



The Igbo Apprenticeship Model and Practice: A Legal Examination of the Contractual Status of the "Nwa Boyi" in South-East Nigeria

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Abstract. The Igbo Apprenticeship Model, known locally as the "Igba Boi" system, which have span over five centuries before the precolonial times serves as cornerstone of entrepreneurship and economic development within the Igbo community of South-East Nigeria. This traditional practice involves a young male apprentice, referred to as "Nwa Boyi," being trained under the guidance of a master trader or entrepreneur. The apprenticeship model is of great economic advantage to both the local Igbo community, the family of the young male apprentice who spend years learning business tactics and skills. Despite its significant socio-economic contributions, the "Igba Boi" system operates largely outside formal legal frameworks, raising questions about the contractual status and legal protections of the apprentices. This study examines how the Igbo apprenticeship model ("Nwa Boyi") fits within South-East Nigeria and its legal framework. Findings reveal challenges in contractual enforcement due to informal agreements. Using sociocultural theory, legal pluralism, and contract theory, the research highlights gaps between customary practices and statutory law, suggesting the need for legal reforms.

Keywords: Igbo, Apprenticeship, Nwa Boyi, Nigerian, Labor,

1. Introduction

The Igbo people, primarily located in South-East region of Nigeria, have a rich history of commerce and trade. According to a *Vanguard Newspaper* publication, Igbo participation in business in commercial cities in Nigeria is substantial (Aidonojie et al., 2024), with investments estimated at over N300 trillion in Lagos. In Abuja, this figure doubles to approximately N600 trillion. In Kano and Kaduna, Igbo investments are each estimated to exceed N10 trillion. In Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa states, Igbo investments amount to around N5 trillion, while in Plateau State, the figure is about N15 trillion. (Udegbe, 2013). Owing to the rich entrepreneurial spirit of the Igbo people over years, the "Igba Boi" system has been integral part in terms of the Igbo entrepreneurial skill development apprenticeship to its history, serving as a mechanism for wealth creation and economic stability (Antai, 2024). Historically, "Igba Boi" apprenticeship system has enabled the transfer of skills and business acumen across generations, playing a crucial role in the entrepreneurial success of the Igbo community

(Obisesan et al., 2024). The system gained significant prominence after the 1970 Nigerian-Biafran civil war between the Biafran foot soldiers and the Nigerian Allied forces, the Igba Boi system, based on the Igbo principle of "lekota nwanne gi nwoke" (take care of your brother), which was aimed to restore Igbo wealth and provides skills, experience, and capital, making young apprentice strong, obedient, versatile, and ready to start their own businesses after some years usually between five to fifteen, or based on agreed terms between the young apprentice and his master (Ugwu, Njeze & Oluka, 2023). According to Ekekwe (2021) "for centuries, the Southeastern region of Nigeria has practiced what is known today as stakeholder capitalism a construct that businesses must elevate the interests of communities, workers, consumers, and the environment alongside those of shareholders" (Ekekwe, 2021). For Robert Neuwirth, "the Igbo apprenticeship system that governs Alaba Int'l Market is the largest business incubator platform in the world" (TEDGlobal, 2017). According to him, at Alaba International Market, where 10,000 merchants generate over \$4 billion annually, the Igbo traders' sharing principle, called Igba Boi, functions as locally generated venture capital, which involves a business owner settling an apprentice by providing startup assistance, challenging traditional economic theories like those of Adam Smith (TEDGlobal, 2017).

The Igbo Apprenticeship System, or "Igba-Boi," is a key driver of entrepreneurial development and economic sustainability in South-Eastern Nigeria (Iwara, et al, 2019). The Igbo culture of entrepreneurship can be traced back to the slave trade business from the 15th century (Wikipedia, 2024) and it flourished in the colonial period and endures through apprenticeship (Ohadike, 1998). While the "Nwa boi" apprenticeship system has the potential to significantly increase the level of entrepreneurial metabolism and to stimulate the rate and pace of new venture creation in the Igbo communities of South-Eastern Nigeria (Obi, 2021) the apprenticeship model is deeply rooted in cultural practices and communal values, facilitating the transfer of business skills and resources across generations. The system is built on a mentorship relationship between the young male apprentice and the mentor, master or "Oga", with a focus on cultivating independent business owners. However, the informal nature of the system presents challenges, including disputes and vulnerabilities for the apprentice (Ekpenisi, et al, 2024). Efforts to modernize and adapt the system, such as formalizing aspects and expanding its inclusivity, are crucial for its continued effectiveness and sustainability (Iwara, 2019).

