



## **Philosophy and Apprenticeship System Amongst Igbo People of Eastern Nigeria: A Critical Appraisal**

By

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### **Abstract**

Philosophy primarily prides herself as the search for ultimate meaning and knowledge. This meaning is not just merely abstract as many scholars from different disciplines and even philosophy itself suggests; it is rather a realistic and very pragmatic explanation of existing realities in cultures and tradition around the world. The Igbo speaking people of Eastern Nigeria are a unique people with immense written and unwritten cultures laddened with meaning. Chiefly amongst the Igbo culture which requires serious study and investigation is the apprenticeship system. This culture was predominantly prevalent post civil war and served as a reconstruction niche for both psychological and economic collapse of Ani- Igbo during the Civil War. Indeed the culture of apprenticeship is broadly unwritten as any theory or policy but has transmuted from mere Igbo socio economic culture to an intercultural way of life and survival amongst other tribes and ethnic groups in Nigeria and beyond. This paper therefore seeks to identify philosophy in the apprenticeship system of the Igbos and argue for it's broad development as an economic model for improving the standard of living and unemployment predicament in Nigeria.

Key Words: Philosophy, Apprenticeship, Igbo People, Economy and Development

### **Introduction**

Like in Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*, philosophy guides human intellect through its search to grasp reality about human world and existence, *quatale*. Unlike empirical sciences, philosophy goes beyond identifying relationships between material objects to asserting and interpreting the conditions of the subject's minds towards comprehending the *thing* in things

(*ens qua ens*). As the mother of all knowledge, it is the study of existence in order to understand existents. To this task, philosophical studies is not only academically important but becomes necessarily a companion that makes intelligible the journey of life which future is enshrined in mysteries and uncertainties. In human existential experiences, philosophy becomes a rational *torchlight* that enlightens the human mind, and meanings made from such enlightenment forms a worldview that guides the process of organizing human life for better. Recognizing the all important company of philosophy to organizing life, Boethius (chpt.ii) addressed philosophy as life *physician*. In a prosaic write-up *Consolation of Philosophy*, he addressed the relationship between life and philosophy thus; “*Even so, the clouds of my melancholy were broken up. I saw the clear sky, and regained the power to recognize the face of my physician. Accordingly, when I had lifted my eyes and fixed my gaze upon her, I beheld nurse, philosophy, whose halls I had frequented from my youth up*” (James, 1897).

In the lens of philosophy, this work makes an intelligible gaze into the conditions of Igbo socio-economic development, to grasp the meaning of apprenticeship which is the nucleus of things surrounding the business success of the tribe. It is not a scientific study of the economic models operational as Igbo business model but a hermeneutical interpretation of the *weltanschauung* upon which the possibility of such business practice came to be. Through a qualitative analysis of some cultural worldview, the study identified a business framework embedded in the tradition of the Igbo people which, although unwritten, had significantly contributed to the socio-economic development of the South-East Region and beyond. The study, thus proposes the formalization of the practice in Nigeria as a peculiar economic model that will enhance human capacity development in the country and salvage the unemployment crises looming large in the nation.

The import of philosophy in this study is rational exposition of the strength of the cultural *thymos* that spiral to a regional economic development of the Igbo tribe. Although the work studies cultural traits that have economic value in Igbo tradition, it critically differs from ethnology and anthropology. It studies the cultural traits from the view point of *sage/ ethno philosophy*. The ethno philosophical perspective is as explained by Mosima (2016:187) that; “Philosophic sages are those that seek rational foundation and critically evaluate commonly held cultural beliefs. They are able to transcend the communal beliefs of their societies by taking a critical and rational distance”. This study, thus, makes a rational evaluation on the Igbo communal practice of *apprenticeship*.

### ***The Igbo Tribe and Business Domination***

An Igbo proverb says that when a lizard falls from an *Iroko* tree, if it is not praised by anyone, it praises itself. Without any intent of tribal superiority, it is evidential that the Igbo people is a tribe known for their business exploits and expansion in Nigeria. In a light manner, the Igbo tribe is often referred to as the real Nigerians who like the ancient *Celtic* tradition lives a life of peregrination, inhabiting in every part of the country to develop himself as well as his environment. Paul Anber as quoted in Achebe (2012:74) has these to say about the Igbos and their development spirit even before Nigeria independence;

With unparalleled rapidity, the Igbos advanced fastest in the shortest period of time of all Nigeria's ethnic groups. Like the Jews, to whom they have frequently been likened, they progressed despite being a minority in the country, filling the ranks of the nation's educated, prosperous upper classes... it was not long before the educational and economic progress of the Igbos led to their becoming the major source of administrators, managers, technicians and civil servants for the country, occupying senior positions out of proportion to their numbers. Particularly with respect to the Federal Republic service and the government statutory corporations, this led to accusation of an Igbo monopoly of essential services to the exclusion of other ethnic groups.

