

## **THE PHENOMENON OF 'IGBA OSO-AHIA' IN IGBO ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN A MODERN INDUSTRIAL SOCIETY**

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**ABSTRACT:** Evidences have proven that even the existential challenges the Igbo faced such as the Civil War could not deter them from known entrepreneurial spirit and excelling in entrepreneurship and this is palpable in every economic activity they have engaged and engaging in. Rather one of the innovations brought into the marketplace, a practice known in local parlance as *igba oso-ahia*, is the reason the entire group have come under serious opprobrium. This paper thus x-rayed the activities of Igbo traders in the typical marketplace in order to improve market exchanges and reposition the group. It adopted the ethical value system and community service approach made popular by Shapero and Sokol (1982), and others; and interviewed some randomly selected Igbo traders and elicited the opinions of some enlightened Nigerians in major markets in Abuja, Lagos and Port-Harcourt. At the end, it found that while it may have been a coping method to survive the post-civil war times and the anti-people policies of successive administrations in Nigeria, and even the outright marginalization of the group, the practice is presently odious and attracts serious resentment of the Igbo. It is not only hurting market exchanges and the economy but also the reputation of the group in a highly diverse and complex nation. More still, if the practice is considered tolerable in earlier times, it is out-rightly anachronistic and an anathema in modern industrial society. It therefore calls on Igbo traditional institutions, town unions, and others, for total jettisoning of the unwholesome practice. In addition, government and market authorities should ensure that right compliances are maintained in the marketplace.

**Keywords:** Marketplace, Market Exchanges, Entrepreneurship, Igbo Traders, *Igba Oso-Ahia Na Apriko*

### **INTRODUCTION**

From time immemorial, the Igbo of Nigeria are known for their entrepreneurial spirit and genuine entrepreneurship. So, it is widely acclaimed that enterprise and hard work are major genetic traits in the DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid) of the typical Igbo man or woman. It is therefore not surprising that they are established in every sector of the national economy and beyond including agriculture, commerce, transportation, household goods, oil and gas, communication, property and real estate, banking and insurance, technology, electronics and aviation, among others.

Even the existential challenges known to have been faced by this group did not deter them from excelling in entrepreneurship. Some of these include the Second World War (WWII) between 1938 to 1945; the Nigerian Civil War of 1967 to 1970; the post-war #20 Pounds Saga that deprived all Igbo entrepreneurs of their hard earned savings; the Abandoned property Saga that confiscated all Igbo property; the Indigenization policy of the Gowon and

Obasanjo administrations in 1974 and 1976, respectively; and other government policies and programmes including privatization, importation policies and even port reforms.

These challenges not only left the whole Igboland dislocated and desolated but also disenfranchised and destroyed the economic activities of the people especially entrepreneurs. But instead of demoralizing the Igbo, they trudged on. For instance, relieving the experiences of Igbo people after the Civil War, Chief Mbazulike, Nigerian's first aviation minister in 1961, as cited in Udeze (2011: 18) observed that to keep body and soul together, so many went into different petty trading, scavenging and other menial jobs like truck pushing, motor loading (*ocho passenger*), gutter and toilet cleaning (*onye-oburu*), among others. From these menial jobs, most of them saved money enough to establish businesses and other thriving economic ventures.

They were not deterred. After all these major hiccups, the Igbo bounced back, surviving through self efforts, entrepreneurship and the presence of the marketplace. Since then, they have shown resilience, doggedness and perseverance, and even brought several innovations in the marketplace to survive and promote their enterprise. One of such is *igba oso-ahia*, which literally translates to 'running errands in the marketplace to earn some cash rewards'.

But while this practice, as a coping method, aided struggling Igbo traders to some extent and assisted the growth of entrepreneurship in the formative stage of development up till the pre-millennium years, or better still, the pre-Globalization era, it seems to have become anachronistic and an anathema in modern entrepreneurship realities, and by implication, in modern industrial society.

From instance, it seems that lately, even when entrepreneurs from that group are widely hailed to be hardworking and enterprising, Igbo entrepreneurship have come under serious opprobrium essentially due to the very visible *igba oso-ahia* by Igbo traders in the marketplace. This portrays the traders as cunning, dishonest and untrustworthy.

