

THE ROLES OF THE NIGERIAN CHURCH TOWARDS PROMOTING IGBO APPRENTICESHIP SYSTEM

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Abstract

The study examines “The role of the Nigerian Church in the promotion of Igbo apprenticeship system”. The economic state and progress of Igbo land and that of Nigeria on the whole were built on the sacrifices and efforts of the missionary societies. The research is an intertwine of historical survey and a vivid attempt to describe people’s experience or reality. By methodology, it employs a qualitative historical and phenomenological analysis using archival documents and academic literature. It looks at the various roles by the missionary agents from the colonial era towards the development of education and skill acquisition. The focus of these foreign Christian missionaries was adopting formal education as the foundation for other development. Skill acquisition and trading formed also was another major of

interest. The Church through these vital roles has remained important to the growth of Igbo apprenticeship system. This paper further investigates other possible ways the modern Nigerian Church can support the traditional model of apprenticeship in Igbo land. It highlights these essential complementary roles which include: serving as middlemen, mediation, sponsorship, reconciliation, follow-up, guidance and counselling, seminars and business coaching. The research thus underscores the transformative potentials of Christianity while offering recommendations for increased presence and impact of Igbo apprenticeship scheme.

Keywords: Church, Igbo apprenticeship system,
National development, Missionaries.

Introduction

Christianity played significant role in the development of Nigeria. As a religious movement, Christianity influenced human conduct and functioned as agent of transformation. The life, public ministry and teachings of Jesus Christ inspired the outstanding impact of the church so far. Nigeria in its contemporary state has benefitted immensely from essential activities of the church. Christianity as a religious institution is with a complex of practical, sociological and experimental dimensions. It is distinguished by its characteristic objects; salvation and ingenuity in giving meaning to life. Asadu (2021) avers that Christianity began in Nigeria through the activities of various evangelical bodies from Europe, whose amazing feat of missionary endeavours became fruitful in the 19th century.

Christianity has penetrated every stratum of the Nigerian society.

The impact of the church in Nigeria as mentioned above is ranged from education, politics, social justice, healthcare, welfare, spiritual, moral and skill development (Ukpe and Gbinde, 2022; Aluko, 2020). Evidently, the transformation to its modern face was championed by the Christian missionaries. Fafunwa (1974) remarks that earlier; the missionaries introduced formal Western education and established the first schools in Nigeria. Furthermore, Aigbovia, Oraiya and Fatukasi (2024) add that Christianity has played role in social cohesion, advocatin for ethical governance and reducing societal inequalities.

Igbo apprenticeship has served as an indigenous practice of the Igbo people. It has formed a vital part of their cultural, moral and economic personality of the people. Although it grew even more popular after the Nigerian-Biafran war, it has continued to foster entrepreneurial spirit. Igbo apprenticeship scheme is in dire need of revitalization. It is an important practice that can sustainably salvage what is left of the Nigerian economy. Allowing this system to decline further will endanger the economy and escalate poverty and unemployment in Igbo land. Christianity in Igbo land has had a formidable track record of human capital development. In recent times, those roles of the church are needful in situating some essential rudiments of the Igbo economy. Most of the recommended contributions of the Church are rather complementary. They are roles reserved mainly for the foundational part of every society, the government.

Promoting Igbo apprenticeship would be of benefit to the individuals, church and the general society.

Conceptual Clarification

Church: The word church originates from the Greek root “ekklesia” meaning the Assembly of God’s people. Louw and Nida (1996) aver that the word *ekklesia* typically refers to the Hellenistic legislative body. In the New Testament, it denotes Christian congregations, both individually and collectively. Morris (2018) notes that *ekklesia* indicated the self-consciousness of the early Christians, who saw themselves as the continuation of what God had begun in the wilderness with the nation of Israel called together by the proclamation of the gospel for the purpose of belonging to God. For him, the church established on the Pentecost day in Acts 2 is but an extension of Genesis 12, where God called Abraham and his descendants. The establishment of the church also follows Jesus’ commissioning of his disciples (Matt. 28: 18-19). Consequently, the church(s) founded by Jesus and those further planted by the evangelical activities of Paul (Rev. 1: 11) were to remain as the light of the world. Otasowie (2025) identifies the church as a religious institution that installs patriotism and acceptance of current arrangement of power. The Church with its sacred books, clergy, and worship and constitute a social institution. In fact, the church is agent of socialization and the custodian of spiritual needs of the society. A church generally accepts the norms and values of society and sometimes regards itself as the guardian of the established social order.