The above was the situation of the Igbo before the Nigerian civil war. After the war, the Igbos were grossly dislodged from the educational and administrative positions. However, the spirit of adventure and business exploration were not taken away from them. Though contained in the South-East region as the aftermath of the war, their business expertise and spirit opened again their contact and connection with other parts of the country. In Achebe's (2012) description; "As in J.P. Clark's fine image of 'ants filing out of the wood', the Igbo moved out of their forest home, scattered, and virtually seized the floor."

In the post civil war Nigeria, Nigerian business floor has to a great extent been seized by the Igbo people. President Muhammadu Buhari attested to the fact of Igbo dominance in the Nigerian business market in his address to the people of Imo State, in the following statements; "There is no town you will visit in Nigeria without seeing the Igbos being in charge of economic activities. The evidence is there for everyone to see that Igbos are in charge of Nigeria's economy" (*PremiumTimes*, September 1, 2021). In the South-East Region, the major revenues to the states come from the markets amongst which is Main Market Onitsha, the second largest market in West Africa. In Anambra alone, there are 63

major markets, established, and managed by Igbo people and as well generate heavy tax revenue to the state government( *PremiumTimes*, April 27, 2020). Among the twenty biggest markets in Nigeria, five of them are from the South East which include in their ranking, (1) Onitsha Main market; (4) Ariaria International Market Aba; (8) Ogbete Main Market Enugu;(12) New Market Aba; and (13) Nkwo Nnewi Market (*NigerianFinder*, 2021). The other markets are mainly domicile in Lagos and Kano and they are majorly dominated by the business management of the Igbos.As development economist, Olajoku (2019) revealed in his studies of Lagos investments and the Igbos; “The Igbos have strategically dominated some certain areas in Lagos and often determine who wins elections in those areas due to their population and the Yorubas see this as a dangerous trend in their land. The Igbos have legitimately occupied those areas by owing properties and contributing immensely to the growth and revenue of Lagos”. Not just in Lagos, the former minister of FCT Abuja, Malam Nasir El Rufai in 2007 noted that, “sixty-eight percent of the land allocations in the FCT belong to the 19 Northern states, but in the actual land ownership, 73 percent belong to the Igbo with the most aggressive in land ownership belonging to the indigenes of Anambra State (Daily Trust 2021). Thus, the Igbos through their expansive business have produced Igbo billionaires all across Nigeria and beyond. As a matter of fact, the current governor of Kano State, Abdullahi Ganduje, in his effort towards the development of the state wooed one of the Igbo billionaires Arthur Eze to consider Kano State as a veritable environment to extend his business empire. (Ilerioluwa, 2019). Thesebillionaires are majorly Igbo business moguls who thrive within South-East and other parts of the country and the world in building business empires that have immensely contributed to the human and infrastructural development of the country.

The concern of this study is not to enumerate the business exploits of the Igbos, because it has gone beyond counting. The area of interest is to identify the business format that saw to the great spread of Igbo businesses and billionaires within and outside the South Eastern Nigeria. The study thus, identifies *Igboapprenticeship* system as an unwritten business partnership model that provided human capacity development and expansion of Igbo business wherever they establish their business enterprise. The strength of this system is argued by this study to be based on some identifiable cultural beliefs.

### ➤ **Igbo Apprenticeship Framework for Business Expansion**

Apprenticeship as an economic and human development term did not originate with Igbo business as other business climes have their own models in applying the term. The British Industry Training Authority (2019) defined the term as ‘a combination of on-the-job training and classroom learning that leads to a trade credential-or ‘ticket’.’” The ticket given to a candidate after the training qualifies the individual to secure a job or business opportunity

that is related to the acquired skill. Such candidate in Britain is qualified when given a Certificate of Qualification (COQ). Participation in the training is made available to men, women and youth that are interested to learn, within the maximum of four years. The trainings are given by professionals in specific industries and institutions which are mostly done in partnership with universities, colleges and training institutions. In the United state, the US department of labour oversee the institution of apprenticeship. According to the department (2021); “workers benefit from apprenticeships by receiving skills-based education that prepares them for good-paying jobs. Apprenticeship programs help employers recruit, build and retain a highly-skilled workforce”. Two things are conversant with these approaches to apprenticeship. First is that it involves formal process of educating and have records of agreement on the nature and time frame of the training. Second, certificate of qualification is offered to a candidate after the training which qualifies the candidate for a related job or business, but not the job or business, as the case may be.

