

**THE IGBO APPRENTICESHIP SYSTEM (IGBA
BỌ) AS COLONIAL-ERA ECONOMIC
ADAPTATION: CONTINUITY, CHANGE, AND
RESISTANCE, 1900–1950**

BY

Samuel Chukwudi Ukachukwu

Department of History and International Studies, Imo
State University, Owerri+2348120659857

samuel0706622@gmail.com

Abstract

This article examines the ịgba bọị apprenticeship system among the Igbo of southeastern Nigeria as an institution of colonial-era economic adaptation between 1900 and 1950. Challenging existing scholarship that treats its persistence into the colonial period as mere cultural conservatism, the article argues that ịgbabọị underwent a fundamental transformation under British colonialism, shifting from a craft-based, kinship-embedded mechanism of skill transmission into a flexible commercial training and capital accumulation system that enabled Igbo actors to navigate and resist colonial capitalism. Drawing on colonial administrative records and secondary literature, the article traces the disruption of pre-colonial Igbo economic organization, the

deliberate adaptation of *igbabọj* to commercial contexts from the 1920s, and the emergence of expansive Igbo trading networks anchored in the apprenticeship relationship. The article engages A.I. Nwabughuogu's thesis of middleman decline, arguing that decline and adaptation are complementary rather than contradictory frameworks addressing different levels of Igbo commercial life. Theoretically, colonial *igbabọj* is interpreted through James Scott's concept of "everyday resistance" a systematic subversion of colonial economic logic through the redeployment of indigenous institutional forms contributing to the revisionist literature on African economic agency.

Keywords: *igba ọj*; Igbo apprenticeship; colonial economy; Nigeria; economic adaptation.

Introduction

Among the many institutions that define Igbo social and economic life, few have proven as resilient, as adaptive, or as consequential as the *igbabọj* apprenticeship system. Known by variant names across Igbo-speaking communities *nwa boy* in some districts, the "trader boy" system in colonial administrative parlance *igbabọj* refers to the practice by which young men, and occasionally young women, are placed in the household and business of a more established trader or craftsman, typically a kinsman or trusted community member, to learn a trade

over a fixed period. At the conclusion of this period, the apprentice receives a capital endowment the "settling" with which to establish an independent enterprise. Today, the *igbaboị* system is recognised as a defining pillar of Igbo commercial culture, sustaining business networks of extraordinary reach across Nigeria and the wider African diaspora. Yet its history and specifically its transformation during the colonial period remains surprisingly underexplored in the scholarly literature.¹

The foundational scholarship on Igbo society from Victor Uchendu's pioneering anthropological study of 1965 through Elizabeth Isichei's comprehensive history of 1976 and Adiele Afigbo's reconstructions of Igbo political culture in the same decade treated institutions like *igbaboị* primarily in their pre-colonial or ethnographic dimensions, as markers of Igbo cultural organisation rather than as dynamic responses to historical change.² The management studies literature has partially filled this gap: Adebukola Oyewunmi, Olabode Oyewunmi, and Chinonye Moses's chapter "Igba-Boi: Historical Transitions of the Igbo Apprenticeship Model," published in the Emerald volume *Indigenous African Enterprise* (2020), represents the most sustained existing scholarly engagement with the system across historical periods, documenting its structural features and its role in the post-civil war commercial revival.³ Valuable as this contribution is,

however, it operates within a management studies framework, draws on no colonial archival sources, and does not engage with the resistance literature or the economic agency debates in African historiography. The present article seeks to provide the historical grounding that the management studies literature has not supplied.

The most important prior contribution to the specifically historical study of Igbo commercial life in the colonial period is A.I. Nwabughuogu's 1983 article, "From Wealthy Entrepreneurs to Petty Traders: The Decline of African Middlemen in Eastern Nigeria, 1900–1950," published in the *Journal of African History*.⁴ Nwabughuogu's argument is that the colonial period witnessed not adaptation but decline that Igbo middlemen who had occupied commercially powerful positions in the pre-colonial and early colonial economy were progressively displaced by expatriate firms, ending the period significantly worse off than they had begun it. This article engages directly with Nwabughuogu's thesis, accepting the evidence of commercial displacement that he documents while arguing that his framework of decline misses the institutional innovation occurring simultaneously at a different level of Igbo commercial life. The *igbabo* system was not the mechanism of the established middlemen whose decline Nwabughuogu charts; it was the mechanism through which a new generation of Igbo traders, operating at smaller scales

and through indigenous institutional networks, built the commercial capacity that would ultimately produce the Igbo commercial diaspora. Decline at the level of the established middleman and adaptation at the level of the apprenticeship institution is not contradictory findings; they are complementary dimensions of a complex and internally differentiated colonial economic history.