Igbo Apprenticeship System: This is a stream of the variants of traditional apprenticeship systems in Africa. Igbo apprenticeship system known as *igba-boi* is particular to the Igbo people. This system is recognized as one of the foremost proofs that entrepreneurial sustainability and success does not solely depend on formal education and skill acquisition. Lauding the achievement and impact of the scheme, many have come to describe it as the largest business incubator in the world because of its far and fast reaching spread by the Igbo people. Notably, this economic model of skill, job and wealth creation has reduced significantly in many southeastern states of Nigeria. The practice is a traditional community-based method of wealth creation. Igbo apprenticeship reflects that strategic model for economic growth and sustainability. Basically, the economic model inculcates traditional/cultural values while transferring skills, knowledge and values from one generation to another.

Onu and Agu (2021) describe the system as a process whereby a successful business person, as a way of enhancing business expansion and/or altruistically giving back to the kindred or community, informally contracts an apprentice to learn a trade or craft under agreed terms and conditions. It is one of avenues where young persons are equipped with relevant skills over a period of time for business and general recommendable human conduct. This is so because the apprentice is required to live with the master in the process of his learning while doing extra-curricular activities such as house chores and running errands. Ekekwe (2023) maintains that it is a form of collective entrepreneurial framework where

successful entrepreneurs nurture others. It is a model for stakeholder capitalism. At the end of the training, the professional support the young enterprise with seed capital and also give up some part of their clientele and thus market share. Chukwuka and Agbele (2024) add that “The cycle continues as the mentees go on to train, advise, launch businesses for additional young apprentices under their guidance” (p. 87). Atueyi and Mabnefo (2025) assert that “This community partnership ensures the training of new generations of successful business people” (p. 426).

Christianity and National Development in Nigeria

Nation-building and development is the art of fostering development and unity of a nation in order to establish a cohesive and working society. It further involves promoting socio-economic development and shared national identity amongst the members of the communities. For every developing society to achieve amiable development, it must embrace the quest as a necessity. Also, it must address its concomitant challenges. Since the 19th century, Christianity has been a major contributor to the development of Nigeria. Christian missionaries in Nigeria have played a major role in the development of the nation. Ajah (2015) notes that Christian missionaries influenced the emergence of indigenous leaders or nationalists in Nigeria who in turn advocated for Nigeria’s independence.

Other areas of their impact in national development and building of Nigeria includes: education, human capital development, agriculture, urban development, politics,

public health, social services, social justice, national language, governance e.t.c. More so, Ayandele (1966) affirms that in Nigeria, the missionaries were also instrumental in addressing social issues such as slavery and harmful traditional practices. The missionaries went further to provide education and shelter to the freed slaves in mission settlements like Abeokuta and Badagry. According to Aluko, Adeleye and Olakanmi (2025):

The church is also evolving in addressing contemporary social issues such as poverty, gender inequality, and environmental sustainability. Many churches, particularly those affiliated with global networks, have increasingly incorporated poverty alleviation programmes into their ministries.... Integrating SDGs into church ministries is another contemporary trend that reflects the church's evolving role in national development (pp. 111-112).

Early Christian Missionary Efforts in Skill Acquisition and Trainings in Different Vocations

Generally, Afigbo (1999) observes that the missionaries in Igbo land made enormous impact in educational and economic development and as well the overall urbanization and building of Igbo land. Historically, the earliest missionary societies and groups in Igbo land had set the examples. The core of many missionary organizations was to make permanent impact using education. Egwuonwu and Mgbemena (2019) discuss some of the areas the missionaries have contributed to Igbo land. They include: urbanization, Igbo language

studies, western education, economic system, and raising a breed of Igbo nationalists/leaders. Concisely, Iwunna, Nwankwor and Opara (2026) say that:

The catholic Mission's engagement in secondary school education in Igbo land was a positive, dynamic, and forward-looking investment. The educational enterprise helped to create the necessary conditions for imparting valuable skills to young school graduates and provided the intellectual tools that prepared them for entry into higher educational institutions. By providing this level of education, the mission created opportunities for youth empowerment, wealth creation, job generation, the reduction of indolence and unemployment, a decrease in crime and criminality and meaningful contribution to community development (p. 102).