2. The Structure and Dynamics of the Igbo Apprenticeship System

The Igbo Apprenticeship System, or "Igba-Boi," is a distinctive and culturally embedded economic practice that has played a significant role in the entrepreneurial development of the Igbo people in South-Eastern Nigeria. This system is structured around the mentorship of young boys, known as "Nwa Boyi," by experienced business owners, called "Ogas." The Igba-Boi system is characterized by its informal yet highly organized structure, which is built on a foundation of trust, familial bonds, and community support. Understanding the intricacies of its structure and dynamics reveals why it has been an effective vehicle for wealth creation and social mobility within the Igbo community. The structure and dynamics of the Igbo Apprenticeship System "Igba Boi" system involves a verbal apprenticeship agreement, a multi-year training period, and a final settlement where the apprentice receives start-up support from the "Oga" to establish their own business (Nnonyelu, et al, 2023).

At the core of the Igbo apprenticeship system is the relationship between the "Nwa Boyi" and the "Oga." This relationship is often initiated through familial connections and community networks. Families, seeking to provide economic opportunities for their children, approach successful business owners within their community to take on their child as an apprentice (Olewu, 2023). The "Oga" agrees to mentor the young apprentice, teaching them the intricacies of running a business, from operational details to customer relations. This relationship is not merely transactional; it is imbued with expectations of mutual respect, loyalty, and commitment. The "Oga" assumes a quasi-parental role, responsible not only for the apprentice's professional training but often for their welfare and moral upbringing as well (Onwuejeogwu, 1981).

The apprenticeship period, typically ranging from five to seven years, is structured in stages, each with its own set of expectations and responsibilities. Initially, the "Nwa Boyi" is introduced to the basics of the business, learning through observation and simple tasks. As they progress, apprentices take on more complex duties, gaining hands-on experience and gradually assuming greater responsibility (Gessler, 2019). This phased approach ensures that the apprentice develops a comprehensive understanding of the business and acquires the skills necessary to eventually operate independently. The learning process is intensive and immersive, often involving long hours and a steep learning curve, but it is also a rite of passage that prepares the apprentice for future entrepreneurial endeavors.

The culmination of the Igbo apprenticeship system is marked by a "settlement," a pivotal moment that signifies the apprentice's transition to an independent business owner. Upon successful completion of the apprenticeship, the "Oga" provides the "Nwa Boyi" with a settlement, which typically includes capital, goods, or even a fully equipped shop to start their own business (Nnonyelu & et al 2023). This settlement is a form of compensation for the years of service rendered and is also seen as an investment in the apprentice's future success. The size and nature of the settlement are often determined by factors such as the "Oga's" financial capacity, the apprentice's performance, and the nature of the business. The settlement process highlights the communal and supportive ethos of the Igba-Boi system, as it not only rewards the apprentice but also strengthens economic ties within the community.

The dynamics of the Igbo apprenticeship system are deeply influenced by the socio-cultural context of the Igbo people. Igbo culture places a high value on entrepreneurship, self-reliance, and community solidarity (Nwala, 1985). The Igba-Boi system embodies these values by creating a pathway for young people to acquire skills and become economically independent while fostering a sense of responsibility and loyalty to their mentors and community (Antai, 2024)

The system's success is also bolstered by the strong familial and social networks that facilitate the matching of apprentices with mentors and provide support throughout the apprenticeship period (Ekpenisi et al., 2024).

Despite its many strengths, the Igbo apprenticeship system also faces several challenges (Igwe et al, 2018). The informal nature of the system means that it lacks standardized regulations and protections, which can leave apprentices vulnerable to exploitation and unfair treatment. Without formal contracts, disputes over settlements or the terms of the apprenticeship can arise, creating tensions and conflicts (Safi' et al., 2024). Furthermore, the traditional male-dominated structure of the Igba-Boi system often excludes women and girls from participating fully, limiting their opportunities for economic empowerment through this pathway.