The argument of this article is straightforward but revisionist in its implications. The *igbabo* system did not simply survive colonialism; it was reinvented by it. Confronted with the economic dislocations of British colonial rule the imposition of direct taxation, the reorganization of trade through expatriate firms, the disruption of indigenous long-distance commerce, and the forced monetization of the Igbo economy Igbo actors responded by adapting *igbabo* from a kinship-embedded craft apprenticeship into a flexible commercial institution capable of operating within and against the structures of colonial capitalism. This adaptation was neither accidental nor passive; it was deliberate, purposeful, and ultimately generative, producing the foundations of the Igbo commercial diaspora that would become one of the defining features of Nigerian economic life by the mid-twentieth century.

The argument engages with three broader historiographical conversations. The first is the revisionist literature on African economic agency in

colonial contexts, associated with scholars such as Sara Berry, Frederick Cooper, and A.G. Hopkins, which has challenged the tendency to portray African actors as passive recipients of colonial economic transformation.⁵ The second is the specific literature on Igbo economic history, including the debates around Igbo migration, commercial organisation, and what Uchendu famously called the "achievement motivation" at the heart of Igbo cultural life.⁶ The third is the theoretical literature on resistance, and specifically James Scott's influential concept of "everyday resistance" the repertoire of small-scale, informal, non-confrontational practices through which subordinate groups subvert dominant structures without openly challenging them.⁷ The *igbabọj* system in the colonial period, this article argues, exemplifies exactly this kind of resistance: not a revolt against colonialism but a systematic circumvention of its economic logic through the redeployment of indigenous institutional forms.

The primary sources for this study include colonial administrative records from the National Archives of Nigeria at Enugu (NAE), encompassing Annual Reports from Owerri, Onitsha, and Awka Divisions for the period 1900 to 1950, supplemented by secondary literature in Igbo history, colonial Nigerian economic history, and African economic history, as well as by the

oral tradition preserved in published ethnographic accounts of the early twentieth century.

The Pre-Colonial *igbabọj*: Origins, Structure, and Social Logic

Any account of the colonial transformation of *igbabọj* must begin with a reconstruction of the institution in its pre-colonial form, for it is only against this baseline that the nature and extent of colonial-era change can be properly assessed. The pre-colonial *igbabọj* system was, at its core, an institution for the transmission of economically productive knowledge within a framework of supervised dependency. A young man typically between the ages of twelve and eighteen would be placed by his family in the household of a master craftsman or trader, often a kinsman, for a period that typically ran between three and seven years. During this period, the apprentice was economically dependent on his master, providing domestic and productive labour in exchange for instruction, shelter, and subsistence. At the conclusion of the apprenticeship, the master was obliged to provide the settling: the capital endowment, tools, starter goods, or money with which the apprentice could establish an independent livelihood.

The social logic of the pre-colonial *igbabọj* was deeply embedded in the broader structures of Igbo society. The Igbo political world, as Uchendu and Afigbo both

observed, was characterised by a republican ethos in which status was achieved rather than ascribed.⁸ The titled man like the ozo holder, the nze, commanded deference not primarily by virtue of birth but by virtue of demonstrated accumulation and generosity. In this context, *igbabọj* served a dual function: it was simultaneously a mechanism for economic mobility (enabling the young man without capital to acquire the skills and resources necessary for adult economic participation) and a mechanism for social reproduction (allowing the established master to build a network of obligation, deference, and commercial loyalty that would outlast the formal apprenticeship period).