Likewise, Okafor (2014) similarly claims that the Spiritans led by Fr. Shanahan from the earliest period of their mission in Igbo land maintained education as a system more than a matter of learning the white man's language and arithmetic. It is for this reason that the congregation also established trade schools at this early stage of the mission. The early education at this infantile stage was mostly made up of slaves or the rejected of the society. Later, it witnessed the influx of the free-born, including the sons of notable men in the Igbo society. Further, citing Nnabuike, Okafor (2014) mentions that the trades taught at the Onitsha Catholic workshop reached five by 1899 and included carpentry, shoe-making, tailoring and so on. The progress of the trades

school was particularly to the credit of the Brothers, especially Brothers David Doran, Barnabe Kurtz and Geronce. Christianity in Igbo land in the recent times has continued to make critical efforts and further progress to expand its influence in Igbo land. Fundamentally, the church compliments government's attempts by promoting the acquisition of different skills.

Continuous Impact of the Nigerian Church through Igbo Apprenticeship System

In the presence of scarce resources and increased cost of quality education, the church can engage in further promotion of skills. These skills are particularly important at least for those with some level of literacy. This engagement into soft skills could generate other sources of income for individuals. They could be useful also for those without any source of earning. Apprenticeship system is one of the primary skills learning method recommended by the Church. The programme has proven its depth than other organized and formal skill acquisition means. Its impressive qualities mark it out significantly. The more personalized training approach and business acumen acquired through Igbo apprenticeship is usually more beneficial to young entrepreneurs.

First, the vital role of the church is provision of subsidized or affordable basic education. The church since the arrival of various missionary groups in Igbo land has made efforts at educating the people. Egwuonwu (2025) avers that western education made emphasis on literacy and religious instruction which

facilitated the spread of Christianity and fostered new elites. Okafor (2014) further insists that a good educational background contributed immensely to the various achievements of Igbo people in various fields of endeavour. This includes; academics, technology, politics, management and entrepreneurship. Basic education at primary and secondary school levels are of enormous help to many Igbo traders. The knowledge of basic spelling and calculation was very useful for many of the primary school leavers turned traders or professionals. The value of education for business is well recognized by many of the less educated traders. Some of them have returned back to part time formal education. Reputably, those run by the missionary churches in Igbo land have been of immense help to business people with little or no education.

On the other hand, formal skill acquisition trainings may be more practical to those not interested in local businesses and trading. Igbo apprenticeship though is informal is holistic and meticulous in transferring essential business know-how for economic advancements. Anigbogu, Onwuteka and Okoli (2019) affirm that “In addition to skill acquisition, apprenticeship also offer guidance, counselling, often involving trainees living with their masters to learn necessary mindset, negotiation skills, behaviour and decorum required for the job through a process of acculturation. The journey of the apprentice necessarily ends in his receiving of capacity support from his mentor/master. The capital and support are extended to him to enable the apprentice establish his own enterprise and become a master (Eze, 2023). In a significant way, it

is the key that church encourage as much as willing young individuals to consider Igbo apprenticeship.

In addition to this, the Church can provide services of guidance and counselling for the young entrepreneurs. Guiding them towards making good choices in their career and business is imminent for their success. Apprentices and young entrepreneurs starting up on their own are expected to be equipped and prepared to manage certain crises, challenges or issues that could arise in their business and family life. Individuals who seriously require such attention can thus receive such help through the Church. They can thus get mentorship, guidance, direction and counselling in difficult moments. Guidance and counselling are life changing process and outcome can make or mar the life of an individual or in this case the young apprentice/entrepreneur yet to fully make sense of these emerging difficulties. This process must therefore be handled with care.

