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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Beyond Western paradigms: exploring the intersection of Igbo cultural belief and entrepreneurship

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ABSTRACT

Long before scholars in developing nations began emphasizing the role of culture in entrepreneurship, Western-centric discourse dominated the global academic landscape, positioning Western cultural factors as the universal standard for entrepreneurial success. This dominance created a significant issue both on over-generalization of Western findings to vastly different contexts and the marginalization of culturally grounded explanations from the Global South. This paper offers a fresh perspective by examining the intersection of Igbo cultural beliefs and entrepreneurship in Southeast Nigeria, departing from traditional Western paradigms. The study identifies and explores six core cultural beliefs that foster human capital development and an 'entrepreneurial spirit' within Igbo society. Employing an exploratory research design and purposive snowball sampling, the study engaged $N = 75$ participants across three prominent markets in the Lagos metropolis: Ladipo, Idumota, and Alaba International. Findings reveal the unique contributions of indigenous African belief systems to entrepreneurship. In due course, this research encourages other cultural groups to leverage their heritage for wealth generation and job creation, celebrating Africa's rich cultural foundations as a viable pathway to poverty reduction.

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Introduction

Long before scholars from developing countries began to emphasize cultural roles in human capital within the sphere of entrepreneurship, Western authors dominated academic discourse in the global North and beyond, presenting Western cultural factors as the universal standard for success (Escobar, 1995). This dominance produced two inter-related problems, majorly in developing countries. First, findings from Western contexts were overgeneralised to very different settings, marginalising culturally grounded explanations from developing countries. Second, African cultural frameworks were often portrayed as backward or obsolete Bothello et al. (2019), reinforcing a narrative that framed entrepreneurship and development as the exclusive domain of the Global North (Omonijo, 2026). The result was skewed theory and policy that overlooked local practices, belief systems, and institutions essential to understanding entrepreneurship and

economic development in non-Western societies, most notably in rural areas (Kumari et al., 2025).

This study intends to bridge a knowledge gap by examining how Igbo cultural beliefs could contribute to human-capital development for entrepreneurship, offering insights into how indigenous African traditions can foster entrepreneurial spirit and drive economic growth, drawing lessons from Western and Southeast Asian development trajectories.

Recent research highlights a dichotomy between modern and indigenous approaches to entrepreneurship: the modern strand, grounded in Western principles and shaped by Western scholars, dominated academic discourse for decades, whereas the indigenous strand, which is rooted in pre-colonial cultural practices, offers locally grounded frameworks for enterprise and economic life (Chakrabarty, 2000; Omonijo, 2025).

As Rodney (1976 cited in Omonijo, 2026) argues, colonial interventions disrupted indigenous economic systems in favour of Western-style capacity-building frameworks for entrepreneurship and seriously undermined Africa's cultural heritage and impeding the development of local entrepreneurial traditions (Akeredolu-Ale, 1976). Although Rodney's critique was once relevant, its relevance has diminished in light of comparative post-colonial trajectories in recent times: some Southeast Asian economies have combined selective Western practices with strong local institutions to achieve rapid development, a synthesis that many African contexts have not yet realised. The core issue is not culture per se but the failure to integrate productive elements of Western approaches with indigenous cultural practices and institutions.

Consequently, the anticipated gains in job creation and wealth generation have been limited; persistent challenges, such as high unemployment and poverty, remain prevalent (Ebonine & Kadiri, 2025). Re-centering indigenous entrepreneurial models may therefore offer viable, contextually appropriate pathways to socioeconomic renewal; the Igbo indigenous business-mentorship model, which continues to generate jobs and stimulate economic activity in southeast Nigeria, may likely provide a compelling example.

Thus, this research seeks to offer a nuanced understanding of indigenous approaches to entrepreneurship, emphasizing the importance of traditional knowledge and practices in fostering sustainable development. Specifically, it intends to explore the cultural beliefs of the Igbo people and their role in human capital development within entrepreneurship, an area that has received inadequate attention in existing literature, highlighting its potential in shaping entrepreneurial success.

Central to gaining entrance into entrepreneurship in Igbo land is locally designed business mentorship model that has been in existence for a couple of years. Thus, this research aims to provide a nuanced understanding of indigenous approaches to entrepreneurship, acknowledging the significance of traditional knowledge and practices in promoting sustainable development. Specifically, it focuses on the cultural beliefs of the Igbo people and how they engender human capital development in entrepreneurship, through their locally design business mentorship.