In recent years, there has been growing recognition of the need to adapt and modernize the Igbo apprenticeship system to better align with contemporary economic realities and legal standards (Nordvall, 2022). This includes introducing more formalized agreements to protect the rights of

apprentices and ensure fair treatment (Mukhlis et al., 2024). It also involves expanding the system to be more inclusive of women and other marginalized groups, providing them with the same opportunities for skill acquisition and economic advancement. Efforts to integrate the Igba-Boi system with formal vocational training programs and support services can also enhance its effectiveness and sustainability.

It is therefore pertinent to state that the Igbo apprenticeship system is a testament to the ingenuity and resilience of the Igbo people. Its structured approach to mentorship and skill acquisition has enabled countless individuals to achieve economic success and independence (Mutawalli et al., 2024). However, to continue thriving in the modern era, the system must evolve to address its challenges and align more closely with formal legal frameworks and inclusive practices (Aidonojie et at, 2024). By doing so, the Igba-Boi system can maintain its vital role in fostering entrepreneurship and economic development within the Igbo community.

3. Labours laws and Legal Framework Governing Apprenticeships in Nigeria

The legal status of the "Nwa Boyi" within the Igba Boi system involves navigating the complexities of Nigerian statutory law, international labour standards, and customary law. Nigerian statutory laws, including the Labour Act and the Child's Rights Act 2003, offer a framework for regulating employment and safeguarding workers' rights (Adeola, 2020). The Labour Act of 1974 outlines conditions for formal employment relationships, recognizing apprentices as individuals undergoing training for a specific trade. It mandates that apprenticeship agreements be written and registered with the Ministry of Labour, setting forth conditions regarding working hours, wages (Aidonojie et al., 2023), and safety standards to protect apprentices from exploitation. Meanwhile, the Child's Rights Act 2003 focuses on shielding children from exploitative labour practices (Arias, Evans, & Santos, 2019). The Act prohibits employing children in work that could harm their health or development but allows light work and apprenticeships if they do not interfere with education or well-being even as parental consent for minors entering apprenticeships which underscores the child's welfare is provided for under the Act (Schlemmer, 2000). Specifically, the Act depicts the legal prohibition of child exploitative labour and thus provides under section 28 that subject to the Act, no child shall be:

- (a) subjected to any forced or exploitative labour; or
- (b) employed to work in any capacity except where he is employed by a member of his family on light work

of an agricultural, horticultural or domestic character; or

(c) required, in any case, to lift, carry or move anything so heavy as to be likely to adversely affect his physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development; or

(d) employed as a domestic help outside his own home or family environment.

(2) No child shall be employed or work in an industrial undertaking and nothing in this subsection shall apply to work done by children in technical schools or similar approved institutions if the work is supervised by the appropriate authority (Child Rights Act, 2003).

International labour standards, particularly those set by the International Labour Organization (ILO), further shape the legal framework of the Igba Boi system. Nigeria, as an ILO member, has ratified key conventions that establish labour standards. International Labour Organisation (ILO) Convention No. 138 sets minimum age standards for employment, generally prohibiting the employment of individuals under 15, with exceptions for light work and apprenticeships starting at age 13 (Edmonds & Shrestha, 2012). This convention permits non-hazardous apprenticeships for individuals aged 15 and above, aligning with the developmental needs of young workers. ILO Convention No. 182 seeks to eliminate the worst forms of child labour, banning employment likely to harm children's health, safety, or morals (D'Avolio, 2004). The informal and potentially exploitative conditions in some Igba Boi arrangements might conflict with these protections which highlights the need for regulatory oversight to ensure compliance with international standards (Antai & et al, 2024). Customary law significantly influences the regulation of the Igba Boi system, reflecting the deeply embedded cultural practices and norms of the Igbo community (Onwuejeogwu, 1981). Customary law often relies on verbal agreements and communal trust rather than formal written contracts, making such agreements enforceable within the community but lacking formal legal backing in statutory law. Community accountability plays a crucial role, as social norms and expectations compel the mentor to provide fair treatment and eventual settlement to the apprentice (Mukhlis et al., 2023). Dispute resolution in customary law focuses on equitable solutions and maintaining community harmony, emphasizing the principles of social obligations and justice (Antai, 2024). Integrating the traditional Igba Boi system with modern legal frameworks presents challenges and opportunities. The informal nature of many Igba Boi agreements often conflicts with statutory requirements, leading to difficulties in legal enforcement and protection of apprentices (Adeola,

2020). Recognizing and formalizing aspects of the Igba Boi system within Nigerian statutory law could bridge these gaps, ensuring better protection and clarity for all parties involved while preserving the cultural significance of the system (Akpanke et al, 2022).