The trades transmitted through pre-colonial *igbabọj* were predominantly artisanal: blacksmithing, woodcarving, pottery, weaving, and, in riverine communities, boatbuilding and net fishing. Long-distance trade like the movement of palm oil, yams, livestock, and craft products along the routes connecting Igbo hinterland communities to the Niger Delta coast was a secondary but significant domain of *igbabọj* activity, particularly in communities like Aro Chukwu, whose long-distance trading networks were among the most extensive in pre-colonial West Africa.⁹ It was this commercial dimension of the pre-colonial *igbabọj* that's always present but subsidiary to the artisanal that would prove, under

colonial conditions, to be the institutional seed of a far more extensive transformation.

A feature of the pre-colonial system of particular importance for understanding its colonial-era resilience was the mechanism of communal enforcement that regulated the master's obligations to his apprentice. The master who failed to provide the settling at the conclusion of a completed apprenticeship faced no colonial legal sanction, Igbo communities had no formal commercial law in the European sense but faced something equally coercive: social ostracism and irreparable damage to the reputation that Uchendu identified as the supreme social asset in Igbo life, the *aha mma*.¹⁰ This social enforcement mechanism, rooted in communal accountability rather than state coercion, would prove to be one of the institutional features that made *igbabo* adaptable to the commercial conditions of the colonial period, when indigenous institutions lacked formal legal standing and colonial courts were inaccessible or hostile to African commercial claims.

Kenneth Onwuka Dike's foundational study of trade and politics in the Niger Delta documented the sophistication of pre-colonial commercial organization in the region adjacent to Igbo land, providing important context for understanding the commercial traditions on which *igbabo* drew.¹¹ The Igbo, as participants in the extensive trade networks that Dike described, were not

strangers to commercial complexity; what colonialism imposed was not commerce itself, but a specific and constraining set of commercial conditions to which the igbaboḽ system would prove a particularly effective institutional response.

Colonial Disruption and the Conditions for Adaptation

The first two decades of British colonial administration in Igbo land were, from the perspective of Igbo economic life, a period of systematic disruption. The mechanisms were multiple and interconnected, but three deserve particular attention for their bearing on the igbaboḽ system and its subsequent transformation. The first and most structurally significant was the destruction of the Aro long-distance trading network. The Aro Expedition of 1901–02, in which British forces destroyed the Aro Chukwu oracle and dismantled the social infrastructure on which Aro commercial dominance depended, dealt a devastating blow to the most extensive pre-colonial commercial system in Igbo land.¹² The consequences extended far beyond the Aro themselves: the network of markets, credit relationships, and commercial routes that the Aro had anchored was disrupted across a wide swathe of Igbo land, depriving communities of established channels for participation in the wider regional economy. The commercial vacuum thus created was both a crisis and an opportunity a crisis

for those whose livelihoods had depended on the existing network, and an opportunity for actors with the institutional capacity to develop alternative commercial arrangements.

The second mechanism of disruption was the imposition of direct taxation. Taxation created an immediate demand for cash in communities that had operated primarily through barter and commodity exchange, forcing Igbo producers and traders into the money economy on terms dictated by the colonial state and the expatriate trading firms that dominated the formal commercial sector.¹³ Annual Reports from Owerri Division in the early 1910s document the disorientation this forced monetization produced, recording instances of communities selling food stocks at below-subsistence levels in order to meet tax demands, and of farmers abandoning subsistence agriculture in favour of cash-crop production, often at the cost of food security. The demand for cash was relentless; the channels through which Igbo actors could acquire it in ways that preserved their economic autonomy were, within the formal colonial economy, extremely limited.

The third mechanism was the reorganisation of trade through the Licensed Buying Agent (LBA) system, by which the colonial state channeled the purchase of agricultural produce like palm oil, palm kernels, groundnuts; through agents licensed by and accountable

to expatriate trading firms, principally the Niger Company and, after 1929, the United Africa Company (UAC).¹⁴ The LBA system effectively interposed a colonial regulatory structure between Igbo producers and the external market, restricting the commercial autonomy that Igbo traders had exercised in the pre-colonial long-distance trade. It is precisely this context that explains what Nwabughuogu documented so carefully: the established African middlemen, caught between the LBA system above and the expatriate firms' buying power below, were indeed squeezed into decline. An Annual Report from Onitsha Division in 1914 records the "marked dissatisfaction among native traders" with the licensed agent system, noting that "the Ibos [sic] are a trading people who do not take kindly to interference in their commercial arrangements."¹⁵ The official's observation was accurate; the form that Igbo resistance to the interference would take the institutional reinvention of *igbabo* was what he failed to anticipate.