And in the long run, it seems to be affecting the group's reputation and relationship with other groups who seem to be looking at the entire Igbo with suspicion. Unfortunately, this suspicion of the group due to market exchanges seems to be permeating into other areas such as politics and leadership.

This work therefore tried to x-ray the activities of Igbo traders in the marketplace against the backdrop of its impact on the state of market exchanges and the economy, and in particular, on the reputation of the Igbo which these traders represent. The overall intention is to reposition the Igbo and enhance entrepreneurship development.

Thus, it proposes a dialectical relationship between *igba oso-ahia* and modern industrial society. As a practice in the marketplace, *igba oso-ahia* is not only a manifestation of the inadequacies in Igbo entrepreneurship but also the general economy, in a modern industrial society. Conversely, the modern industrial society not only exposes the ills in *igba oso-ahia* but also places a burden on Igbo entrepreneurship to improve and be more responsible to the economy and the entire society.

With the adoption of the ethical value system and community service approach made popular by Shapero & Sokol (1982), complemented by the cultural theory of Williams (1961) and

Thompson (1963), and socialization theory of Weber (1948) and Fukuyama (1995), this paper explored some historical records and also elicited the opinions of some Igbo traders and enlightened Nigerians in the three major markets in Abuja, Lagos and Port-Harcourt.

There is therefore need to jettison this unwholesome practice in the marketplace in order to improve market exchanges, reduce inflationary spiral, add value to the national economy and meaningfully reposition the Igbo group in a highly diverse and complex Nigeria society.

### **Conceptual Clarification**

*i. Igba Oso-Ahia:*

*Igba oso-ahia*, is an Igbo phrase that literally means, *running errands in the marketplace*, is an activity that goes with another word, *apriko*, which expresses a trader's intention to exploit unsuspecting buyer. Thus, in the marketplace parlance, *igba oso-ahia na apriko*, literally and succinctly captures and expresses the practice by some Igbo traders in the typical market setting who solicit for customers but intentionally inflate the price of the commodity the unsuspecting buyer sought for. Here, even those who do not own shops pose as shop owners and convince the unsuspecting buyer to pay for a commodity in another trader's shop, at a higher selling price.

Initially, when the phrase evolved, it was not so. Then, it was purely a coping method where young struggling traders who sometimes have no shops or wares of their own, canvass for buyers so that the owner of the shop or wares will give them commissions, at the end of the day, to keep body and soul together.

Here, we may recall the contributions of Robert Merton (1968), the renowned American sociologist, on the concepts, function and functionalism. In his explications, while manifest functions (intended consequences) are those whose consequences the actors or participants (market participants, in this case) are aware of; latent functions (unintended consequences) are the ones they are not aware of. Moreover, the great scholar concluded by noting that the latent functions may or may not be generally beneficial, in the long run.

Thus, appropriating from Merton, while assisting both the seller to increase sales (of course for a small commission or change for the errand boy) and the buyer to purchase the required commodity as conveniently as possible, may be regarded as the manifest function of *igba oso-ahia*; *apriko* easily becomes the latent function of *igba oso-ahia*.

Again, questions have risen on the difference between the phenomenon of *igba oso-ahia* and touting. It is important to clarify that while it is not exactly touting, which is always seen in the body of laws as an illegality anywhere it is practiced (Hornby, 2020: 1658), *igba oso-ahia* is seen as a part and parcel of normal marketplace activities.

So, for market participants, especially the traders involved, there is nothing wrong with this practice in the marketplace where, as traders, their status confers on them the *Magna Carta* for mischief making and economic recklessness. This is not forgetting the misconceived posturing of the key principle of capitalist economic system that stipulates *laissez fairism*, where private businesses are allowed to thrive without government control. Any wonder the

British Conservative politician, Michael Hasseltine (1988) once noted that ‘the marketplace has no morality’.

Arguments have also emerged on the propriety or otherwise of *igba oso-ahia* in the marketplace. Some proponents have consistently insisted on the philosophy of the market system whose major article extols the principle of *laissez fairism*, where the traders are free to will and deal without hindrance and government control. Here, traders feel they are free to do anything in the marketplace, to make profit. Yet, others have argued that traders who engage in this practice are merely middlemen who are very necessary in the exchange system.

But we know that there are lots of government controls in the capitalist economic system superintended marketplace, directly or indirectly. For instance, there are price control boards, and consumer and environmental protection agencies, among others.