Following this informal nature of the apprenticeship system (Imoisi & Aidonojie, 2023), it will serve good for both parties in the Igbo apprenticeship model to utilize formalization Initiatives such as documenting informal agreements through encouraging the formal documentation of apprenticeship agreements which can help clarify terms and facilitate legal enforcement when the "Nwa boyi" fails to serve his master or "oga" as agreed upon entering the apprenticeship agreement. Furthermore, registering apprenticeships with relevant authorities or organisations such as human rights and other Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) can ensure compliance with labour standards and protections (Massajuwa and Aidonojie, 2020).

Apprenticeships, as a form of employment and skill acquisition, are recognized under Nigerian law (Egielewa and Aidonojie, 2021), but the formal legal provisions primarily focus on structured vocational training programs. The National Board for Technical Education (NBTE) regulates formal apprenticeship schemes and vocational training programs in Nigeria. These schemes are typically associated with industries and businesses that provide technical and professional training under more formalized and documented agreements (Trends in Vocational Education, 1973). The NBTE sets standards for the training content, duration, and the qualifications required for both apprentices and their trainers (Majekudumi et al, 2022). This formalized approach contrasts sharply with the informal and largely undocumented nature of the Igbo apprenticeship model, which operates outside the NBTE's regulatory scope.

The National Minimum Wage Act 2019 is another critical piece of legislation that impacts employment relationships in Nigeria. This Act establishes the minimum wage that employers are required to pay their workers (Anifowose et al, 2024). While the Act is designed to protect workers from exploitation by ensuring they receive a fair wage for their labour, its provisions are challenging to enforce within the informal sector. In the context of the Igbo apprenticeship system, apprentices (Nwa Boyi) are often not paid regular wages but are instead compensated through training and the promise of a "settlement" at the end of their apprenticeship period. This practice does not align with the minimum wage requirements, highlighting a significant disconnect

between traditional apprenticeship practices and modern labour laws (Mordi, Ajonbadi & Adekoya, 2023).

Also, the Employee's Compensation Act 2010 provides further protections for workers by establishing a comprehensive framework for compensating employees for work-related injuries, diseases, or deaths (Trusted, & Trusted, 2024). This Act is part of the country's broader effort to align its labour laws with international standards and ensure the safety and welfare of workers. However, similar to other labour laws, the Employee's Compensation Act primarily applies to formal employment relationships and does not explicitly cover informal apprenticeships like those in the Igbo system (Idahosa et al., 2023). Consequently, apprentices working under the Igba-Boi model may not be adequately protected or compensated for work-related injuries or illnesses, which therefore underscores the need for broader legal reforms that include informal apprenticeship systems.

A key challenge in integrating informal apprenticeship systems like Igba-Boi into Nigeria's formal legal framework is the inherent flexibility and reliance on customary practices that define these traditional systems (Chukwu, Ihezue & Njoku, 2024). The Igbo apprenticeship model, for example, is deeply rooted in cultural norms and community-based agreements, which often conflict with the rigid requirements of formal labour laws. The model's emphasis on trust, family involvement, and oral agreements makes it difficult to apply standardized legal provisions without potentially disrupting the very essence of the system even as most participants in this scheme are young people under the age of 18, which raises concerns that it sometimes allows for the exploitation of children. The vulnerability of children, combined with factors such as their poor family backgrounds, low literacy levels, close ties between parties involved in the apprenticeship, and the informal nature of initiating these relationships, creates opportunities for the abuse of their rights (Olewu, 2023).

To address these challenges, there is a growing recognition of the need to adapt and expand the existing legal framework to better accommodate and regulate informal apprenticeship systems. One potential approach is the introduction of flexible legal instruments that recognize the unique characteristics of traditional apprenticeship models while providing basic protections and rights for apprentices. This could include the development of simplified contractual templates that capture the key elements of the apprenticeship agreement, such as the duration, the

nature of training, and the settlement terms, while ensuring compliance with minimum labour standards.

Moreso, the community-based oversight and regulation could play a crucial role in bridging the gap between traditional practices and formal legal requirements. Engaging local leaders, community organizations, and stakeholders in the process of formalizing and regulating apprenticeship systems can help ensure that reforms are culturally sensitive and widely accepted (Smith & Kemmis, 2013). This approach can also facilitate the enforcement of basic labour standards within the informal sector, providing apprentices with greater protection and support.

