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Traditional Apprenticeship in the Old Africa and Its Relevance to Contemporary Work Practices in Modern Nigerian Communities

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Author's contribution

This work was conceived and carried out by the author only.

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ABSTRACT

Unemployment is one of the major challenges facing Nigeria's process of development. Various attempts had been made to improve the employment situation especially among the youths with little or no result. This paper therefore discusses how Nigeria can adopt, restructure and improve on one of her traditional heritages: traditional apprenticeship to improve the employment situation among the youths, early school leavers and graduates of the formal school system in the country. The paper also discusses the problems facing practice of apprenticeship in Nigeria and suggested the way forward. This discourse concludes that using traditional apprenticeship to productively engage idle and unemployed youths would not only create employment and enhance technological advancement; it will also impact positively on issues of security in the country.

Keywords: *Traditional apprenticeship; old Africa; contemporary; work practices; Nigerian communities.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

The work system started almost with the creation of man. The early man started his life in a very crude manner but as time went on, he learns how to influence his environment to meet his needs. He invented various instruments such as stone axe, making fire by striking two hard stone together and later bow and arrow with which he kills animals for food. With gradual development in the process of influencing his environment to suit his purpose, the early work types such as hunting, farming and smiting started. When man started spreading over the land with increase in population through procreation, issues of tribe and the family system started to emerge with a particular work type attached to each tribe or family. For instance the earliest Jewish tribes and the Arabs were known to be Shepherd. In Nigeria, the three major tribes were known to favour such works as farming, hunting, divination, fishing etc all these are the early work type ever known in this part of the world.

As tribes and family gradually become established, each family soon became to be known to engage in a particular type of work that soon became a monopoly of such family. For instance, among the Yorubas in the South West of Nigeria, there are for example, the hunters' compound (Ile Oluode), Diviners' compound, (Ile Oluawo) Drummers' compound (Ile Onilu) etc. It has thus been established by scholars that the type of work engaged in by a group of people is an integral part of their culture. As part of the culture, [1] observed that the work system in the traditional society was handed down from one generation to the other through the process of indigenous education. Learning itself, according to [2] had always been with man from the beginning. Expertise in the family work was considered as loyalty to the family. The process of skill acquisition then was from father to son.

There was no established system of skill development for the Youths. [3] observed that all learning activities were integral part of the indigenous education learnt through observation, imitation and constant practice. The idea of organized and progressive training was not known. The Youths then were compelled to learn the family work as opportunity to learn work outside one's family was almost not available i.e apprenticeship system was not known.

In the African Traditional Education system according, to [3,4], functionalism was the guiding principle. The focus of the education which includes the work system was a preparation for adulthood. The education emphasized job orientation and moral values among other things. The method was purely practical. It involves participation in activities such as faming, fishing, weaving, carving, knitting etc. The objectives of this training system [1] noted were mainly to produce an individual who was skilled, cooperative and could conform to the social order. In the modern society, these vocations are mostly run through the apprenticeship system. The children are usually sent to specialists for training especially when such job is not the family work.

With the penetration of the Europeans into Africa, many new types of jobs that were the result of industrial revolution in Europe were introduced to the Africans. New fields such as Painting, Mechanic, Bicycle repairing, Driving, Printing etc become known. As a result of increase in awareness through civilization, the era of family monopoly of a particular work type started to be a thing of the past. The idea of choosing job outside the family started to gain prominence. Thus, parents started sending their children and wards to people who are skilled in such job chosen by their children for onward training. This period marked the beginning of apprenticeship system in Nigeria.

2. PRACTICE OF APPRENTICESHIP SYSTEM IN INDIGENOUS NIGERIAN COMMUNITIES

Apprenticeship is the process of learning/skill acquisition through enlistment with a master craftsman. It is a method of developing craftsman. In Nigeria, for instance, before the colonial administration, [2] noted that the principal form of education for going into any occupation or profession was through the apprenticeship system whereby a young person was apprenticed to a master craftsman who taught him the skill of a vocation and after many years of learning, he was allowed to start his own workshop or business.

In the European countries, particularly Britain, the apprenticeship system was a descendant of the craft guild system of the middle age. In America, [5] observed that the apprentice generally lived in the home of the master craftsman to whom he was indentured and received no wage but simply was given his own room, board and clothing. In the indigenous Nigerian communities, the apprentice, in addition to not receiving any wage, was expected to help his master on the farm and do other domestic work for his master's family outside the craft he has come to learn.