Further, the church could serve as middle man in the selection or the choosing of mentors for young boys. Selecting a good and experienced professional is sometimes not easy for parents or guardians. Parents are becoming cautious of whom to release their children for training. The worry often is primarily whether the businessman is of reputable character. Increasing rate of exploitation and maltreatment of apprentices have further raised this concern. These parents fear that their children may not be settled by some crafty businessmen after long years of service. Noble members of the laity whose values and character are trusted by the clergy could be suggested to the parents. When this introduction

between the two parties is executed, it is left for the parents to carry out further investigations. Informed decisions leading to the actual apprenticeship contract could be birthed by such intervention. Conversely, honest and morally sound youths in search for means of earning living could be recommended for genuine businessmen. This vital role would help in connecting these individuals in the church community.

Additionally, the church as a distinguished moral agent in the Nigerian society contributes towards the building of a moral conscious individual. The Christian ethical values impacted by the church are aimed to foster moral consciousness and instil these values. The values are to be lived out on day-to-day life most especially. Onwuatuegwu (2020) notes this failure of the church and moral decadence is a cankerworm that has eaten deeply into the main fabrics of our society. It is evident that the auspicious growth of Christianity and multi facet groups has not reflected in Nigeria. Onah and Agbo (2021) argue that, “Notwithstanding, the geometrical increase in churches, other vices have remained unabated in the country” (p. 88). The character and lifestyle of many rather, depicts addened depravity of morality. Apparently, the church has a responsibility to advance more in her role of establishing moral values. Increased efforts must be made towards actualizing a community of saints.

Furthermore, Christianity in Nigeria has another essential role to play in re-shaping Igbo apprenticeship. The church has a task of forming support group and network for local entrepreneurs. The Catholic Church

has set a remarkable example with the Young Catholic Professionals (YCP) for entrepreneurs and professionals. The organization was formed in 2010 by Jennifer Baugh. Young Catholic Professionals has brought many young people across different field together with the aim of “Work in witness for Christ”. The organization provides a supportive community, professional development and spiritual guidance. The simplest goal of the organization is to found a congregation of like minds. This organization in the Catholic Church however active it has remained over the years needs more presence in the grass root.

Similar structure or organization could especially be formed by other Christian denomination in Igbo land. The essence of such group would be bringing together professional or entrepreneurs including those in the informal sector. More so, encouraging young aspiring entrepreneurs to join such organization would make it easy for access to seasoned businessmen. Experienced Christian business leaders preferably could mentor the young people in such groups. These organizations are the easiest place for networking and exchange of business ideas. At the same time, it affords the members opportunities for spiritual guidance and work-life balance. The social events and workshops organized by such grassroots support system create conducive environment for business and faith growth.

On the whole, the church can engage in more reconciliation and advocacy programmes. It is possible for the church to mediate in some instances of misunderstandings between Christian apprentices and

their masters. The church has chances of influencing favourable policies through government agencies. The collective voice of the church as the conscience of the state and moral authority is stronger and more meaningful in this way. The Church could hence challenge unjust exploitation that discourages many people from enrolling into Igbo apprenticeship. The abuse of Igbo apprenticeship especially by several notorious and unscrupulous masters has since remained unbridled. As a part of church-community relations, the church as a body can provide avenues for these young entrepreneurs who were fraudulently cheated out by their masters. Legal aid ministry or clinics through local parishes can help many masters and apprentices. This would be a thoughtful way for the church to re-echo its voice for the people and Igbo apprenticeship.

Conclusion

It is established in this paper that the Church has played significant role in the development of Nigeria. The contributions of the church to education in Igbo land has broadened into other social areas of life such as politics, health, economy and moral systems. The success of Igbo apprenticeship as a unique system of the people needs all the support it can garner for its growth and sustenance. This is evidently the church should fully take up its place in task of repositioning Igbo apprenticeship by fulfilling these essential roles. The church leaders through Christian teachings and moral codes foremostly stand as a moral voice for better human conduct and character. Therefore, standing as a valid agent of mediation and reconciliation will ultimately salvage the

decline situation of the scheme. Further, creating avenues for guidance and counselling, business seminars and coaches will bridge certain limitations caused by disconnection from modern business trends, tools and knowledge. II

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