In the same vein, we are conversant with the roles of middlemen whose primary responsibility is to break the bulk of the producer or supplier and to make sure goods get to the final consumer as conveniently and quickly as possible.

However, on the face value, there may be nothing wrong with this practice given the numerous reasons and excuses for it. When it started, probably in the early seventies, it may have been expedient given the numerous challenges faced by the traders at that time. And the practitioners may have been very conscionable in going about it. But, as years go by, the practice may have metamorphosed into something else and incurred several abuses by the traders, especially from the nineties when the effects of several anti-people policies and outright marginalization of the Igbo and the challenges presented by capitalism, came to fore.

So, while the practice may have been considered tolerable in earlier times, it is out-rightly anachronistic and an anathema in modern industrial society that is built on very strong work ethics. On a closer consideration, it shows the irresponsibility of the traders not only in their interactions and relationship with intending buyers but also the tendency to inflate the prices of commodities and create inflation in the general economy.

#### *Theoretical Foundation of the Phenomenon of Igba Oso-ahia*

Historically, available records may point neither to the exact time the practice emerged nor to the events that conspired to introduce it into Igbo entrepreneurship. But events that emerge within the general economic space may have led to its emergence especially as a strategy to cope with and cushion effects of the unending economic challenges of the highly innovative capitalist economic system captured by Marxists as ‘the crisis of capitalism. This is in addition to undue pressures traders faced (and are facing) in the marketplace such as excessive taxations and undue levies and fines. This is not forgetting the post-civil war challenges, the incessant anti-people policies and programmes, and the out-right marginalization of the Igbo by successive administrations in Nigeria.

Theoretically, *igba oso-ahia* as a practice, naturally evolved in an Igbo region that expresses and lays great emphasis on enterprise, creativity, innovativeness, and more especially has strong apprenticeship system. In this area, individuals engage in one economic activity or the other; and families encourage their young ones to embrace entrepreneurship through

involvement in the existing apprenticeship system. Hence, budding traders imbibe the spirit of humility, service and value creation, and made to be responsible early in time.

Apparently, the Igbo are a people found on an arable land with good climates, and so they depend much on agricultural practices and trading. Thus, they rely so much on the marketplace which provided the first opportunity for participation in the economic process (Asika, 2003).

Another characteristic typical of the Igbo group that made entrepreneurship and marketplace not only indispensable but one that find appreciable expression is the existence of extended family system with its face to face exchange pattern and high sense of hospitality, friendliness, tolerance and interaction that strengthens social relationships (Ezeanata, 2008).

#### *Epistemological Basis of Conceptual Controversies*

As most concepts and phrases in every clime, the phrase *igba oso-ahia* presents and elicits its own controversies. Though an old practice, individuals, traders, other market participants, and even scholars and intellectual differ in their understanding and explanation of the subject matter to the extent of their subjectivism, arbitrariness, eclecticism and ahistoricism.

To begin with, *igba oso-ahia* as a practice evolved from a group out of the very many ethno-linguistic groups that constitute the present Nigerian nation. Hence, the whole idea and meaning of the practice may be misconstrued due to the lack of deep understanding and interest of the Igbo language.

The next reason may be ideological as it is well known that individuals who are ideologically opposed to an idea may trivialize it. In this case, those who are opposed to the idea of a marketplace in capitalist economy like Nigeria, or even to the whole idea of the entrepreneurial spirit of the Igbo group, may not be fair in treating the practice.

But whatever the case, these myriads of explanations are healthy as they unwittingly lead to better understanding of the practice. And without wasting much resources on this point, it is pertinent here to reiterate the advice of Adam Smith that ‘an analyst need not be more precise about a phenomenon than is necessary’.

However, the following submissions need to be made here for the benefit of this study. First, the phenomenon of *igba oso-ahia* does not require further researches or evidences to understand its intricacies, intended and unintended consequences (Merton) in the marketplace. Secondly, an x-ray of the structure and function of the phrase, *igba oso-ahia*, not only reveals its intrinsic value but also the social value placed on it. Apparently, it is not out of place in Igbo cosmology that useful or cherished words or phrases come with heavy sound stresses (Okoye, 2017: 25). In addition, according to Odiaka (2011: 3) such terms start with a vowel that usually produce vibrations in the vocal cord. So, with its flair as a regular practice, the phenomenon of *igba oso-ahia* signifies not only a regular practice but also a very crucial one in daily market exchanges.

