

**INDIGENOUS AFRICAN ENTERPRISE:  
THE IGBO TRADITIONAL  
BUSINESS SCHOOL (I-TBS)**

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VOLUME 26

**INDIGENOUS AFRICAN  
ENTERPRISE: THE IGBO  
TRADITIONAL BUSINESS  
SCHOOL (I-TBS)**

EDITED BY

**OGECHI ADEOLA**

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Howard House, Wagon Lane, Bingley BD16 1WA, UK

First edition 2021  
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**British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-83909-034-9 (Print)  
ISBN: 978-1-83909-033-2 (Online)  
ISBN: 978-1-83909-035-6 (Epub)

ISSN: 1877-6361



ISOQAR certified  
Management System,  
awarded to Emerald  
for adherence to  
Environmental  
standard  
ISO 14001:2004.

Certificate Number 1985  
ISO 14001



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

To my Dad, Chief Emmanuel Ezeriwe Anumnu, nonagenarian, lover of God and humanity, who embodies the Igbo work ethics and business culture

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# LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BSP	Business Succession Planning
IAS	Igbo Apprenticeship System
ICT	Information Communication Technology
I-TBS	Igbo Traditional Business School
NDE	National Directorate of Employment
ROSCA	Rotating Savings and Credit Association
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SMEs	Small- and Medium-Sized Enterprises
SWOT	Strength, Weakness, Opportunities, Threat
TED	Technology, Entertainment, Design
TVET	Technical Vocational Education and Training
TFL	Transformational Leadership

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# PREFACE

When I gained admission into the university was same time my cousin started going to shop with his dad. We spent same duration in both pursuits. Today, he wants to buy Uber for me to drive. There's something they teach them in that Igbo apprenticeship that you can't learn outside.

Ikenna Okonkwo, @iykeville90 (Tweet of 6 May 2020)

Entrepreneurship is, without a doubt, key to a nation's development. While African nations have struggled for social and economic development by emulating Western and Asian business management ideologies, they have failed to look inward and adopt indigenous entrepreneurial philosophies and practices to engineer their own development. One such failure is the neglect of the apprenticeship business practice of the Igbos of south-eastern Nigeria. The Igbos are the third largest and most industrious ethnic group in Nigeria. Their diverse entrepreneurial investments have contributed immensely to the economic development of Nigeria and other parts of Africa.

Igbos are known for their industry, perseverance, resilience, risk management, and business acumen. The successful ventures of most Igbo entrepreneurs are attributed to their unique indigenous business practices collectively described in this book as the Igbo Traditional Business School (I-TBS), an incubation system of entrepreneurial skill development and utilisation for economic purposes. The Igbo Traditional Business School (I-TBS) is not a conventional academic institution as it operates outside the classroom. Though without a library, or even an address, its tradition of lifelong entrepreneurial learning is worthy of consideration. The system has successfully nurtured young adults into gainful employment, trading, and entrepreneurship for decades.

The success of the Igbo business practices has not gone unnoticed by local or international practitioners who have regarded the Igbo model as the largest and most successful entrepreneurial incubator in the world. Yet, Africa has not fully adopted this entrepreneurial model for business development. This book traces the origins, development, and key themes of Igbo business practices that include apprenticeships, entrepreneurial clusters, sales practices, conflict management, talent recruitment, indigenous financial practices, venture capital financing, family businesses, and succession planning.

*Igba-Boi*, the principal constituent of I-TBS, prepares young adults for the business world through mentorships or apprentice relationships with established traders or businesspeople. The indigenous entrepreneurship practice has produced millions of entrepreneurs who have found economic space for themselves in Nigeria and abroad, lifting families out of poverty. The unique I-TBS model imparts ethical entrepreneurial skills which make the business school a key learning prototype for businesses all over the world. It is imperative that I-TBS methods of operation should be analysed and documented,

identifying critical insights into ways to reduce unemployment, encourage entrepreneurship, and make a valuable contribution to sustainable development in Africa.

Igbo business practices have important lessons for present-day management and are capable of meeting Africa's desire for sustainable development and financial independence. This book illuminates the unique characteristics of Igbo business practices and the ways those practices have produced successful business owners in Nigeria. Also included is a comparison with a German entrepreneurial model and discussion of Igbo business practices in the diaspora. Readers will discover recommendations for institutionalising these indigenous practices, formulating policies, and creating operational frameworks that will advance sustainable economic growth in Africa.

# FOREWORD

I am gratified to see continued systematic attention to the thematic thrusts of this book: *Africa's Indigenous Enterprise: The Igbo Traditional Business School (I-TBS)*, edited by Ogechi Adeola.

Remarkable progress has been in the literature seeking to enrich our understanding of the model underpinning Igbo business prowess. This book, without a shadow of doubt, significantly provides incremental additions to knowledge of the dynamic processes of entrepreneurship from the contextual lenses of *I-TBS*. Understandably eclectic, the chapters individually advance our understanding and appreciation of the inter-subjective discourses and situated practices. They also show that much more learning/understanding is required to fully appreciate the temporal and spatial dimensions of Igbo business acumen. Furthermore, it is clear that the process of 'learning' and 'knowing' *I-TBS* is complicated not only by the subject eclecticism but also its relativism. This is not a disadvantage. Rather, in its simplicity, it de-reifies, reconstructs and resituates the cultural syncretism and hegemonic representations of entrepreneurship learning. It also reinforces the notion that entrepreneurship among Africa's indigenous groups is a very fertile terrain for exploration, but research to inform, critique, influence and inspire critical reflections and innovative practices remains in its infancy.