The process of apprenticeship system in the traditional society started with the child chosen a career of his/her choice with the approval of the parent after consultation with the oracle. When this had been done, the child would then be enlisted with a master craftsman of the parent's choice. Such craftsman has the choice to accept or reject such potential apprentice. On the acceptance of such apprentice, the term of agreement will be sealed by the parent and the master craftsman. This oral agreement usually cover issues like duration of apprenticeship, residence of the child during the period of apprenticeship (whether the parent's house or master's house), feeding and other welfare schemes.

In the traditional apprenticeship system, there is usually no established curriculum or formal procedure for the acquisition of skill. The apprentice only learns through observation, imitation and trial and error method. The apprentice learns on the job by direct instruction and could be punished for making silly mistakes. The apprenticeship system in the traditional set-up was not restricted to artisanship alone. It was the vehicle for instruction in healing, law, carving, rituals and so on. It was a loosely organized system where the craftsman who is the instructor is free to run his programme as he pleases, even where such freedom on the part of the master craftsman is at a disadvantage to the learner. [1] observed that the apprenticeship system does not encourage questioning or offer of suggestion by the apprentice. The master craftsman teaches and establishes his authority on learning and the learner in an autocratic manner. Also there are no standard regulations guiding the process, except what the master craftsman sets.

The traditional apprenticeship system in the indigenous Nigeria involves hardship, commitment and discipline especially on the part of the apprentice. Success or failure of the apprentice really depends on the master craftsman and endurance, patience and determination on the part of the apprentice. The extent of skill, knowledge and expertise acquired also depended on how much the master himself know.

The age of apprentice often range from 9-40 though, [1] noted that majority are always between 12-25 years. The duration of apprenticeship vary from vocation to vocation and graduation depends on how fast the apprentice catches up with the rudiments of the vocation and performance on the Job; including good moral and commitment to the master and the vocation. The essence of the apprenticeship training is on learning and not the

teaching process. The master craftsman only evaluates, the learning process, on the basis of performance of specific tasks of the vocation.

At the completion of the training, to the satisfaction of the master craftsman, the apprentice is set free after meeting the conditions attached to the training and the freedom ceremony which is usually organized to graduate the apprentice. Unlike the western education graduates, graduates of the apprenticeship system are not exposed to the danger of unemployment since they are self-employed and even employers of labour at graduation.

3. CHANGES OVERTIME AND CONTEMPORARY PRACTICE

With the recognition of apprenticeship, by the Federal Government of Nigeria through the [7], as a strategy for the training and education of the youths outside the formal school system, the practice of apprenticeship has witnessed some changes.

In recent times, traditional apprenticeship system had been changing with time. As noted by [7] as unemployment becomes an issue on every graduate and carrier changer's mind, apprenticeships are becoming the most legitimate and popular route into work. However, how do you choose the right apprenticeship that is right for you and how do parents support and guide and support and guide children into best possible career become an issue. According to [6] Quality apprenticeship based on robust social dialogue and public-private partnership help young people overcome work inexperience trap that block their transition from education to employment. In Nigeria, apprenticeship as practiced today tends to follow the 1939 definition of the ILO that described apprenticeship as any system by which an employer undertake by contract to employ a young person and to train him/her or have him/her trained systematically for a trade for a period the duration of which have been fixed in advance and in the course of which the apprentice is bound to work in the employer's service.

In the traditional society the apprenticeship system was not based on any requirement but today, many master craftsmen and organizations require apprentice to possess certain educational qualifications before he can fit into the vocation. This is usually found in vocations such as printing, tailoring, electronics, surveying etc. The idea of issuing certificate to apprentice during freedom is also a new innovation in the practice of apprenticeship system. Similarly, fees are now being paid by the apprentice or his sponsor and terms documented and signed by parties involved at the commencement of the apprenticeship period.

As was previously mentioned, there was no formal system of training. Also, there was no organized body involved in the organization and quality control of the training programme. Recently, Governments in Nigeria as one of her strategies to combat unemployment in the country perceived apprenticeship system as equally useful as formal education. The government policy of encouraging Nigerians youths to be self-employed has geared up the drive for real development and changing in modus operandi of the traditional apprenticeship system.

(8) observed that the rediscovery of the values of apprenticeship has been one of the most significant trends in vocational education in recent years thus; various innovations are now being introduced into the system. For instance, the Oyo state government introduced the Oyo State Integrated Self Employment Scheme in 1986. The main focus of the scheme was to organize the youths to undergo apprenticeship training in various vocational fields which

could make them independent on the completion of such training. The Federal Government of Nigeria also established the National Directorate of Employment (N.D.E.) to organize Nigerians youths to undergo apprenticeship training under selected master craftsmen and organisation in almost all the known vocations depending, on the choice of the individual youth involved.