Finally, as it is revealing, the practice seems to be resulting to something else in present times. So, an x-ray of the age-long *igba oso-ahia* phenomenon is critical now not only for the benefit of market exchanges and the economy but also for the Igbo group. Across all regions

of the county, the marketplace is very critical and important in the lives of every member of society. As such, what happens in the market affects in more fundamental ways the lives of everybody and every other thing in the general environment.

*ii. Market participants:*

This term connotes all individuals or persons that are not only usually seen in the marketplace but also have one thing or the other to do in the marketplace, whether legitimate or not; and in fact depend on the marketplace for their daily activities and survival. This represents the category of persons or everyday people that are usually seen in the market place and not necessarily those that engage in buying and selling. Market participants include buyers, sellers, market masters, unions or association officials, official and unofficial government agents, hangers-on and touts, and urchins.

In other words, the modern marketplace is not a place for only buyers and sellers but for other categories of persons who benefit from such transactions by the fact of their presence in that setting. It is more appropriate to use the term, market participant, than the word, *traders*, erroneously used in common parlance to refer to all persons found in the marketplace but now seen to be inadequate, and has been overtaken by time and events.

It is important to note that the presence of these mentioned categories of individuals not only add to the huge population *in situ*, but also put more pressure on market exchanges and the market environment. This has implications on the existing spaces for transactions and interactions, and even on safety and security considerations.

In this almost a state of rowdiness and commotion, buyers troop into the market to transact. So, it becomes very imperative to use proxies and middlemen in the name of those who run errands. This is where the phenomenon of *igba oso-ahia* comes in. Traders who are not so lucky to have the required goods, are readily available to assist those buyers who want to be assisted, to get the commodities from other shops. Other hangers-on who have no shops but stay around to eke out their daily income are also there. Thus, *igba oso-ahia* literally became enshrined as a practice to get over the bustle and hustle instigated by the huge population found at a time in the typical marketplace.

As to whether the practice will be expunged or not, is left for the future. After all, as social realities usually prove, nothing stays the way it is; change is the only permanent thing in life. And philosophers once informed that nature abhors vacuum. So, without any claim to gift of clairvoyance, the practice of *igba oso-ahia* may someday experience change or be replaced.

*iii. Modern Industrial Society:*

In simple terms, a society is a relatively large, relatively autonomous collection of people with common heritage who interact with one another. It is therefore a group of people who occupy a particular space and also share common identities, customs, laws, and so on. In spite of their diversities, Nigerians are a people with shared identity and common heritage. As Africans, they have identifiable features, distinct cultures and traditions.

In that vein, an industrial society clearly describes that which displays the characteristic feature of industrialism which includes the universal application of scientific methods to

problem-solving and the capacity for increased wealth creation compared to traditional societies (Scott & Marshall, 2005: 622). In sociological studies, an industrial society is a society driven by the use of technology and machinery for increased mass production and support for increased large population and division of labour ([www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com)).

On the other hand, the concept, modern, evokes a nostalgic feeling for the concept of traditional, or even classical or old (Hornby, 2020: 1006). Thus, it not only seeks to understand the traditional or classical but also tries to reveal areas of improvement, progress, advancement, and more importantly, correctness.

Therefore, a modern society is highly dynamic as it is driven by great learning, scientific knowledge and technological innovations. It is a society that has achieved very high rationality, and special form of cooperation based on division of labour and very strong work ethics. Thus, it is a society that continually seeks for innovation and improvement.

So, no matter how conceived, the Nigeria society, is a member of the comity of nations and very strong participant in the global system. With her numerous resources, both human and natural, the country has strong footing as a key player in world affairs especially economic matters, and thus contributes to the development of the global economy.

### **Igbo Entrepreneurship**

Located in the southern part of Nigeria, specifically in the south eastern and south southern regions of Nigeria's six regional configuration, the Igbo people are one of the three major ethnic groups among the existing three hundred and seventy-two ethnic language groups that make up Nigeria, as a country (Otite, 1995). Thus, they are described as one of the tripods on which the Nigerian nation stands.