In the Igbo apprenticeship system, the two noted processes are not involved. The training is neither formal, written down as an agreement, nor offered any certificate. It is highly informal and dependent on practical sharing of business knowledge through participation. Ekekwe (2021) captioned this Igbo approach to apprenticeship as *Stakeholders Capitalism*. In *Harvard Business Review*, Ekekwe (2012) described Igbo apprenticeship system as follows;

A communal enterprising framework where successful business develop others, and over time provide capital and give away their customers to new businesses. The implication is that few businesses grow to become very dominant, since they keep relinquishing market share, and in doing so, they accomplish one thing: a largely equal community where everyone has opportunities, no matter how small.

The ending part of the above description informs that the Igbo apprenticeship does not necessary grow through proper economic model of expansion of customer base. The system is not structurally against the business competitive model of customer marketing but operates in the system of availing the stakeholders a business survival opportunity. As Ekekwe further explained on the business structure of the system;

The IAS has demonstrated that markets could deepen management accountability, competitiveness and profitability, while at the same time, anchoring shared

prosperity. The result is that communities experience inclusive growth with empowered workers and customers helping firms deliver sustainable fiduciary results.

Ekekwe's (2012) analysis indicates the need to enquire more on the possible rationale of market equality that transcends the capitalists competitive structure of business. In a practical experience the Igbo apprentice is a system where business owners who believe that they have grown to need the assistance of others in carrying out their business, go to their communities to orally arrange with parents of young people in their community and take them to live with them and assist them for number of years in their business. The young males lives with their masters as *nwaboy*, and learn the business through all inclusive participation in the business as well as house chores. These young men at the end of their long stay (9 years max) are settled with cash and cash equivalents, as well as customers, so that they can begin their business lives and develop themselves as well as their families. Without written agreement and formal business education, but only trust in cultural belief, the apprenticeship system accounts for the great spread of Igbo people and business in South-East and all over Nigeria, and beyond. Although the selection system of Igbo apprentices has extended beyond community basis, the community base human development system saw to the identification of some businesses with particular towns in South East region. For instance, Urualla people are known to be dealers on books and stationary materials. Osina is known for stockfish. Enugu, Uga and Ebonyi are known for motor spare parts and clothing. Akokwa is known for cooking utensils. Oko is known for motor transport business, and many more. These particularization of business dealing with town came out of the necessity for masters to take *nwaboy* from their communities and later establish them to grow in their lines of business, both within the South-East and beyond.

However, the communal selection system is no longer the case now as business owners search for apprentices from places outside their towns and even states. As a practical example, the Mgbuka Obosi motor spare parts dealers were originally people from Uga, Ekwulobia and Oko towns of Anambra State in the seventies. As development spread in Anambra State, many business men who sent their children to do formal education began to demand the apprenticeship of people from Enugu and Ebonyi. Today Mgbuka Obosi spare parts dealers as well as other markets in South-East are dominated by the billionaires from Enugu and Ebonyi State who served their apprenticeship in those markets. It is exactly this model of business partnership that saw South-Eastern region of Igbos expand and dominate virtually all the markets in Nigeria, and the impacts deeply felt in the African market.

However, since this business model is preoccupied with stakeholders development of equity than competitive capitalism, this study enquires and interprets the cultural worldview that consolidates this business model and has continued to sustain it till this day.