Generally, the dominantly prevailing knowledge of entrepreneurial processes and practices largely reflects axioms that are inextricably linked to the idiosyncrasies of economic systems of developed countries. In fact, it has long been argued that the bulk of entrepreneurship episteme is tinted and framed by Western hues. Thus, embedded concepts are encumbered with ideological and ethnocentric biases. This has meant that large parts of the world system remain insufficiently accommodated in the formal discourse of entrepreneurship theories. Particularly excluded are theoretic movements and practice inflections in African societies prior to as well as after the initiation of large-scale contacts with Europe. Consequently, the intellectual development of the discipline (i.e. historical development of the doctrines) in relation to African contexts has been hampered mainly because of the prevailing tendency to apply Anglo-centric prisms to the analysis of environments for which they are ill-conceived. This, in turn, mirrors a general failure by modern scholars to fully appreciate the spatial and temporal dimensions of entrepreneurship itself. Essentially, the study of enterprise cultures of Africans in Western terms has led to the arbitrary truncation of the vast canvass of entrepreneurship development in the region: the imposition of constructs and ideas prevalent in developed economies on Africa without regard to Africa's own constructs, categories, ideas and institutions. The implications have been far-reaching for the development of entrepreneurship education in Africa, resulting, in part, to a general failure by scholars to recognise non-linear and discontinuous movements of entrepreneurship in comparative settings. More recently, however, researchers have started to pull conceptual and analytical tools from various disciplinary areas to reinterpret what has been alluded to as the 'critical mess' of

entrepreneurship. The results have been profoundly refreshing; boundaries have continued to be pushed back, 'truth claims' have come under increasing tensions, orthodoxies and taken-for-granted assumptions are challenged, methodological pluralism and conceptual reflexivity are significantly evident and gaining popularity. With credit to Dr Adeola's intellectual dexterity, this scholarly work, *Africa's Indigenous Enterprise: The Igbo Traditional Business School (I-TBS)*, embodies this modern rationality.

It is particularly difficult to summarise the arguments and positions adduced in this book. The contributing authors demonstrate wide variety of intellectual purposes and practice approaches. In many ways, they stretch theoretical and discursive aspects of an indigenous Africa-centric business model practised by the Igbos of south-eastern Nigeria. In doing so, newer directions and agendas are introduced, some potently emergent themes are focused. All of these, despite the underpinning eclecticism, give impetus to the growing dynamism and need to continue to re-scope the landscape of entrepreneurship in African contexts. This has particular relevance when put alongside the complexities of reading and deciphering the 'meaning below the surface' in much of the entrepreneurial processes among Africa's indigenous groups. The significance, policy and practice implications may turn out to be more than just 'academic work'.

From a personal standpoint, whilst undeniably sensitive to the limits of particularisation, the phenomenon encapsulated in Dr Adeola's notion of *I-TBS*, especially *Igba-Boi* apprentice system, has continued to excite and challenge all those with an interest in unravelling the business success of Igbo people as indigenous Africa's most formidable entrepreneurial group. In terms of research, it is certainly a phenomenon that is full of exploratory potentials, fecund, ever-evolving and continually exposing new possibilities. In particular, for academic researchers like myself who consider entrepreneurship as discursive practice tied to the goals and practices of specific social agents (in given historical contexts) and embedded in socio-economic relations of power, it certainly is a field of vibrant contestations. Perhaps, there is also a philosophical angle to this which, in part, has much to do with constructions, dialectic and sometimes contradictory reconstitutions or reconstructions of indigenous/ethnic groups in business research settings.

I regard this book as an essential guide for policy makers, researchers, business advisers, intermediating agencies for enterprise-led growth (e.g. bank and business support agencies). It offers a strong practical rationale to unpack what works (or may not work) for start-ups and procedures that lead to excellent outcomes in terms of business start-up growth and sustainability. The book would be of interest to students of marketing, entrepreneurship and strategic management.

I, therefore, recommend this book for the following reasons. First, it provides comprehensive insights into a successful and profitable indigenous business enterprise model and considers implications and recommendations for business management in Africa. Second, it presents a framework for African management curricula for entrepreneurial studies and development. Third, it affords a unique characterisation and assemblage of salient practices of an indigenous archetypical enterprise learning model which, if adopted, would be a catalyst for enterprise-led growth and development beyond the Igbo ethnic enclave. Finally, it would serve as a springboard to start the arduous process of ontological indigenisation of entrepreneurship curricular that speak directly to contextual subjectivities of Africa and, perhaps, a springboard for future books on indigenous enterprises in Africa.

I congratulate the book editor, Dr Ogechi Adeola, for a job well done. Undoubtedly, she brought her wealth of experience and years of research to bear in putting this book together. I also hope that readers will find this book equally fascinating and useful.

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# **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

The editor acknowledges all the 29 authors who embarked on this journey with her to document the entrepreneurial process, practices and business heritage of the Igbos of south-eastern Nigeria, for posterity and as a launchpad for portraying the uniqueness of Africa's indigenous enterprises. Together, we have made history.

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