While Nigeria's labour laws and legal framework provide a comprehensive structure for regulating formal employment and vocational training (Edetalehn & Aidonjio, 2023), they fall short in adequately addressing the unique dynamics of informal apprenticeship systems like the Igbo Apprenticeship Model. Bridging this gap requires a thoughtful integration of traditional practices with modern legal standards, ensuring that apprentices receive the necessary protections and rights while preserving the cultural essence of these systems (Oladele et al., 2022). Through a combination of legal reforms, community engagement, and flexible regulatory approaches, it is possible to create a more inclusive and equitable framework that supports the diverse range of apprenticeship practices across Nigeria.

4. Contractual Status and Rights of the "Nwa Boyi"

The "Nwa Boyi" apprenticeship system as a traditional process is often facilitated through practical entrepreneurial training, mentorship and perceived contractual status between both parties. Throughout the apprenticeship, both parties the "boyi" and the "Oga" have distinct responsibilities. The latter is often expected to serve the former diligently and handle both business and domestic tasks. In return, the "Oga" is responsible for providing shelter and food, and, at the end of the agreed period, equipping the "boyi" with the necessary skills, mentorship, networking opportunities, and funds to start their own business (Olewu, 2023).

The Igbo Apprenticeship Model, or "Igba-Boi," is deeply woven into the economic and social fabric of the Igbo communities in South-Eastern Nigeria (Achebe, 1984). Central to this traditional system are the "Nwa Boyi," young apprentices who enter into extended periods of tutelage under the guidance of

more experienced business owners, referred to as "Ogas." While the Igba-Boi system is renowned for its effectiveness in nurturing entrepreneurship and fostering economic self-reliance, the contractual status and rights of the "Nwa Boyi" are complex and often ambiguous. This complexity arises from the interplay between traditional norms that have governed these relationships for generations and the demands of modern legal frameworks.

Traditionally, the relationship between the "Nwa Boyi" and the "Oga" is grounded in unwritten agreements and customary practices. These apprenticeships are usually arranged through family negotiations, motivated by socio-economic considerations. The "Oga" takes on a role that blends mentorship with a form of guardianship, providing not only business training but also basic needs such as food and accommodation. In return, the "Nwa Boyi" is expected to contribute labour and demonstrate loyalty throughout the apprenticeship period, which typically lasts several years. The culmination of this apprenticeship is marked by a "settlement," where the "Oga" provides the apprentice with capital or resources to start their own business, signifying the apprentice's readiness to become an independent entrepreneur (Olewu, 2023). However, the reliance on verbal commitments and traditional expectations means that these arrangements often lack formal documentation, leading to potential disputes and vulnerabilities for the apprentice.

Within the formal legal system of Nigeria, the status of the "Nwa Boyi" remains largely undefined. Nigerian labor laws, such as the Labour Act and the National Minimum Wage Act, provide general guidelines for employment relationships but do not specifically address informal apprenticeship systems like the Igba-Boi. This creates a significant gap in the protection of the rights of these young apprentices. The absence of formal contracts means that the "Nwa Boyi" operates in a grey area that straddles being a trainee and an employee. This undefined status complicates the application of labor laws designed to protect workers, such as those setting standards for minimum wage, working hours, and workplace safety. Consequently, apprentices often have limited avenues to enforce their rights through legal channels if disputes arise, particularly in cases where the "Oga" fails to fulfill promises of settlement or where apprentices experience unfair treatment.

Despite the informal nature of the Igba-Boi system, certain rights and protections for the "Nwa Boyi" can be inferred from broader legal principles and human rights standards. The apprentice has a fundamental

right to fair treatment, which includes being free from exploitation and abuse. This principle is supported by both customary expectations within the community and international human rights standards, which Nigeria is obligated to uphold (ILO, 2002). Also, the apprentice should have opportunities for personal and professional development, which not only include acquiring business skills but also access to basic education that can be crucial for long-term success and adaptability. Furthermore, the "Nwa Boyi" should be provided with a safe and supportive working environment, encompassing adequate rest, reasonable working hours, and protection from hazardous conditions (ILO, 2011).

