hope that future existence would have meaning. In a cosmogony of this kind, while the ontology of the person is founded on the particularity of the individual, implying that it is the metaphysics of the particular that founds identity, it is the community that gives meaning to such an existence and grounds such an identity(pp.1-2)

As an ideology, Igwebuiké encapsulates the philosophical, religious, political, economic, and social dimensions of African life. It is a holistic and integrative philosophy that affirms the primacy of unity in human existence. At its core, Igwebuiké asserts that no individual part can be greater than the whole. This underpins Kanu's view of Igwebuiké as a philosophy of unity, solidarity, and communal love (Kanu, 2016). For individuals raised within Igbo culture, the term *Igwebuiké* is intuitively meaningful. It is commonly translated as "strength in numbers" or "the strength of the majority." Etymologically, the concept derives from three Igbo words: *igwe bu ike*, meaning "multitude is strength" or "there is power in the collective." The philosophy emphasises the indispensable value of community and mutual support.

Kanu (2016a) articulates this view by noting that when human beings unite in solidarity and complementarity, they form an indomitable force capable of achieving tasks beyond individual capacity (p. 3). Similarly, Ndubuisi (2019) argues that human beings are more likely to achieve meaningful outcomes collectively than individually. This is echoed in an African proverb: "If you want to go fast, walk alone; but if you want to go far, walk together" (Ndubuisi, 2019, p. 168). The same sentiment is reflected in an Igbo adage: a single broomstick cannot sweep, but a bundle can. Such proverbs vividly illustrate the foundational principles of the Igwebuiké philosophy, which upholds communal strength and interdependence as vital to human flourishing.

With the above general understanding of Igwebuiké's Philosophy, given the purpose of our study, it becomes pertinent to understand the foundational principles of the philosophy. According to Professor Kanu (2019), there are four foundational principles of Igwebuiké philosophy. These principles are the core values or framework that shape and justify the Igwebuiké philosophy. We discuss them briefly below.

**The Identity Principle:** The principle of identity holds a foundational place in Igwebuiké's philosophy, as it serves as the necessary precondition for inter-subjectivity, interconnectedness, and complementarity. According to Kanu (2019), before any meaningful connection or complementarity can occur between entities, each must possess a distinct identity that differentiates it from the other. This distinctiveness makes interaction and mutual relations possible. Identified as the first principle of Igwebuiké philosophy, the principle of identity asserts that every being is self-determined, unified within itself, and internally coherent. In this view, each being exists as a unique entity, distinguishable from others. Traditional metaphysics supports this notion by referring to the distinguishing features of matters, such as size, colour, and shape, as accidents that mark one being as distinct from another. Without identity, the concept of reality collapses into undifferentiated sameness, where everything is indistinct and no meaningful distinctions can be made. In such a scenario, the relationship between subject and object would be impossible, as there would be no basis for differentiation (Kanu, 2012 & 2013, as cited in Kanu, 2019). Thus, the essence of the principle of identity in Igwebuiké's philosophy lies in its insistence that meaningful communal or relational existence is predicated upon the recognition of distinct and defined identities. Igwebuiké, therefore, does not operate in a vacuum; it requires differentiated entities capable of engaging in mutual complementarity.

**The Hierarchy Principle:** In Igbo-African ontology, every reality in the universe is believed to possess a force. However, these forces are not uniform; they vary in intensity and potency. This gradation of force forms the basis for the ontological categorisation of beings. Within this hierarchy, entities endowed with greater force occupy higher positions, with God situated at the apex as the ultimate source of all force. Reality, therefore, is structured according to this hierarchy of forces. Among these, the category of *Muo* spiritual beings holds a central position. This category includes God, divinities, and spirits. Within it, God stands supreme, as both the

origin and sustainer of all other forces. As Tempels (1959, as cited in Kanu, 2019) explains, “Above all force is God... It is he who has force, power, in himself. He gives existence, power of survival and increase, to other forces. In relation to other forces, he is he who increases force” (p. 167). Tempels further affirms that God possesses complete knowledge of all forces, their order, interrelations, dependencies, and capacities. His existence is self-sustained, and he alone determines the continuity or cessation of all other forces. Thus, in the Igbo-African worldview, God is not only the source but also the regulator of all ontological force, underpinning the entire structure of being and existence.