Although, the broad objective of the government in setting up these schemes were to combat unemployment, the local craftsmen are deeply involved in the programme because the trainees of these schemes are always attached to them to undergo apprenticeship training in the vocation chosen by such apprentice. In short, what these organized bodies are doing can only be equated to the role of parents in the traditional society: taking the children to the master craftsman, standing as guarantor to the apprentice, carrying the financial burdens involved and settling down such apprentice after freedom to become masters themselves.

3.1 The Nigerian Experience: The National Directorate of Employment (NDE)

The system of the young learning on the job from an experienced master has its roots in traditional African life when blacksmiths, carvers, native doctors and others with specific skills took member of the younger generation (usually close relative) into their households to give them specialized training over a period of years. Now the system has widened to include the whole range of modern skills. For example, electrical wiring, radio and television repairing, photography etc are modern vocations which the apprenticeship system had absorbed as fields of practice.

The depression of the early 80's had a lot of damaging effects on the Nigerian economy and consequently led to a rapid increase in the rate of unemployment. In the bid to check the growing rate of unemployment among Nigerian youths, the Ibrahim Babangida led administration on 26th March 1986, set up a committee known as the Chukwuma Committee to look into the problems of mass graduate unemployment. Based on the recommendations of the committee, the National Directorate of Employment (NDE) was established on November 22nd, 1986. It was formally launched on 30th January, 1987, by the chief of General Staff, Vice-Admiral Augustus Aikhomu on behalf of the President and Commandor-chief of the Armed Forces, General Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida.

The National Directorate of employment was set up by the government with the aim of assisting youths to acquire marketable skills with a view to ensuring that they become self employed. The objectives of the NDE as contained in the government gazette include:

- i) To assist Nigerian youths in acquiring marketable skills with a view to ensuring that they are gainfully employed.
- ii) To promote self reliance among the youths by encouraging and assisting them to set up cottage industries.
- iii) To stimulate the economy by providing employment opportunities for the Nigerian youth through training and resettlement.
- iv)

Some of the programmes put in place by the NDE to achieve these objectives are:

1. **Waste to Wealth Programme:** This programme is created to encourage the conversion of hitherto neglected raw materials into useful and marketable products. Apart from creating employment opportunities for those involved, this scheme helps in

developing a culture of innovativeness and self-reliance in resource use, thereby curtailing wastefulness and importation of items that can be produced locally.

2. **National Open Apprenticeship Scheme:** This is aimed at providing unemployed youths with basic skills that are needed in the economy. This is achieved by attaching registered youths as apprentice to companies, ministries and professional craftsmen and women with adequate training facilities.
3. **School on Wheels Scheme:** The directorate recognized that there are few organizations in the rural communities capable of offering apprenticeship training to the youth and therefore the danger of encouraging urban migration. School on the wheels involves taking fully equipped mobile vocational training facilities in a specially designed truck to the rural areas to train the youths on specific vocation relevant to the individual and community development.

In practice, the scheme identified competent well established master craftsmen and organizations and formally registered them as trainers. The scheme accommodates almost all vocations but with special interest in computer studies, hair dressing, catering, automobile repairs, mobile phone repairs etc. Interested Nigerian Youths are invited to register with the Directorate free of charge through electronic and print media adverts. The interested youths are often classified into two categories: graduates and non-graduates. The participants are required to fill a registration form in which they are expected to indicate their choice of vocation and other personal background information.

The NDE, after registration formalities, would attach the participants to relevant crafts master for training in the chosen vocation for a period ranging between 6 months to 3 years, depending on the vocation and educational level of the participant. The craftsmen often have 3-5 trainees at a time, depending on the vocation and the size of the workshop. The NDE then provides monitoring services on the performance and behaviours of the trainees on the job. This is usually done through the Monitoring and Evaluation Unit of the directorate. Regular reports on individual trainee are also submitted to the NDE by the master craftsmen. Where it becomes necessary, a trainee may be disciplined by the organization.

To ensure regular attendance and welfare, the trainees are entitled to monthly stipends. The master craftsmen are also paid allowances depending on the number of trainees under his tutorship. Through this apprenticeship training programmes, The National Directorate of Employment in Nigeria has been able to reduce the pressure of unemployment by equipping about one million Nigerian youths with vocational skills that makes them self-employed. To a large extent, the NDE has been providing the trainees with necessary equipment and fund as take-off grants after graduating from the training scheme.