Legal disputes involving the Igbo apprenticeship model, while relatively rare, highlight the system's vulnerabilities and the need for clearer legal definitions (Brimmer, 2020). When conflicts escalate to formal legal settings, courts are often required to interpret the terms of apprenticeship based on customary practices and oral agreements, leading to varied outcomes depending on the specifics of each case. For instance, some legal cases revolve around the failure of the "Oga" to provide the promised settlement, while others involve claims of unfair treatment by the apprentice. These cases underscore the necessity for more structured legal frameworks that can offer clearer guidelines and protections for both apprentices and their mentors.

To address the contractual ambiguities and enhance the rights of the "Nwa Boyi," several pathways for legal reform and formalization can be considered. One approach is the introduction of formal contracts within the Igbo apprenticeship system, which could provide clear expectations and protections for both parties. Such contracts would outline the terms of service, the duration of the apprenticeship, and the specifics of the settlement, thereby reducing the risk of disputes. Legal recognition and regulation of the Igbo apprenticeship model within the Nigerian legal system could also be beneficial (Gunawan et al., 2023). This would involve defining the status of the "Nwa Boyi" within labour laws and ensuring that the system's practices comply with minimum standards for treatment and compensation. Moreover, given the cultural significance of the Igba-Boi system, community leaders and organizations could play a crucial role in overseeing apprenticeships and ensuring that traditional practices align with modern legal standards (Rovingheights Books, 024). This could include the establishment of community agreements or codes of conduct that protect apprentices' rights while preserving cultural values (Aidonojie & Edetalehn, 2023).

It is therefore trite to state that while the I'bo apprenticeship model remains a powerful mechanism for economic empowerment and skill development, the contractual status and rights of the "Nwa Boyi" are fraught with complexities and often inadequately protected (Yerima & Akinwale, 2002). Addressing these challenges requires a balanced approach that respects cultural traditions while introducing formal protections and legal clarity. By fostering greater transparency, accountability, and legal recognition within the system, the Igbo apprenticeship model can continue to thrive and adapt to the needs of future generations. This will ensure that the "Nwa Boyi" are not only equipped with the skills necessary for entrepreneurial success but also with the rights and protections they need to navigate their journey towards independence and self-reliance.

5. Challenges and Controversies in the Igbo Apprenticeship Model

The Igbo Apprenticeship Model, or "Igba-Boi," has long been celebrated for its role in fostering entrepreneurship and economic self-sufficiency among the Igbo people of South-Eastern Nigeria (Onu & et al, 2023). This system, deeply rooted in tradition, involves young boys, known as "Nwa Boyi," entering into apprenticeships under the mentorship of experienced business owners, or "Ogas." Through this arrangement, the apprentices gain practical skills and business acumen over a period typically spanning several years. However, despite its numerous benefits, the Igbo apprenticeship system is not without its share of challenges and controversies, which stem from potential exploitative practices, modern legal incongruities, and socio-economic pressures.

One significant challenge within the Igbo apprenticeship system is the potential for exploitative practices (Eze, 2023). The informal nature of the apprenticeship arrangement often means there are no formal contracts outlining the specific rights and obligations of the apprentice and the master. This lack of documentation can lead to situations where apprentices are subjected to unfair labor practices, such as working excessively long hours without adequate rest or compensation. Without formal contracts, apprentices have limited legal recourse to address grievances, making them vulnerable to exploitation. Additionally, because the initiation into the apprenticeship can occur at a very young age, sometimes as young as 10 or 12 years old, child labour concerns are raised. Early entry into the apprenticeship often means that children miss out on educational opportunities and are placed in environments where they may be exposed to physical or emotional abuse.

The initiation and termination of apprenticeships in the Igbo model also present significant challenges, particularly regarding consent and fairness between the "Nwa Boyi" and his "Oga" as typically decisions to enter into an apprenticeship are mostly made by family members rather than the apprentices themselves, leading to questions about the true consent and autonomy of the young boys involved. Often, these decisions are influenced by economic pressures or family expectations, rather than the apprentice's own choice. At the end of the apprenticeship, disputes frequently arise over the traditional "settlement" that the apprentice is supposed to receive, which usually includes capital to start their own business. Some masters may fail to provide this settlement, leading to feelings of betrayal and legal disputes. Even when settlements are given, they may be deemed inadequate, causing further dissatisfaction and potential legal challenges (MoneyRise, 2024).