While other creatures may paralyse, diminish, or temporarily obstruct the operation of another being’s vital force, they cannot extinguish it entirely; only God holds that ultimate power. Following the Supreme Being in the ontological hierarchy are the divinities, who function as intermediaries and embody certain aspects of divine authority. Awolalu and Dopamu (1978, as cited in Kanu, 2019) describe them as the executive agents overseeing various departments within the divine governance structure of the Supreme Being’s monarchical order. Though subordinate to God, the divinities still possess considerable force (Kanu, 2019). Beneath the divinities in this hierarchy is the human person, regarded as a vital force endowed with intelligence and will. While God remains the ultimate source of all vital force, the human being is considered the sovereign vital force within the temporal realm, presiding over the earth and its constituents. Yet, as Kanu (2019) notes, the human being’s fullness of existence is contingent upon their degree of participation in God’s supreme force (p. 168). Tempels (as cited in Kanu, 2019) further emphasises this position by asserting that “man is the supreme force, the most powerful among created beings” (p. 168). Importantly, the human person can renew and strengthen their vital force by drawing from the energies of other created beings, thereby sustaining their ontological status within the cosmic order.

Following human beings in the ontological hierarchy are the lower animals. This category includes beings that, while possessing vital force, lack rational capacity and are governed primarily by instinct. They are subordinate to human beings and are considered to exist for human use and benefit. As Tempels (as cited in Kanu, 2019) explains, “In fact, even inferior beings, such as inanimate beings and minerals, are forces which, because of their nature, have been put at the disposal of men, of living human forces, or of men’s vital forces” (p. 168). In another passage, he affirms that “these lower beings exist, by Divine decree, only for the assistance of the higher created being” (p. 168). Accordingly, animals and other non-rational beings serve practical and spiritual purposes: they provide sustenance for humans and are also employed in ritual offerings to God, the divinities, and ancestral spirits (Kanu, 2019).

Following lower animals in the ontological hierarchy are *things*, which refer to events, occurrences, or specific objects. In Igbo thought, the term *ife* captures this category and can be modified by adjectives to denote particular forms—for example, *ife obuna* (anything), *ife ebube* (thing of wonder), *ife ojoo* (bad thing), or *ife oma* (good thing) (Kanu, 2019, p. 168). As a category of being, *ife* possesses force, but it is inert; it cannot act autonomously. Its activity is only realised when influenced by a higher force such as God, the divinities, spirits, or human beings. These entities lack will and depend entirely on the volition of superior forces to function.

Next in the ontological order is *space* (*ebe*), which refers to location or the spatial relationship between two bodies or points. It answers the existential question of “where.” Following space is *time*, which addresses temporal positioning. The final category in this hierarchy is *modality*, which refers to the manner, mode, or style of being. It concerns how a being exists or expresses itself (Kanu, 2012 & 2014, as cited in Kanu, 2019). In the framework of Igwebuiké's

philosophy, the degree of force a being possesses directly influences its level of complementarity and capacity for interconnectedness. Thus, beings with greater force exhibit a higher potential for relational integration within the ontological structure (Kanu, 2019).

**Contrariety Principle:** The principle of contrariety in Igwebuiké's philosophy affirms the essential otherness inherent in reality. Derived from the term *contrary*, contrariety refers to the existence of opposing but interrelated elements. Aristotle (as cited in Kanu, 2019) defines contrariety as “a kind of difference, and difference is a kind of otherness” (p. 169). Igwebuiké recognises contrariness as an integral part of the natural order. The universe encompasses opposing realities—good and evil, life and death, light and darkness, heat and cold, wetness and dryness, love and hate, unity and diversity, short and long, substance and accident, act and potency, fortune and misfortune, male and female. These opposites coexist as necessary components of existence. When these contraries are held in balance, they strengthen and enrich reality. Igwebuiké's philosophy, therefore, insists that the world is structured through oppositions, and to deny the presence of contraries is to reject the complexity of being. The human task, then, is to consciously navigate and mediate these tensions in daily life (Kanu, 2019).