4. STANDARDIZING THE GUIDELINES AND STRUCTURE OF TRADITIONAL APPRENTICESHIP SYSTEM

Advocating for a change in the present practice of apprenticeship system, [2] and [9] criticized the present method used by parents and crafts masters. They opined that for the apprenticeship system to be able to contribute meaningful quota to the national economy, there should be change in the structure and method adopted in the system. This is because as noted by [10] the transition from school to vocational education is of different quality and performance and heavily determined by the different structure of governance in the national education system. For the Nigerian apprenticeship system to be suitable for contemporary usage there is the need to strengthen the weak structural guidelines of the system. In this connection, Peterson and Hedges in [2] suggested that, there is the need for government to

standardize the apprenticeship system for maximum response to contemporary need. In standardizing the guidelines, government should take care of the following:

- a) Define apprenticeship.
- b) Draw up and approve policy statement that will apply to all types of apprenticeship programmes.
- c) Make personal inventory and skill inventory showing training needs and vocation requirements.
- d) Draw up apprenticeship agreement format.
- e) Get the agreement registered
- f) Determine period of apprenticeship based on job types.
- g) Determine wage scale for journeymen.
- h) Set up appeal channels.
- i) Set up process of termination of apprenticeship agreement.
- j) Design standardized curriculum of instruction based on job types.
- k) Control method of instruction and discipline.
- l) Set up code of conduct for both the apprentice and the master craftsmen.
- m) Create conducive atmosphere for inter-agency interaction and operation.
- n) Make arrangement for mass graduation of graduates from the apprenticeship system.
- o) Provide moral and financial assistance for the graduates to set up their business, trade or workshop.

5. PROBLEMS FACING TRADITIONAL APPRENTICESHIP PRACTICE IN NIGERIA

For a very long time, the practice of traditional apprenticeship has been facing series of problems. These problems make it difficult for the master craftsmen and the apprentice to practice effectively in a conducive atmosphere. One major problem of apprenticeship system is that, it is generally believed to be meant for people who cannot do well in the formal education system or those whose parents cannot afford to sponsor their education. This particular problem makes it difficult to attract young graduates and youths of school age into the system. It is assumed that people undergoing apprenticeship are 'never do well' people and they are not given deserved respect like their counterparts in the formal school system.

The fact that there is no standardized curriculum set out for the practice of apprenticeship system constitutes a hindrance. In all the vocational fields, there is no laid out curriculum. The apprentice only learns according to the available job type in the workshop, day by day. In practice, learning is not sequential, does not follow any pattern or move from simple to complex. Topics under the apprenticeship system are haphazardly learnt without any specific method of assessment.

The attitude of the masters in most cases constitutes a hindrance to the practice of apprenticeship. This is caused by the fact that they are not trained in the act of teaching. Most masters are difficult and have little skill to sustain the interest of the apprentice on the job. This makes the rate of drop-out and non-completers to be high.

Funding is another problem facing the practice of apprenticeship. The economic condition of most parents of the apprentice and the apprentice themselves in most cases made it difficult for them to sponsor the training for the agreed period. The master craftsmen themselves are not spared of the problem of poverty. In most cases, they find it difficult to equip their

workshop with necessary equipment that can improve efficiency and make them meet up with contemporary technological needs. For those in the trading sectors, success in the chosen business largely depends on the size of fund available which in most cases is not forthcoming. Their inability to provide suitable collateral for bank loans still compounds the problem; even the Microfinance Banks set guidelines that make accessing loans by graduates of the apprenticeship scheme a difficult task.

Another problem of apprenticeship system is choosing of wrong career by the apprentice. Due to lack of exposure, limited knowledge of psychology and career counseling, apprentice often make wrong career choice. In most cases, career are forced on would be apprentice by the parents or guardians without due consideration for the interest, ability and capability of the apprentice. This has often resulted into non-completion of the apprentice period due to inability of the apprentice to cope with the physical and intellectual requirements of the career.

The problem of outdated and unimplemented policy is also a major problem confronting the practice of apprenticeship system in Nigeria. As practiced today, there seems not to be any guiding principle from government as regulatory agency for apprenticeship system. The haphazard nature makes it less attractive to youths and graduates.