Blessed with abundant human and natural resources, including rich flora and fauna, wonderful climate and clement weather; and covering an area of about 41,000 square meters (Kujenya, 2008) and with an estimated population of 30 million people, according to the 2006 census head count, with an annual growth rate of 0.29 percent (NPC-FGN Gazette; 2007), the Igbo is found in the following states of the Nigerian federation: Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo. Also included are some parts of Akwa-Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross-River, Delta and Rivers States. This number, of course, excludes Igbo sons and daughters in Diaspora.

Though found in different states of the Nigerian geo-political setting (and so there could be discernible language and cultural differences), researchers and scholars have unanimously identified their common language and cultural pattern, and therefore identified them as a community of people who are unified by a common language irrespective of local variations (Asika (2003: 2).

Invoking the concept of culture area made popular by Wissler, an anthropologist, to highlight and explain the sameness of a people, a renowned anthropologist, Onwuejeogwu (1987) described the entire Igboland as a geographical area occupied by peoples whose cultures exhibit a significant degree of similarity with each other as well as a significant degree of dissimilarities with cultures of others.

In another vein, it has been stressed and evidences abound to suggest that entrepreneurship play critical role in the economic development of any given society (Oputu; 2007:37). Thus, it is referred to as the eternal option of humanity to objectively address the unemployment saga. This is the reason every nation takes the issue of entrepreneurial skills development very serious.

Entrepreneurship ranges from solo ventures or projects, even involving the entrepreneur only part time, to major undertakings; and there are many shades of entrepreneurship. There is economic entrepreneur, social entrepreneur, religious entrepreneur, etc. Some people erroneously equate entrepreneurship to only large scale business ventures but as Yunus, the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize winner, rightly informed us, “there is an entrepreneur in all of us”.

In all, evidences have continued to suggest that Igbo are a people endowed with so many qualities as they are equally imbued with great potentialities. The Igbo society is also described as egalitarian, republican and the people known for their enterprise as they have been glowingly describes as creative, innovative and dynamic, among other qualities. According to Ottenberg (1959; 135-139), “*the Igbo are highly individualistic people... A man could become rich through the skillful use of farming resources.....trade and use of lands*”. The people of this area are therefore not noted for idleness, and in the words of Echeruo (1979; 12), “every one contributes something meaningful to the common stock”.

However writing about this geographical zone has never been an easy task. Researchers both past and present, who have engaged in studies of the race agree to this fact. They included among others Green (1949), D’Forde & Jones (1950), Ottenberg (1959), Isichei (1976), Nzimiro & Eteng (1978), Nzimiro (1985), Onwuejogwu (1987), Asika (2000), Eteng (2004) and Ogbuagu (2006). Unanimously, these works agreed that the group is such a power-packed, interesting and appealing one that no time will ever seem to be enough for any exhaustive research of the people.

It is pertinent to note however that the Igbo are peoples found on the area where the vegetation is rapid and rainfall, heaviest, almost although the season. Here, there is in existence, arable land and good climate and therefore, it is a geographical area of the country that supports heavy population. This underscored why the economy of the region is sitting pretty well on agricultural practices, farming, trading and local (cottage).

So, in Igboland, skills such as wood carving, black smiting, wrought iron, among others, were rife. These skills were put into the production of tools such as hoes and knives for use in the farm; and products such as palm oil (and palm kernel) to produce soaps, fuel, lubricants and illuminants.

In other words, farming boomed and this encouraged the growth of skills, the production of tools and products; while these in turn, encouraged farming and agricultural activities. Thus, due to its sustenance by land and agricultural products, the Igbo society relies heavily on the marketplace for effective exchange and consumption.

This means the marketplace is regarded as an essential organ of the community in Igboland. Just as Otite and Ogionwo (1985:311) opined that a “*people exploit their social and physical resources in order to survive in their environment*”, the idea of the marketplace in Igboland came up as the desire to fill-up a special need of the community arose.



However, there are different interjections that conspired to hamper socio-economic progress of the Igbo people particularly between the Second World War (II) till date. So many scholars have done incisive works and reports on Nigerian experiences even from way back in the inglorious Atlantic slave trade, colonialism and the Christianizing mission, and the evitable Nigerian civil war. Great works such as Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and the various rich and incisive Ahiajoku Lecture Series (from 1979 to 2008) are worthy examples.