### ➤ **Philosophical Sagacity of Igbo Apprenticeship**

Igbo apprenticeship is operationally effective and survives in Igbo socio-economy given the Igbo worldview which admonishes the need for the socio-economic development of every Igbo man. Aptly recorded in their adage, the Igbo people believe that the community can finish the food prepared by one man, but one man cannot finish the food prepared by the whole community (*Ofu onye siere oha, oha erichaa, ma oha siere ofu onye ogaghi ericha*). In this worldview the Igbo believes that progress made by one or few individual within a community can hardly sustain the development of that community. Therefore, there is need for individuals in a community to help and develop each other so that the development of all can be sustained (*Umunna nwezuoku, iro na asi anaa*). Thus, the Igbo man by his worldview, is meant to show the light of his achievement to his community by developing the people around him with what he has achieved. And since the Igbo people got hold of the business sphere of the country, the apprenticeship system becomes a tool in living up to the demands of Igbo-socio-economic worldview. As Ekekwe opined, 'at the core of it, the IAS is a business philosophy of shared prosperity where participants co-operatively participate to attain economic equilibrium'. The business ethical call to attain economic equilibrium can be best understood when studied from sage philosophical point of view. Hence, the ethics expresses two major Igbo worldview translated into Igbo apprenticeship, namely, *Onyeaghalanwanneya* and *mmadukaejiaka* philosophy.

### ***Onyeaghalanwanneya Philosophy***

A transliteration of the Igbo word means that no one member of the community should abandon another in any circumstance. *Nwanne* which means siblings does not stand for blood relations alone but extends to extended family system, village, town and even the Igbo tribe. An Igbo man that sees a fellow Igbo man in a foreign land addresses the person as *Nwanne*, (brother) and is culturally demanded to offer the physical and spiritual connection of Igbo brotherhood. It is such a brotherhood that is cosmologically believed to be guided and guarded by the earth goddess, *ani*. It is this cosmocentric belief on Igbo brotherhood and the trado-religious stipulations of the relationship that the Igbo adage says, *onyegburu nwanne ya abughi odogwu* (one does not become a warrior by killing a brother). The trado-religious belief in the concept of brotherhood (*Nwanne*) translates into the Igbo worldview on the conditions of brotherly socio-economic development. The worldview opines that, (*bunubu ibu anyi danda, gidigidi bu ugwu eze, anyukoo mamiri ogbaa ufufu*), socio-economic

development is achievable and much easier through interdependence of effort. The cooperative context may not represent the brotherly trust binding the Igbo apprentice business model. It is the need for brotherly dependence in solving issues that instigates the master to extend the hand of help to the apprentice while the apprentice offers a hand of fellowship to help out in the business of the master while developing business skills.

*Onyeaghalanwanneya* philosophy, thus, bridges the gap between the one who has seen the economic light and his community by bringing his people into the line of business. This was aptly described as an Igbo economic development system by Achebe in his *ArrowofGod*, where *Ekemezie* who had abandoned village dance to pursue the colonial white man's money, came back and picked his friend *Nwaodika* to join the new world of white man's business. *Nwaodika* narrated the experience as follows;

He called me by name and I answered. He said everything was good in its season; dancing in the season of dancing. But, he said, a man of sense does not go on hunting little bush rodents when his age mates are after big game. He told me to leave dancing and join in the race for the white man's money. I was all eyes. Ekemezie called me Nwaodika and I said yes it was my name. he said the race for the white man's money would not wait till tomorrow or till we were ready to join; if the rat could not run fast enough it must make way for the tortoise. He said other people from every clan-some people we use to despise-they were all now in high favour when our own people did not even know that the day had broken; (p. 169).

The above literary expression unearths the philosophy of *Onyeaghalanwanneya* in which the Igbo apprenticeship system thrives. It is a philosophy which advocates expansive community development through collective sharing of business awareness, knowledge, training and responsibility. It was the connection of *Nwaodika* to the government house of the white man that saved the chief priest *Ezeulu* from the torments of prison. It is the philosophy of collective development in brotherhood as ethical spirit of cooperative business that have produced a great number of billionaires and millionaires in the Igbo tribe of Nigeria. The ethical spirit not only inspires the Igbos to train their brothers in their different businesses but also evoke the concern for equity to reciprocate in the apprenticeship through provision of capital base for the apprentice. Such human investment is enshrined in the Igbo philosophy of *mmadukaejiaka*.

### ➤ ***Mmadukaejiaka Philosophy:***



As earlier informed, in the Western formal apprenticeship system, certificate is given to those trained at the end of their program, but not necessarily job nor cash for business establishment. In this way, the trained candidate may remain unemployed where there is no immediate available job or business to occupy the candidate. This is not the case in the Igbo apprenticeship system. In the Igbo apprenticeship system, the apprentice is not only given the business training but also offered financial assistance to begin his own business journey towards greatness. This business character is done not out of any written or even oral agreement but stems from the worldview of *mmadukaejiaka* (he who has people is wealthier than material riches). The concern of the Igbo master is to economically develop the apprentice by producing a reasonable amount of capital that will gainfully employ the apprentice in the line of business he has been duly trained. This is done in the belief that the youth will grow in business and become socially beneficial to his family and the community, all thanks to the master's support. The apprentice is treated in such manner as a son to his master who will grow richer than the master and somewhat offer support to the master as a son does to aged father. It becomes an economic prowess to a master who has produced wealthy men who had served him as former apprentices. They, thus become beneficial to the community and to himself, all things being equal.