The concept of the ‘Other’ has a long-standing philosophical lineage, stretching from the Sophists and Socratic dialogues to Hegel’s dialectics, where the ‘stranger’ engages ontological questions of being and non-being, the one and the other. Otherness refers to the condition of difference, moving from Descartes’ abstract treatment of the other to a more grounded understanding of the other as situated within concrete social and cultural contexts. The question of otherness remains a central concern in philosophy, continuously provoking inquiry across different historical periods. It raises fundamental questions such as: What does it mean to be other than the self? How should one relate to the other? (Kanu, 2018, as cited in Kanu, 2019).

**The Unity Principle:** Despite the inherent contrariness of reality and the distinct identity of each entity, Igwebuiké's philosophy asserts the existence of a unifying element that binds all beings together. Every individual reality is understood as both a part of and a contributor to a greater whole. Thus, unity exists amid diversity. In this framework, being is defined by relationality—each entity exists in mutual dependence and connection with others.

To *be*, in the Igwebuiké sense, is to exist in solidarity and complementarity with others. To live outside this relational structure is to experience alienation. Being, therefore, is essentially *being-with-others* in a community of interrelated beings. This notion is aptly captured in the well-known proverb cited by Mbiti (1970, as quoted in Kanu, 2019): “I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am” (p. 171). The African worldview, as expressed through Igwebuiké, is grounded in the principle of complementarity. It seeks to bring together fragmented perspectives, thoughts, and identities into a cohesive whole (Kanu, 2019). Igwebuiké holds firmly that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. It affirms that through the collective convergence of individuals or parts, a viable and enduring whole can emerge, one in which each part finds the full realisation of its purpose (Asouzu, 2004; Kanu, 2019).

### **A Critical Analysis of the Igbo Apprenticeship System “Nwa Boy/Igba Boi” As A Reflection of Igwebuiké Philosophy.**

An examination of the historical background of the Igbo apprenticeship system reveals a strong alignment with the principles of Igwebuiké philosophy. Although the exact origins of the practice are difficult to pinpoint, scholars widely agree that it gained significant prominence in the aftermath of the Nigerian-Biafran civil war of 1970. In response to the economic devastation experienced by the Igbo, whose financial assets were reduced to a mere twenty

pounds per individual, the apprenticeship system emerged as a strategic mechanism for collective economic recovery.

In the absence of substantial federal economic infrastructure in the southeastern region and the Igbos' exclusion from corporate ownership during the indigenisation era, the community turned inward. They recognised that their survival and long-term prosperity depended on hard work (*igba mbo*) and mutual support. The resurgence of the apprenticeship model was therefore grounded in the Igbo values of brotherhood, solidarity, and communal responsibility. This collective ethos is encapsulated in the Igbo maxim *Onye aghana nwanne ya*, "let no one leave his brother behind, which poignantly expresses the spirit of the time and the communal resolve to rebuild through shared effort and interdependence (Ogbujah, 2022).

When examined through the lens of Igwebuike's philosophy, it becomes evident that the Igbo apprenticeship system is fundamentally rooted in the principles of communal solidarity and collective strength. Igwebuike, as articulated by Kanu (2016), is a philosophy of togetherness, unity, and love, grounded in the conviction that no individual part is greater than the whole. It emphasises that “when human beings come together in solidarity and complementarity, they are powerful or can constitute an insurmountable force. At this level, no task is beyond their collective capability” (Kanu, 2016a, p. 3). This framework affirms that individuals accomplish more through collective effort than in isolation (Ndubuisi, 2019). The African proverb, “If you want to go fast, walk alone; but if you want to go far, walk together” (Ndubuisi, 2019, p. 168), encapsulates this ethic. Similarly, the Igbo adage that a single broomstick cannot sweep, but a bundle can, further illustrates the value of unity in purpose and action (Ndubuisi, 2019). These proverbs reflect the philosophical foundation of the *Igba boy* apprenticeship model, a system built on mutual cooperation, shared growth, and the belief that collective success strengthens the individual and the community alike.