For instance, the Nigerian civil war left the whole Igboland dislocated and desolate. The gradual but steady desertion of Igboland was a direct response to the near irreparable damage done to the economic system especially. Consequently, the region lost its economic activities, entrepreneurial skills and even the marketplace. Production and exchange were disrupted, pushing so many people to other unworthy economic ventures for survival. In the long run, the region started witnessing an increasing rate of unemployment, unwholesome behaviours and other vices, among other things.

In addition, and over the years, economic policies of successive administrations in Nigerian have not generally favoured the majority of the population. They are seen as highly discriminatory, anti-people and minimally functional, and most times, outright marginalization of particularly the Igbo.

Some of these include the effects of the Second World War (WWII) of between 1938 to 1945; the Nigerian Civil War of 1967 to 1970; the post-war #20 Pounds Saga that deprived all Igbo entrepreneurs of their hard earned savings; the Abandoned property Saga that confiscated all Igbo property; the Indigenization policy of the Gowon and Obasanjo administrations in 1974 and 1976, respectively; and other government policies and programmes including privatization, importation policies and even port reforms.

This, of course, is not forgetting the pressure of social imperatives placed on every average Igbo youth due to the fluid extended family system in place. That is social imperatives as contributions to family up-keep, school fees, medical bills, transportation fares, accommodation bills, expenses for community and social functions, contributions to burial rites, marriage rites, and all other responsibilities facing a young person in Igboland. The question is, how would one meet up with all these competing demands in the face of numerous challenges especially when the general environment is usually not conducive?

But in the face of these existential challenges, the Igbo were not deterred. They bounced back, surviving through self efforts, entrepreneurship and the presence of the marketplace. They have relied heavily on the marketplace which provides the first opportunity to participate in the economic process. And since then, they have shown resilience, doggedness and perseverance, and even brought several innovations in the marketplace to survive and promote their enterprise. One of such is *igba oso-ahia*.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This work did not intend to delve into all the gamut of Igbo cosmology nor engage unnecessarily in the explications of Igbo apprenticeship and entrepreneurship system. Also, it did not spend meaningful space in the explication of those known existential challenges the Igbo have faced and are facing in Nigeria. It simply zeroed-in on an aspect of market

exchanges and in particular, on the consequences of the practice usually observed in the present marketplaces in Nigeria, popularly referred to as *'igba oso-ahia'*.

With a cursory excursion into the vicissitudes of Igbo entrepreneurship in the country, from the threshold of the First Republic in Nigeria through the Post-Civil War challenges, to the succeeding Second, Third and the present Fourth Republic that started since 1999, this paper tried to reveal the challenges Igbo entrepreneurs, typified by the ordinary trader in the marketplace, faced and are still facing in Nigeria.

The researchers interviewed some randomly selected Igbo traders doing their businesses in purposively selected three major markets outside core Igbo enclaves, specifically Abuja, Lagos and Port-Harcourt; thirty (30) from each. These markets were not only considered very big in size and daily attendance but they also play host to market participants from the different parts of the country and beyond. However, irrespective of the huge population in these markets, the researchers considered the traders as a homogeneous group due to their orientation, character and even *modus operandi*.

Also, this work relied on the opinions of informed Nigerians from across the country who were some of the market participants found in these markets. There were thirty (30) from each of the markets. This is not forgetting the experiences of a participant observer which this author assumed in the course of carrying out this study. On the whole, one hundred and eighty (180) respondents, all market participants, were involved in the survey.

In addition, this work adopted the ethical value system and community service approach made popular by Shapero and Sokol (1982), which tries to suggest that entrepreneurship seems to prosper in societies where members of society view it with a favourable attitude and where cultural factors encourage it. This is complemented by the cultural theory, made popular by Williams (1961) and Thompson (1963), and socialization theory of Weber (1948) and Fukuyama (1995), which respectively tries to understand the dynamics of a cultural setting, and ways individuals learn to conform to their society's norms, values, and also acquire skills to enable them adapt and play some roles. It is however important to note that though these theories are silent on how social forces will conspire to spark-off the interest of individuals towards entrepreneurship, they successfully achieved their purpose as theoretical orientations.

Evidences suggest that the Igbo region, due to its natural endowments of arable land and good climatic conditions, support great agriculture and farming, trade and economic exchanges; while on the hand, individuals promote the growth of entrepreneurial skills through encouragement of apprenticeship system which Asika (2003) referred to as 'the Igbo university of business'.