It is important not to reduce the Igbo response to colonial economic disruption to a simple narrative of victimhood. A.G. Hopkins's seminal analysis of West African economic history urged historians to resist precisely this temptation, insisting on the adaptive capacity of West African commercial actors in the face of colonial restructuring.¹⁶ The Igbo case provides powerful evidence for Hopkins's position. The disruption of the

Aro network, the monetisation of the economy, and the restrictions of the LBA system created conditions that were simultaneously threatening and generative: threatening to existing commercial institutions, and generative of pressure to develop new institutional forms capable of operating within and around the colonial commercial structure. The *igbabọj* system, with its flexibility, its social embeddedness, and its opacity to colonial regulatory oversight, was exceptionally well placed to serve as the vehicle for this institutional innovation.

Transformation under Colonialism: The Commercialisation of *igbabọj*

The transformation of *igbabọj* from a craft-based to a commercially oriented institution accelerated significantly in the 1920s, a decade that coincided with the expansion of the colonial cash economy, the growth of urban centres particularly Enugu, Port Harcourt and Onitsha and the integration of southeastern Nigeria into the broader West African commercial network. The shift was gradual and geographically uneven; manifesting earliest and most fully in communities with established pre-colonial trading traditions, but by the 1930s the commercially transformed *igbabọj* was recognisable across a wide swath of Igbo territory.

The core of the transformation was the extension of *igbabọj* into retail and wholesale trade. Where the pre-colonial system had trained craftsmen in the production of specific goods, the colonial-era *igbabọj* increasingly trained commercial agents in the procurement, transportation, and sale of goods within the expanding colonial market. A young man placed with an established Igbo trader in Onitsha in the 1920s was not learning to make things; he was learning to buy and sell, to navigate colonial credit networks, to build relationships with suppliers and customers across ethnic and geographic lines, to manage the social obligations of the trading household, and to accumulate the commercial knowledge and social capital that would eventually enable him to establish an independent trading operation. The goods traded varied: kola nuts, tobacco, cloth, hardware, foodstuffs, and, increasingly, the imported consumer goods whose penetration of Igbo markets deepened with each decade of colonial rule.¹⁷

What is particularly significant about this commercialized *igbabọj* is the way in which it preserved the social architecture of the pre-colonial system while radically altering its economic content. The master-apprentice relationship, the obligation of endowment at completion, the communal accountability of the master; all of these features were maintained intact. What changed was the economic domain in which the

relationship operated. The effect was to create an institution simultaneously embedded in pre-colonial social norms (and thus familiar, trustworthy, and operable without colonial legal enforcement) and oriented toward the commercial opportunities of the colonial economy. This combination of social conservatism and economic adaptability was the *igbabọj* system's most important institutional achievement.

Colonial administrative records from this period reveal a telling ambivalence in British officials' attitudes toward the transformed *igbabọj*. On one hand, district officers noted with approval the commercial enterprise of Igbo traders and their apparent facility in adapting to the cash economy. On the other, the same officials expressed unease about the Igbo commercial networks forming around the apprenticeship system, detecting in them an institutional infrastructure that operated beyond colonial regulatory reach. An Annual Report from Onitsha Division in 1929 noted, with evident frustration, that Igbo traders were "organizing their affairs in ways that make it very difficult for Government to ascertain either the volume of trade or the terms on which it is conducted."¹⁸ Read against the grain of its official anxiety, this observation amounts to a tribute to the institutional effectiveness of the *igbabọj*-based commercial network. The system's opacity to the colonial gaze was not an accidental feature; it was, as the

analysis below suggests, one of its most consequential forms of resistance.

The role of women in the colonial-era *igbaboị* system deserves specific attention. The pre-colonial Igbo trading world had always included significant female participation, particularly in the local and medium-distance trade in foodstuffs and craft products. The 1929 Aba Women's War (Ogu Umunwanyi) the mass uprising of Igbo women against colonial taxation and the threat to women's economic autonomy demonstrated the depth of women's investment in Igbo commercial life and their willingness to mobilise collectively in its defence.¹⁹

While the formal *igbaboị* relationship was predominantly male in both its pre-colonial and colonial forms, women participated actively in the commercial networks it generated as independent traders, and there is evidence from the 1930s and 1940s of women establishing informal apprenticeship relationships that paralleled the male *igbaboị* in social structure, if not in official recognition.

