

# From Igbo Streets To Harvard Strategy

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Research Publication By [Prof. MarkAnthony Nze](#)

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**What elite business schools now celebrate as mentorship, experiential learning, incubation, networking, and venture-building has existed for generations in a distinctly African form: the Igbo apprenticeship system. Known widely as Igba Boi or Imu Ahia, it is one of the most consequential indigenous enterprise systems in modern Africa. To dismiss it as mere “street smartness” is to miss the sophistication of what is actually taking place. This is not casual hustle. It is commercial education, delivered outside formal classrooms, tested in live markets, and designed not simply to create workers but to produce owners (Irene et al., 2024).**

Still, precision matters. Harvard did not literally copy the Igbo apprenticeship model. That claim would be exaggerated. But the comparison remains intellectually compelling for another reason: many of the principles now formalized in elite entrepreneurial education closely resemble practices that Igbo commercial communities have refined through lived experience over decades. The point, then, is not plagiarism. It is parity. A system born in Nigerian markets embodies ideas that top institutions now package as innovation, leadership, and venture formation—only with different language, better branding, and far more global recognition.

At the heart of the system is a structure that is both simple and profound. A young apprentice is attached to an established trader or manufacturer, often called an oga, for a period commonly described as lasting five to seven years, although arrangements vary. During that time, the apprentice is not merely observing from a distance. He is immersed in the actual mechanics of commerce: stock management, customer relations, supplier networks, pricing, negotiation, and market timing. In many cases, the master also assumes responsibility for food, shelter, and basic welfare. Then comes the decisive moment—“settlement”—when — when the apprentice is given start-up capital, stock, or both, to begin an independent enterprise of his own (Irene et al., 2024).

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That final stage is what makes the system so remarkable. Unlike ordinary labor arrangements and many contemporary internships that end with little more than experience, the Igbo model is explicitly designed for entrepreneurial reproduction. The aim is not endless service. The aim is transfer. A successful trader is expected, in time, to create other traders. Wealth is circulated through mentorship and release rather than trapped in one generation. The apprentice is not trained merely to support a business; he is trained to become one. That is why the system deserves to be understood not as folklore from the street, but as a serious indigenous architecture of business formation.

Recent scholarship helps explain why it has worked so effectively. Irene et al. (2024), writing on entrepreneurial learning in the Igbo Apprenticeship System, argue that the model relies heavily on mimetic learning: learning through observation, repetition, participation, and gradual internalization. That insight matters. In elite institutions, experiential learning is often simulated through incubators, consulting projects, labs, and case competitions. In the Igbo apprenticeship system, there is no simulation. The learner encounters difficult customers, supply uncertainty, price instability, debt pressure, and reputational risk in real time. The market itself becomes the classroom, and consequence becomes the method of instruction.

This is why the phrase “street smartness” is both tempting and inadequate. Yes, the system produces commercial instinct: the capacity to read people, identify opportunity, endure volatility, and negotiate under pressure. But instinct here is not random improvisation. It is trained judgement. It is built through repetition, discipline, social hierarchy, and accountability. What appears informal from the outside often reveals a deep internal order when viewed from within. The apprentice is learning not just how to sell but also how to evaluate trust, protect reputation, manage turnover, extend credit carefully, and survive in low-margin, high-risk environments (Irene et al., 2024).

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Its wider economic significance is impossible to ignore. Nigeria's MSME economy is vast. The National Survey of MSMEs reported more than 41.5 million MSMEs in the country as of 2017, while later reporting based on the NBS/SMEDAN 2021 survey states that MSMEs account for 96.9 percent of businesses, 87.9 percent of employment, 46.32 percent of GDP, and 6.21 percent of exports (NBS and SMEDAN, 2017; PwC, 2024). These figures do not suggest that all such enterprises emerged from the Igbo apprenticeship system. They do suggest something broader and more important: any low-cost, socially embedded, durable mechanism capable of producing entrepreneurs at scale deserves far more national and scholarly attention than it usually receives.

Its influence is especially visible in southeastern Nigeria. In a 2024 study published in *Cities*, Isiani et al. describe the post-civil-war Igba-boi system as central to the transformation of Onitsha into a thriving urban economic hub through human capital development. That observation is historically significant. After the Nigerian Civil War, many Igbo families were left with little capital and limited state support. Yet through networks of trade, mentorship, and settlement, they rebuilt commercial life from below. In that setting, apprenticeship was not just a business custom. It was an instrument of social recovery—a way of reconstructing mobility, dignity, and economic possibility after collective devastation (Isiani et al., 2024).

Nnewi offers an equally powerful example. As the Ellen MacArthur Foundation (2021) notes, the Nnewi automotive cluster began as a local apprentice scheme spread across the town's four quarters and is now estimated to generate 80 percent of all locally fabricated automotive spare parts in Nigeria. The same report states that the Suame and Nnewi clusters together provide employment for more than 30,000 people and handle over 560,000 tons of automotive materials annually. Even allowing for the caution needed when interpreting cluster estimates, the larger point remains unmistakable: apprenticeship in this context does not simply train individuals; it can seed whole industrial ecosystems.

This is where the comparison with elite institutions becomes most revealing. Harvard and other top schools teach frameworks for venture growth, network formation, learning-by-doing, and the conversion of knowledge into enterprise. The Igbo apprenticeship system has long practiced comparable principles in a less protected and far more unforgiving arena: the open market. Its language is different. Its methods are informal. Its credentials are unwritten. Yet its internal logic is sophisticated. It turns observation into competence, competence into trust, trust into capital, and capital into new firms. That is not folklore. It is enterprise design.

None of this means the model should be romanticized. Like many informal systems, it has real weaknesses: legal vulnerability, uneven conditions across sectors, disputes over settlement, and the difficulty of modernizing without destroying the social bonds that make it work in the first place. Irene et al. (2024) and Isiani et al. (2024) both point, directly or

indirectly, to the importance of understanding the system not as perfect, but as powerful—effective, yet in need of stronger safeguards, better documentation, and more thoughtful policy engagement.

The larger lesson is unsettling for anyone who assumes that knowledge becomes legitimate only after it is filtered through Western institutions. The Igbo apprenticeship system demonstrates that sophisticated economic reasoning can emerge from kinship, necessity, and market practice. It shows that what is often dismissed as “street wisdom” may actually be compressed business theory—embodied rather than abstract, practiced rather than lectured, and transmitted through labour rather than slides.

So the deeper story is not that Harvard invented street smartness. It is that the world has been slow to recognise intelligence when it appears in African form. The Igbo apprenticeship system transformed hustle into mobility, mentorship into enterprise, and market participation into intergenerational wealth creation. It made the street a school and the apprentice a future proprietor. That is not an accidental tradition. It is one of Africa’s most significant business innovations, and it deserves to be studied not as a curiosity at the margins, but as a serious model of entrepreneurship, development, and economic design.

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