Apparently, the Igbo are known to be hardworking and enterprising, and a group that not only values entrepreneurship and wealth creation but also exhumes so much energy in economic matters that earn financial rewards and add value to self and society. Thus, since *'igba oso-ahia'* is evolved as a coping method to survive the numerous existential challenges the Igbo have faced, they may not have envisaged or anticipated any negative outcome nor aware that it will hurt their reputation and even the entire state of the economy. After all, what was important (and still is) was that the traders were breaking even and surviving in the economic space.

**The Phenomenon of *Igba Oso-ahia* in Igbo Entrepreneurship in a Modern Industrial Society**

Evidences abound to suggest that the geographical location of the Igbo area within the rainforest region boosted agricultural practices and the production of several cash and food crops. This in turn encouraged the production of more goods and the emergence of entrepreneurial skills like weaving, pottery, carving, and so on (Eteng, 2004).

However, the successes recorded by Igbo entrepreneurs over a long period of time, before the British colonizing mission up till the post-independence era, were noted to have been greatly hampered and nearly washed away by the devastating effects of the Nigerian civil war that ended in 1970; the vicissitudes of the innovative capitalist economic system; the anti-people policies and programmes of successive administrations in the country and outright marginalization of the Igbo. Thus, the practice of *igba oso-ahia* in Igbo entrepreneurship became a natural fall-out in response to these numerous existential challenges entrepreneurs especially traders in the typical marketplace, were facing.

Initially, when it started, traders concerned were mindful of their positions in the market. That is, they were only concerned in making small cash to eke out a living and survive the persisting harsh economic times. But as time went on, and as the socio-economic conditions continued to worsen, the practice at the same time evolved to something else. And presently, it has metamorphosed to a level where traders actually exploit unsuspecting buyers, and therefore the practice is widely considered as odious.

This is more so happening in the modern industrial society that represents a stage in social development where the society is considered to have achieved great dynamism, and individuals have come to terms with great opportunities and meaningful living standards. In this stage of development, there are no half measures, and everyone is aiming towards excellence and perfection.

In addition to their entrepreneurial spirit, the Igbo are also known to be a highly mobile people. This is easily seen in the way they traverse every nook and cranny of the. Here, in Nigeria, they are found in every space of the entire geophysical setting. From east, west and north of the country, they are seen as strong market participants in the marketplace.

In the words of Doyin Okupe, a former adviser to former president Olusegun Obasanjo, and as cited in Asika (2003), 'the Igbo represent the most mobile and adaptable Nigerians that can be found anywhere there are human settlement...'. Ezeanata (2008:23) went further to describe the group 'as a great people of adventure'.

Without doubt, other tribes or regions in Nigeria have always hailed the Igbo for their energy, enterprise and hard work. But presently, these accolades may not obliterate their cautious indignation towards Igbo entrepreneurship that has come under serious opprobrium essentially due to the very visible *igba oso-ahia na apriko* by Igbo traders, in the marketplace. Hence, this practice that is perceived as 'sharp practice' in the marketplace portrays the traders as cunning, dishonest and untrustworthy.

Today, it is not out of place, in a friendly conversation between the Igbo and individuals from other regions to hear comments, whether in English or Pigeon, like 'Igboman like money',

‘Igbomen too get sense’, and so on. These comments go a long way to portray the group in bad light, suggesting that they are cunning and untrustworthy in economic relations.

In time, this thinking has permeated into the system and has even metamorphosed to the stereotyping of the entire Igbo even when not all members of the group are traders. Some individuals from other regions of the county have elevated this thinking to outright resentment and denial of the Igbo region of its statutory rights and positions, and attainment of desired political ambitions.

At this point and across the three markets, the researchers sought the opinions of respondents. They interviewed ninety Igbo traders, and elicited information from ninety informed Nigerians through copies of questionnaires. Altogether, one hundred and eighty respondents participated in the survey.

Here, so many questions were posed namely: Are you conversant with the phrase, *oso-ahia* (people that run errands) in the market? Do you know that some people pose as middle men and run errands in the market for buyers? Have you ever bought anything in the market through a middleman (*igba oso-ahia*)? Is the practice beneficial to sellers and buyers? Have you benefitted from the practice? What is your impression of the practice? How has the behaviour of traders in the typical marketplace affected their relationship with buyers? How have the anti-people policies and programmes of successive administrations in Nigeria including outright marginalization of the Igbo affected the group? What is the perception of the Igbo by other groups in Nigeria? How can the Igbo group reposition itself in the Nigeria society?