Sara Berry's analysis of the social dynamics of agrarian change in sub-Saharan Africa offers a useful framework for understanding what the colonial-era *igbaboị* system was doing institutionally. Berry argued that in colonial and post-colonial Africa, access to resources was determined less by formal property rights than by the

ability to negotiate and maintain social relationships, that social networks, in other words, were productive assets of the first order.²⁰

The *igbabo* system was, from this perspective, a highly efficient mechanism for producing exactly the kind of social capital that Berry identified as the critical resource in African economic life: networks of trust, obligation, and mutual accountability that enabled commercial cooperation across distances too great for direct supervision and in conditions too unstable for formal legal enforcement.

***igbabo* and the Making of the Igbo Commercial Diaspora**

One of the most consequential effects of the colonial-era transformation of *igbabo* was its role in driving and structuring the great Igbo migration to urban centres across Nigeria. The historical literature on Igbo migration in the colonial period has emphasised demographic factors (land pressure in the densely settled Igbo heartland), educational achievement (mission schooling producing a surplus of educated young men seeking employment beyond the reach of the local economy), and the Igbo cultural emphasis on individual achievement and mobility.²¹ These factors were real and important. But the *igbabo* system provided the specific institutional mechanism through which migration was

organised, sustained, and made economically productive and its role in this process has received insufficient scholarly attention.

The pattern was as follows. An established Igbo trader in Lagos, Port Harcourt, or Enugu, who had himself completed *igbabo* apprenticeship in an earlier generation and used his settling to build a successful trading enterprise, would recruit apprentices from his home community. The recruitment was typically mediated by kinship and community networks: the trader would approach a kinsman in the home village with a request for a young man to serve as his apprentice, and the community would sanction the relationship as a form of investment in the young man's future and in the maintenance of its commercial connection to the urban trading network. The apprentice would travel to the city, live in his master's compound, work in his master's business, and over several years acquire the commercial knowledge, social connections, and savings that would eventually enable him to establish an independent trading operation, often in a third city, extending the network still further.

The geographical reach of these networks grew rapidly through the 1930s and 1940s. By the late 1930s, Igbo trading communities existed not only in Lagos, Port Harcourt, and Enugu but in Kaduna, Kano, Jos, Maiduguri, and smaller urban centres across the north

and middle belt of Nigeria. A 1942 report from Kano Province, held in the National Archives of Nigeria at Kaduna, noted that Igbo traders had established themselves in several of the city's major markets and were operating through "a network of personal connections that appears to function as an informal credit system."²² The informal credit system the official observed was, in effect, the economic infrastructure of the *igbabo* network, the web of obligation, trust, and mutual accountability that the apprenticeship relationship had established and that sustained commercial cooperation across geographic distance.

The role of the settling the capital endowment provided at the conclusion of the apprenticeship in this process of diaspora formation deserves particular emphasis. The settling transformed *igbabo* from a purely educational relationship into a capital transfer mechanism, enabling the systematic movement of commercial resources from established traders to new entrants in a way that neither the colonial banking system (which effectively excluded most Igbo traders from formal credit) nor the expatriate trading firms (which integrated Igbo actors as subordinate agents rather than independent entrepreneurs) could replicate. A.G. Hopkins's foundational analysis of West African economic history identified the absence of formal credit institutions as a central structural constraint on African commercial

development in the colonial period.²³ What the *igbabo* system provided was precisely the informal credit institution that the colonial financial system withheld: one operating through social rather than legal enforcement mechanisms, and proving remarkably effective in channeling commercial capital to where it could be most productively deployed.