The informal nature of the Igbo apprenticeship system often conflicts with modern legal standards, creating discrepancies and challenges. In many instances, the verbal agreements and traditional norms that govern the system do not meet the requirements for formal contracts as dictated by contemporary legal frameworks. This absence of formal agreements complicates the enforcement of rights for apprentices, who may find themselves without a clear legal pathway to resolve disputes. Also, the apprenticeship practices may not comply with national labor laws that set standards for minimum wage, working conditions, and employee welfare. Businesses operating under the Igbo apprenticeship model risk facing legal challenges if they are found to be non-compliant with these labor regulations.

Socio-economic and cultural factors further complicate the landscape of the Igbo apprenticeship model. Socio-economic pressures often play a significant role in pushing young boys into apprenticeships, sometimes at the expense of their future educational and professional opportunities. Families experiencing financial hardship may see apprenticeship as a way to alleviate economic burdens, leading to decisions that prioritize immediate economic relief over long-term development and education. The societal expectation for boys to become entrepreneurs also adds pressure, potentially overshadowing other viable career paths. Cultural norms and values deeply intertwined with the apprenticeship system can both support and hinder its practices (Hashim & et al, 2012). While the system is instrumental in fostering community cohesion and economic development, it also raises challenges related to gender dynamics, as the model is

traditionally male-dominated and often marginalizes girls and women from these opportunities.

Disputes and conflict resolution within the Igbo apprenticeship model are typically handled through informal mechanisms, such as family interventions or decisions by community elders. While these traditional approaches can be effective in certain contexts, they often lead to inconsistent outcomes and may lack the accountability and enforcement mechanisms present in formal legal systems. When disputes escalate to formal legal settings, courts face significant challenges due to the lack of clear legal standards governing these informal agreements. This highlights the need for legal clarity and more structured protections for apprentices within the system.

Balancing the preservation of the Igbo apprenticeship model's cultural heritage with the need for modernization and legal reforms is a delicate but necessary endeavour (Unya, 2024). The system is a vital part of the Igbo community's economic and cultural fabric, and efforts to address its challenges must be sensitive to this significance. Community engagement and the involvement of traditional leaders are crucial for ensuring that reforms are culturally appropriate and widely accepted. Introducing formal contracts and documentation can help protect apprentices' rights and provide clear expectations for both parties. Aligning the system's practices with national labor standards will also be essential in safeguarding against exploitation and abuse. Additionally, enhancing oversight and regulatory mechanisms can ensure accountability and fairness within the apprenticeship system, allowing it to continue benefiting future generations while aligning with contemporary legal and ethical standards (Edet, Antai, & Itafu, 2022). In all, while the Igbo apprenticeship model is an invaluable system that has empowered countless individuals and contributed significantly to the Igbo community's economic vitality, it faces numerous challenges and controversies that must be addressed. Thoughtful examination and reform are necessary to balance the preservation of cultural heritage with the requirements of modernization and legal compliance. Through legal reforms, socio-economic support, and community engagement, the Igbo apprenticeship model can be transformed into a more equitable and robust framework, ensuring its sustainability and fairness in the contemporary world.

6. Conclusion

There is no doubt to say that the Igbo Apprenticeship Model is a vital economic and social institution that has significantly contributed to the economic development of the Igbo community and the economic development of the Nigerian society. However, its largely informal nature raises legal and ethical questions regarding the status and protection of the "Nwa Boyi." A nuanced approach that respects traditional practices while incorporating modern legal safeguards is essential to ensure the continued success and fairness of the "Igba Boi" system. While the system have greatly benefited the majority of those who engage in it, it is best to encourage the documentation and registration of apprenticeship agreements to provide legal clarity and protection, develop specific legal frameworks that recognize and protect the unique nature of traditional apprenticeships, increase awareness among participants about their rights and obligations under both customary and statutory laws, and engage in dialogues between traditional leaders and policymakers to harmonize customary practices with modern legal standards. Also, the government, non-governmental organizations, and community leaders in reforming and regulating the practice as well as enabling strategies for modernizing the apprenticeship system to align with contemporary labour and business standards without losing its traditional essence. These recommendations will help fosters the entrepreneurial model to fit into the contemporary economic dispensation, as well as help in the protection and rights of apprentices while preserving the cultural heritage of the system of the Igbo community.

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