*Mmadukaejiaka* philosophy, therefore, expresses that human capacity development is the root of socio-economic development. The Igbo apprenticeship system operates in that philosophy in the belief that the best empowerment given to a family is by empowering their son through apprenticeship. *Mmadukaejiaka* informs that empowerment through material riches to a family is good, but it is best when a member of the family is empowered so as to take care of others. Such empowerment model is believed to be more lasting and sustaining than mere materials. The philosophy is related to authentic personhood of communal co-existence as contended by Obioha (2020). According to Obioha (2020: 111), for the fact that all human being ethnically desires good; "The sense of fellowship, bonding and communion that constitutes and describes community in Igbo traditional thought makes possible the ideals of solidarity and cooperative togetherness that is needed for human well-being". The recognition of personhood on fellow brothers inspires the masters to not only train the apprentices but also to invest on them in order to lead them to the path of human development. The apprenticeship system, thus, not only opens socio-economic relations but also bonds families who may not be of blood relations. Many families in the Igbo tribe have strongly been bonded because of the progress made in human investment through apprenticeship. For instance, many young billionaires in Alaba International market as well as Onitsha main market are known as *UmuBishop*, Bishop being the business name of an Igbo billionaire by name Emma Bishop Okonkwo. He is a business mogul who has produced many well to do

young men in his business enterprise through apprenticeship. Today, those young men who are mostly not from his town address him as their father and as well economically enjoy inbringing up other youths from their respective communities through Igbo apprenticeship system. As Ekekwe (2021) surmised, 'largely, the Igbo apprenticeship system is a practical demonstration of the Ubuntu philosophy- the belief in a universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity.'

### ➤ **Igbo Apprenticeship System, and Nigerian Youth**

Currently, unemployment is one of the great challenges ravaging Nigeria as a nation and its youths in crime. From statistical records, the unemployment rate in Nigeria increased to 33.30 percent in the fourth quarter of 2020 from 27.10 percent in the second quarter of 2020. This is socio-economically dangerous to the nation and the situation has not been improving. Again, the level of national borrowing towards funding capital budgets have continued to increase while the corruption level in the polity incubates bleak future for Nigeria and Nigerian youths.

However, the employment rate is not the same in different states within the country. Data shows that many states like Benue, Zamfara, Jigawa, Gombe, Kebbi and many northern states have unemployment rates of 43.52%, 41.7%, 41.29%, 36.17% and 34.94% respectively. Whereas states like Imo, Enugu, Ebonyi, Anambra and Abia have 25.68%, 21.29%, 21.98%, 16.4% and 15.87% respectively (Varrella, 2021). It is necessary to note that allocation and government empowerment programs from the Federal government are not evenly distributed as South-East region receive very little compared to other regions. Yet, their self-employment in business enterprises both lifts the region from poor standard of living and also from higher rates of unemployment than other states. Lagos is 4.52% which is the least in unemployment rate among the states. In any case, the significant presence of businesses mostly own by Igbos have great employment impact in the state.

These statistical data about unemployment rates is a pointer to impact of self employment and capacity development through private business. As the study shows the exponential impact of Igbo apprenticeship in Nigerian business structure, it advocates for the inculcation of such business practice in other tribes of the nation. The influence of private investment cannot be underestimated in any economic developing clime. Thus, there is need for other business moguls in Nigerian private sectors to take up the system as a medium for direct grassroots empowerment. It is commendable to note that government, through bank of industry and SME packages have worked towards providing empowerment packages to the youths. But the problem is that most of these youth who may have formal education, do not have practical

experiences of the ventures they take up, unlike the apprentices who spend years in the field. As such, some of the apprentices who begin their business life with sums like N200,000 end up building business empires that worth millions and billions of naira, unlike some graduates who cannot manage millions of naira offered for business start up. It therefore becomes necessary for Nigerian government and private investments to look into the Igbo apprenticeship system and possibly partner with some Igbo business men towards human capacity development and empowerment system for the Nigerian youth. Worthy to note in this regard is the empowerment scheme for apprentices currently launched by Hero Lager in October 2021. According to the package, 'the apprentice under the "Igba Boi scheme" and in their final year would be supported with N50 million worth of seed capital, mentorship and business grants' (Fasogbon, 2021). This is a feasible step in the right direction of capacity development and empowerment.