It is worth noting that *igbabo* was not the only indigenous Igbo institution performing this capital formation function during the colonial period. As Nwabughuogu demonstrated in a companion study, the *isusu* rotating credit association among the Ngwa Igbo served a parallel function, enabling communities to pool savings and extend credit in ways that the formal colonial banking system denied them.²⁴

The *igbabo* settling and the *isusu* operated as complementary institutions within a broader ecosystem of indigenous Igbo capital formation a system of informal financial arrangements that constituted, in aggregate, an indigenous alternative to the colonial banking infrastructure that excluded them. The simultaneity of these two institutions is itself evidence for the broader argument advanced in this article: that Igbo economic responses to colonialism were characterized by institutional creativity and multiplicity, not passive acceptance.

The commercial networks built through *igbaboḽ* also demonstrated a significant capacity for what economic historians have described as "relational contracting" the ability to conduct complex commercial transactions on the basis of personal trust and communal accountability in the absence of formal legal enforcement mechanisms.²⁵ The Igbo trader in Kano who extended credit to a fellow Igbo supplier in Lagos was not relying on the colonial courts to enforce repayment; he was relying on the web of communal obligation and reputational accountability that the *igbaboḽ* network had established. The effectiveness of this relational contracting system is attested by the remarkable growth of Igbo commercial enterprise across Nigeria in the 1930s and 1940s, a growth that occurred despite, and in some measure because of the barriers that the colonial formal economy placed in the path of indigenous commercial development.

V. Resistance and Agency: *igbaboḽ* as Counter-Colonial Institution

The transformation of *igbaboḽ* during the colonial period was not simply an adaptation to colonial economic conditions; it was also a form of resistance to colonial economic structures. To make this claim is not to romanticize the *igbaboḽ* system or to read into it a political consciousness of anti-colonialism that its participants may not have articulated in those terms. It is,

rather, to follow James Scott's analytical distinction between resistance as political declaration and resistance as practical subversion, the systematic pursuit of interests and the preservation of autonomous institutional capacity in ways that undermine the effective reach of dominant power, regardless of whether the actors involved conceive of their actions in explicitly political terms.²⁶

The colonial economy in Nigeria was structured to benefit metropolitan interests at the expense of African producers and traders. The Licensed Buying Agent system, the Currency Board arrangements that drained Nigerian surpluses into metropolitan sterling balances and the dominance of the United Africa Company and other expatriate firms in the wholesale and import-export trade all operated to limit the share of colonial commercial gains accessible to Nigerian actors. The *igbabo* system subverted this structure in several specific and interrelated ways.

First, by operating through social networks opaque to colonial regulatory oversight, *igbabo* -based trading networks were able to conduct commercial activities including the circumvention of official price controls and, in some instances, the evasion of colonial licensing requirements that would have been impossible for formally registered commercial entities. The communal enforcement mechanisms that substituted for colonial

legal institutions in regulating the master-apprentice relationship were, from the colonial state's perspective, effectively invisible: they operated through social sanction rather than court proceedings, through community reputation rather than registered contract.

An Annual Report from Owerri Division in 1933 expressed precisely this frustration, noting that "native trading arrangements of the Ibo [sic] are conducted on terms and through channels which Government has found it extremely difficult to monitor or regulate."²⁷ The official's frustration is the historian's evidence: the *igbabo* system's regulatory opacity was not an accidental feature but one of its most important institutional qualities.

Second, the *igbabo* system built autonomous Igbo commercial capacity in deliberate competition with the expatriate trading firms that dominated the formal economy. The Igbo trader who had completed his apprenticeship and received his settling was not inserted into the commercial network of the United Africa Company as a subordinate agent; he was constituted as an independent commercial actor whose economic allegiance was to his own network of kinship and apprenticeship obligation. The aggregate effect of tens of thousands of such individual trajectories across the 1930s and 1940s was the construction of a parallel commercial infrastructure indigenous, informal, and

increasingly competitive with the formal colonial economy in key market sectors.