At the end, one hundred and seven-two (172) or 95.56% of respondents confirmed their knowledge of *igba oso-ahia na apriko* practice in the marketplace; one hundred and twenty-one (121) or 67.22% affirmed that they have employed the services of middle men several times in the market; ninety seven (97) or 53.89% agreed that the practice (*igba oso-ahia*) is beneficial to both buyers and sellers; while one hundred and seven (107) or 59.44 noted that the huge population, and the shuffle and bustle in the market is the reason the use of a middleman is imperative.

Continuing, one hundred and forty-seven (147) or 81.67% of the responses agreed that the issue of marginalization of few groups in Nigeria is a reality and went ahead to opine that the Igbo group have been overtly and covertly marginalized by successive administrations in the country. Also, one hundred and three (103) or 57.22% of respondents easily confirmed that continued display of the unwholesome practice, *igba oso-ahia na apriko* in the marketplace is not only antithetical to healthy market exchanges and the entire state of the economy but also capable of attracting serious odium to the Igbo group.

In addition, it was revealed that the trust problems affecting the Igbo group may have emanated from the group’s relationship with other groups and this is easily manifest and visible in the typical marketplace. Other groups seem to be very wary of the Igbo, and therefore becoming very difficult to relate and interact with the group, especially in economic matters. This issue of trust, they argued, may have also affected the group’s share of the nation’s commonwealth and national cake, and other accruing benefits particularly the group’s efforts at attainment of the highest political office in the land, the presidency of this great nation.

## Conclusion

No doubt and overtime, the Igbo have established themselves as a very enterprising and hardworking people in Nigeria. Any wonder they are established in every sphere of human endeavour including agriculture, commerce, transportation, telecommunication, oil and gas, and aviation, among numerous sectors.

They have also shown to be very resilient, dogged and persevering. Their experiences and challenges, and survivalist tendencies particularly after the Nigerian civil war and other debilitating experiences, and anti-people policies and programmes of successive government in Nigeria, have proven that.

In the face of all these existential challenges, they have trusted the economic system and relied on the marketplace to contribute to the growth of the economy and the development of the country. They have equally evolved several coping methods and one of such is *igba oso-ahia*, an Igbo phrase that concisely describes the habit of some traders who run errands in the marketplace in order to make some cash from buyers.

But while this practice may be expedient at the time it emerged, given the numerous reasons and excuses for it; and also there may not be anything wrong with it, initially, given the fact that the practitioners may have been very conscientious in going about it; presently, it may not only be hurting market exchanges and the economy but also the reputation of the Igbo in a highly diverse and complex nation. So, while it may be considered tolerable earlier on, it is now considered as problematic, and even an anathema in modern industrial society that is dynamic, and has achieved very high rationality and special of cooperation based on division of labour and strong work ethics.

Let the Igbo be bold to say the truth like *Ikwighi-kwighi*, the Owl. When asked to comment on his son, he agreed that though he sired him but that he is still afraid of his son's head. *Igba oso-ahia* assisted Igbo traders no doubt but there is need to take a second look at the practice and any other negative practice in the marketplace in order to not only ensure healthy market exchanges but also to better reposition the Igbo group in modern industrial times.

Prof. Anya once advised the Igbo to discover the Igbo soul. Entrepreneurship is a veritable aspect of the Igbo soul. And as it is said, the bush that abhors baskets should not grow mushrooms. Apart from interactions in the marketplace, if the Igbo desire to play with other groups in the 'Big League', aspire to the presidency, the highest political position in the land, they will avoid anything that tarnishes their image.

This paper therefore calls on Igbo traders to jettison *igba oso-ahia* as it is problematic. In its stead, they should evolve better ways to serve the general public, particularly buyers in the marketplace. In addition, it calls on Igbo traditional institutions, politicians, administrators, town unions, women and youth groups, religious bodies, and others, to mount serious enlightenment programmes for total rejection of unwholesome practices in the market. In addition, government and market authorities should ensure that right compliances are maintained in the marketplace for healthy market exchanges and the overall economy.

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