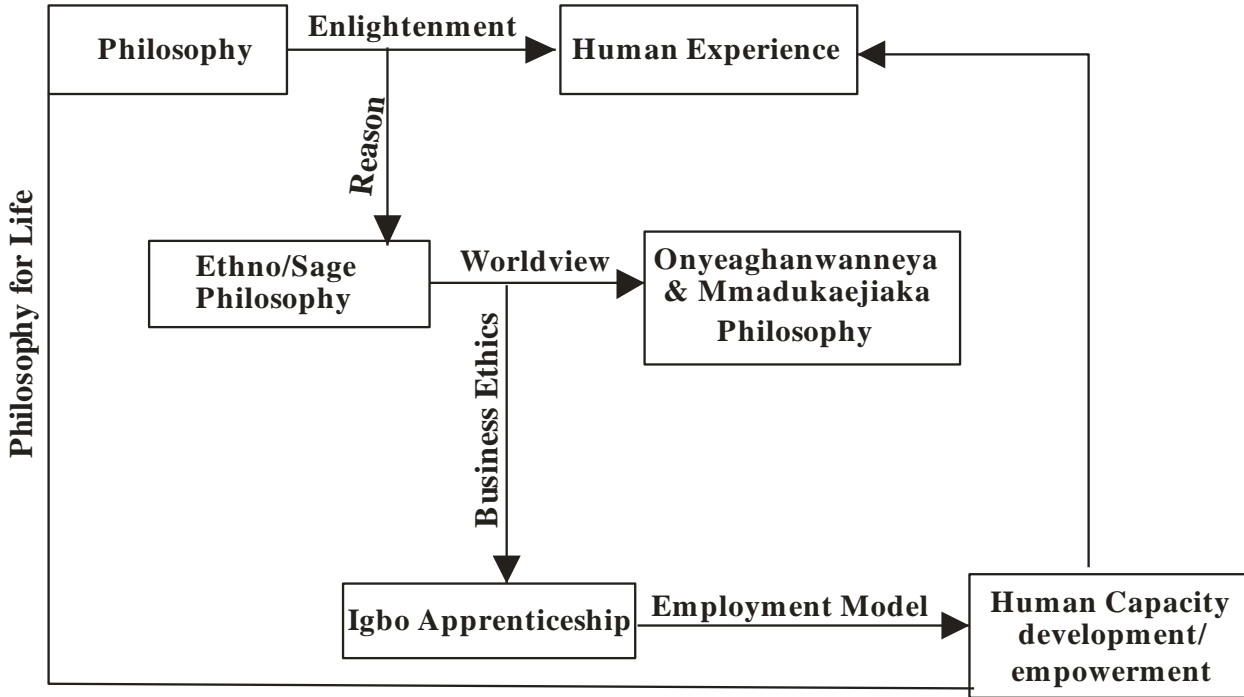
### **Conclusion**

The tenacity of Igbo apprenticeship system in upholding and sustaining Igbo business expansion can be economically understood and developed through understanding the Igbo philosophic economic worldview behind the system. The Igbo philosophy, being part of African philosophy that has ethnological contents, conceives the concepts of *Mmadukaejiaka* and *Onyeaghalanwanneya* from a sagacious perspective. The study thus, argues that the Igbo philosophical interpretation of these two concepts materialize in the Igbo apprenticeship, which though unwritten and informal, has seen to the greater socio-economic development of the region. In a time of great national economic difficulty of unemployment, the system can be of great help when inculcated in the business culture of other regions of the country.

### **Recommendations**

- i. There is need to formalize through written agreements the processes involved in the Igbo apprenticeship system in order to take care of vulnerable apprentices.
- ii. There is need for direct government intervention through following the system adopted by Hero company in assisting the apprentices.
- iii. The Igbo chauvinistic tradition makes it difficult for women to be involved in the Igbo apprenticeship system. Hence, they loose out of such opportunities. Formalized conditions of apprenticeship agreement should be made to accommodate women in the system.

### Diagrammatical Representation of the Study



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