6. THE WAY FORWARD FOR APPRENTICESHIP SYSTEM IN NIGERIA

Despite the catalogue of problems confronting the practice of apprenticeship system in Nigeria, it has continued to exist and contribute to national development. However, maximum benefits of traditional apprenticeship could be gotten if the present national economic reforms in the countries extend its focus to include usage of traditional apprenticeship to tackle the problem of unemployment. To improve on apprenticeship practice in Nigeria, government and other stakeholders in apprenticeship should note the views of [11] that apprenticeship operates within a wider context of cultural traditions and aspirations of the individuals and the complexity of the labour market regulations. Straight transplantation of institutions from one cultural context to another without regard is likely to be unsuccessful. However, policy which identifies universal characteristics underpinning successful system for example; incentive to participants, management of equity issues and overcoming market failure can provide a policy guide to policy makers seeking to build or expand a viable apprenticeship system.

In reforming the practice of traditional apprenticeship, government through the Ministry of Employment, Labour and Productivity should give adequate recognition to traditional apprenticeship system as one of her programmes for combating unemployment, formulate workable policies and develop sustainable vocational training that could be implemented at Small and Medium Enterprise (SME) level at the grassroots. This is in line with the advice of the [11] that; in modern economy, apprenticeship is normally regulated by law. Government should therefore provide laws to regulate the practice of apprenticeship and confirm her formal recognition of traditional apprenticeship. Legislation is necessary for high quality apprenticeship system to safeguard rights and responsibilities of the main partners. However, question of content of apprenticeship, assessment and certification should be left to the parties. It is important for legislation to recognize the unique status of apprentice as learner and secure his right to high quality training, set minimum duration for apprenticeship and secure provision for career progression and set out the right of apprentice to training allowance commensurate with their productive contributions. This will go a long way to attract the interest of many unemployed youths to the apprenticeship system. The National

Directorate of employment (NDE) and The Small and Medium Enterprise Development Agency of Nigeria (SMEDAN) would do well in tackling the problem of unemployment and establishment of cottage industries if they can formally adopt traditional apprenticeship as a project.

To make traditional apprenticeship more responsive to national aspirations there is the need to identify special areas of focus, develop adequate curriculum that would run for a specific period of not more than three years. This curriculum development will allow training to follow specific order, rather than the present haphazard method. The identified vocational education instructors should also be made to undergo programme of train the trainers on the contents of the curriculum, teaching method, evaluation and leadership style especially, as leadership style of the instructors had been identified as one of the reasons for apprentice dropping out of the programme in most cases.

Adequate budgetary provision is another important need for the promotion of apprenticeship system. Adequate fund should be provided for the programmes and project of traditional apprenticeship system. There is the need for adequate financial support for apprentice to sustain their interest. The present quarterly stipend given to apprentice under the National Directorate of Employment (NDE) scheme in Nigeria is grossly inadequate. In addition, registered trainers should be adequately remunerated for the services they render. In fact, monthly or quarterly remuneration which should be based on the number of apprentice being trained by each instructor or organisation is recommended. The trainers' workshop should also be supported with modern equipment to improve their skill, efficiency and general performance. More still, post-training financial support should be given to the trainees. This should be in terms of establishment of workshop, provision of equipment, take-off grants etc.

Another important ingredient needed for maximum usage of traditional apprenticeship is career counseling. In the traditional society, parents often contact diviners and Suit Sayers to determine which vocation will suit the future of their children. This role must now be taken over by career counselors to provide adequate guide on career choice to the intending apprentice, the parents and on the job service for the instructors and the apprentice. This will go a long way to solve the problem of non-completion of apprentice period.

Finally, a National Commission for Open Apprenticeship Scheme should be established to run the scheme. Establishment of the commission will allow for adequate focus of the government on using apprenticeship system to tackle the problem of unemployment in Nigeria. The Africa Development Bank (ADB), Bank of Industry and other donor agencies would promote this scheme if it is recognized and included in the programmes they support.

7. CONCLUSION

Nigeria is currently being challenged by high unemployment and insecurity. The apprenticeship scheme if given adequate attention and effectively organized possesses the capacity to reduce the number of young graduates seeking white collar jobs. Technologically, Nigeria will be able to move forward since, these young graduates will be more innovative and creative and help the country to develop technologically and compete favourably with other technologically advanced countries of the world. The consensus of opinion among security experts and development practitioners is that unemployment correlates with high crime rate and insecurity. It is therefore concluded that using traditional apprenticeship to productively engage idle and unemployed youths would not only create

employment and enhance technological advancement; it will also impact positively on issues of security in the country.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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