A defining feature of the *Igba boy* apprenticeship system is the collaborative relationship between the *Oga* (mentor) and the *nwa boy* (apprentice). The *Oga* assumes the responsibility of training the apprentice, equipping him with the necessary skills and knowledge to master the trade. Simultaneously, the *nwa boy*, while undergoing training, contributes to the expansion and success of the *Oga's* enterprise. Upon the completion of the apprenticeship period, and in recognition of the *Nwa boy's* contribution, the *Oga* “settles” him, providing start-up capital and resources to enable him to establish his own business and pursue financial independence. This reciprocal relationship exemplifies the principle of complementarity, which lies at the core of Igwebuike's philosophy. Such mutual support echoes the wisdom of the African proverb: “If you want to go fast, walk alone; but if you want to go far, walk together” (Ndubuisi, 2019, p. 168), highlighting the enduring value of solidarity and shared progress within the Igbo socio-economic framework.

Once an Igbo businessperson becomes successful, they take their wealth home by recruiting an *nwa boy* (apprentice) to establish. When the apprentice graduates and is settled, he reciprocates by taking on another apprentice to serve him. Even before the apprentice graduates, the master typically recruits a new apprentice to learn the trade, creating a continuous cycle of wealth (Yemisi, 2021). The willingness of an established businessman to train others in the trade that made him successful reflects the core of Igwebuike's philosophy.

The foundational principle of the Igbo apprenticeship system (*Nwa-boy*) is encapsulated in the saying “*Onye aghala nwanne ya*” (Yemisi, 2021). This principle holds that an individual's wealth is communal, and it is a duty to share the knowledge of wealth creation to foster a balanced community (Yemisi, 2021). In line with this ethos, everyone benefits, and no one is

left behind. The *Oga* recruits and trains apprentices to expand his business, then shares his wealth with them proportionally, empowering them to become entrepreneurs. This ongoing cycle of recruitment, training, and settlement is a powerful economic empowerment system that has positively influenced all parts of Igboland (Ogbujah, 2022). This cultural practice embodies the core tenets of Igwebuiké philosophy.

In the final analysis, the name Igwebuiké, meaning “unity is strength,” is reflected in the *Igba boi* apprenticeship system, which has contributed significantly to the growth in Igboland. According to SEREDEEC (2024), it has fostered high entrepreneurship rates, with many successful businesses run by former apprentices. The system promotes economic dynamism through a steady flow of new enterprises that drive innovation and job creation. It also encourages community-driven growth by supporting collaboration and mentorship, thereby creating a strong network for aspiring entrepreneurs. Additionally, it preserves Igbo cultural values such as hard work, respect, and communal spirit, ensuring their transmission to future generations.

### **Conclusion**

At the heart of this study is the central thought that the Igbo apprenticeship system, commonly known as *Igba boi*, is deeply reflective of the Igwebuiké philosophy (propounded by Professor Kanu Ikechukwu). In the study, we explored the very concept of *Igba boy* and its origins. Here, we discovered that while there is no specific origin of the system that it has been in existence, but only got popularised in the aftermath of the Biafra war when it came in very handy, as a means for the Igbo to recuperate from their loss. The very foundation of the system is on brotherliness and mutual upliftment, anchored on the Igbo saying “*Onye aghala nwanne ya*”. This reveals the Igbo belief that the wealth of a man is wealth for the community, and a man is obligated to teach his brothers the secrets of wealth, to create an even and balanced community. It is from this instance that the system mirrors the Igwebuiké philosophy, anchored on complementarity, togetherness, unity and love. This is because in the *Igba Boi* system, wealth is built to successful heights on the strength of the *Oga* and his *nwa boy*. It is this unified strength that drives the business to prosper and yield enough returns, from which the *Nwa Boyi* is settled. Everyone is supported to partake in the community wealth. No one is left out. By the foregoing, we have successfully answered the three core questions of the paper: What is *Nwa Boy/ Igba Boi* (Igbo apprenticeship)? What is Igwebuiké's Philosophy? How does the Igbo apprenticeship system reflect the Igwebuiké Philosophy? The significance of the study shines out as it offers insight into the entrepreneurial mindset of the Igbo as seen in the “*Nwa Boy*” apprenticeship model and how it reflects the Igwebuiké Philosophy.

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