Third, and most consequentially, the geographical expansion of the Igbo commercial diaspora through *igbabọj* networks created facts on the ground that complicated the colonial state's ability to manage the Nigerian economy according to its preferred model. The presence of well-organised Igbo trading communities in every major Nigerian city by the 1940s was not the result of colonial planning; it was the unintended consequence of the *igbabọj* system's capacity to generate and sustain commercial migration across vast distances. Colonial officials could regulate the formal economy; they could not easily regulate the movement of young Igbo men responding to the social and commercial logic of an institution that predated colonialism by generations and operated entirely outside colonial legal frameworks. Frederick Cooper has argued that the most significant forms of African agency in the colonial period were often those that exploited the spaces and opportunities created by colonial change without directly confronting colonial power.²⁸ The *igbabọj* system exemplifies this kind of agency with unusual clarity. Don Ohadike's study of Igbo resistance to British conquest in western Igbo land documented the range of strategies from armed confrontation to passive non-compliance through which Igbo communities responded to colonial imposition.²⁹

The commercial resistance embedded in the *igbabo* system belongs to this same repertoire of response, though it has received far less scholarly attention than the more dramatic forms of anti-colonial action. Scott's concept of "weapons of the weak" the everyday practices through which subordinate groups resist domination without exposing themselves to the full force of reprisal is directly applicable here.³⁰

The young Igbo trader who entered an *igbabo* apprenticeship in Onitsha, learned his trade in the spaces between the formal colonial economy, and eventually established an independent commercial enterprise in Kano was not articulating a political programme of anti-colonialism. But in building autonomous economic capacity outside the structures of colonial commercial control, he was doing something that had the functional effect of resistance: preserving indigenous institutional autonomy and enabling the reproduction of an economic culture that the colonial system had sought, by design or by inadvertence, to subordinate.

It is equally important, however, to acknowledge the limits and internal contradictions of the *igbabo* system as a form of resistance. The system was not, and never became, an egalitarian institution. The master-apprentice relationship was, by its nature, a relationship of power asymmetry one in which the apprentice's dependency was real and sometimes exploited. There are accounts in

the oral traditions of various Igbo communities of masters who extracted labour from apprentices over extended periods without providing adequate instruction or fair settling, and the communal enforcement mechanisms that were supposed to check such exploitation were not always effective. The system reproduced, alongside commercial solidarity, the hierarchies of gender and seniority that structured Igbo social life more broadly. To celebrate *igbaboị* as resistance without acknowledging these internal inequalities would be to romanticise rather than to historicise it.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the *igbaboị* apprenticeship system underwent a fundamental transformation during the first half of the twentieth century, evolving from a craft-based, kinship-embedded institution of skill transmission into a flexible commercial training and capital accumulation mechanism that served as the primary institutional engine of Igbo economic resilience in the colonial period. This transformation was driven by the specific conditions of British colonial rule in Nigeria, the destruction of pre-colonial trading networks, the forced monetization of the Igbo economy, and the dominance of expatriate firms in the formal commercial sector and it was achieved through the deliberate

adaptation of indigenous institutional forms to new economic circumstances.

The argument engages directly with Nwabughuogu's influential thesis of middleman decline in colonial eastern Nigeria. Nwabughuogu was right to document the displacement of established Igbo middlemen by expatriate commercial capital; but his framework of decline addresses only one level of Igbo commercial life. The *igbabo* system was operating at a different level, producing not the established middlemen whose decline Nwabughuogu charts, but the next generation of independent traders who would, by the 1940s and 1950s, have reconstituted Igbo commercial presence across Nigeria at a scale and with an institutional depth that the pre-colonial middlemen had never achieved. Decline and adaptation were simultaneous, complementary, and both genuine.

The argument also reframes our understanding of the extraordinary post-colonial Igbo commercial presence across Nigeria and the global diaspora. The remarkable commercial reach of the Igbo did not emerge from some primordial "Igbo commercial genius," as popular and even some scholarly accounts have sometimes implied. It was built, institution by institution and apprentice by apprentice, through the colonial-era transformation of an indigenous institution that had the resilience, the adaptability, and the social depth to survive and flourish

under conditions that destroyed many of its institutional peers.

Finally, the *igbaboi* case invites historians of colonial Africa to look more systematically at informal institutions, those that operated in the spaces between colonial formal structures and pre-colonial social organization as sites of both economic production and political resistance. The formal colonial economy has been extensively studied; the informal institutional world that African actors built alongside it, in response to it, and sometimes against it, has received far less sustained historical attention. The *igbaboi* system of colonial-era Igbo land is one of the more illuminating windows into that world. As Scott reminded us, the most consequential forms of resistance are often those that leave the least visible trace in the official record, which is precisely why recovering them requires the kind of patient, multi-source historical reconstruction that this article has attempted.³¹

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