Indigenous Igbo business mentorship is a traditional practice in Southeast Nigeria, where experienced entrepreneurs and traders guide and support younger ones, emphasizing hands-on training, apprenticeship, and knowledge sharing. This mentorship approach transfers intergenerational knowledge, develops practical skills, and instills cultural values and ethics while building networks and relationships through informal

apprenticeships and on-the-job training, contributing to the success of Igbo entrepreneurs and the growth of the Igbo business community.

This study is systematically organized to provide a clear transition from theory to practice. It begins with an Introduction and a review of Literature, followed by a discussion of Theoretical Insights. The subsequent sections detail the Methodology, present the Data Analysis and Findings, and offer actionable Recommendations based on the study's results. By exploring the Igbo cultural belief system, this study seeks to contribute to the development of innovative and culturally relevant entrepreneurial frameworks which may likely foster sustainable economic growth and development in Africa.

Literature

Culture denotes a people's or group's way of life (Taylor, 1871, cited in Omonijo, 2026); it shapes how they organise and manage their economic activities. Yet, we must not lose sight of the fact that culture can produce both positive and negative outcomes, depending on several factors, most notably historical, social, and temporal contexts, which feature prominently.

At the onset of entrepreneurship studies, the Global North was the first to establish a positive relationship between culture and entrepreneurship Nwankwo and Chendo (2023). However, this perspective was rooted in Westernisation and shaped academic discourse for decades, long before scholars in the Global South began investigating the positive role of their cultures in entrepreneurship. That dominance led to the generalisation of Western cultural models to the Global South, often overlooking indigenous attributes that can foster entrepreneurship and national development Saka-Helmhout et al. (2020). Such attributes include, but are not limited to, habits, values, social norms, festivals, kinship bond, and belief systems of local populations; these elements define daily life and play a broader role in shaping social organization and progress.

Within traditional cultures, Kuratko and Hodgetts (1998) illustrate the significance of family orientation, a vital dimension of kinship, in shaping entrepreneurial behaviour, whereas Latare et al. (2023) contend that this orientation is primarily focused on eradicating poverty. So, rather than promoting individualism, which is rooted in westernisation, communalism is often employed to raise entrepreneurs and to reduce poverty through communal efforts, where mentorship and role models play a crucial role. Consequently, entrepreneurial values and skills are transmitted across generations, reinforcing shared values that enhance business sustainability.

Furthermore, authors such as Henry et al. (2017) argue that socio-ethnic values are strongly connected to how different social and cultural groups develop distinct entrepreneurial tendencies that are shaped by their unique historical, cultural, and social contexts. In the context such as India, Weber (1934) explores the link between culture and entrepreneurship. The work appears obsolete, but it highlights the reality of the caste system and how it hinders economic development.

Cultural contexts differ globally. Unlike India, most African societies, such as the Igbo in Nigeria, do not operate caste systems. Instead, the culture prioritizes community and social mobility, fostering entrepreneurship. Although, the Osu caste system historically existed in Igboland, it has largely been abolished (Abia et al., 2021). This aligns with Alipu

et al. (2024) on how cultural values shape behaviour. While G. Agu and Margaça (2025) discuss groups like the Gurage, Ewes, Guns, and Zulus sharing traits with the Igbo, these groups appear to lack the unique structures for sustainable entrepreneurship. Thus, in Igbo society, entrepreneurship is a prestigious tradition and it is illustrated by the indigenous business mentorship model, based on kinship and brotherliness (Omonijo, 2024). This framework provides mentorship, financial support, and social welfare, enabling individuals to establish viable enterprises. Furthermore, the humility and obedience displayed by mentees toward their *Nna-Ukwu master* reinforce the trust, discipline, and knowledge exchange necessary for the seamless transfer of entrepreneurial skills (Ezems-Amadi, 2025). This dynamic closely mirrors *Isusu*, the traditional Igbo rotating savings and credit system, which has historically underwritten entrepreneurship and capital formation (Ademola et al., 2020). In contrast, Western models often focus strictly on technical skill acquisition while neglecting the financial support mechanisms and social safety nets essential for entrepreneurial success in developing contexts.

Financially, the Western approach relies heavily on bank financing, this option is often unfeasible in developing countries where poverty rates are high. Consequently, aspiring entrepreneurs face a significant challenge in accessing funds after completing their apprenticeship, as banks typically require collateral, a luxury few can afford. It is unrealistic to expect individuals struggling to meet their basic needs to provide collateral and thereby give credibility to alternative approaches that acknowledge the cultural and economic realities of Africa.

Regarding social safety, the Western approach prioritizes individualism and formal structures (Assmann & Ehrl, 2021), often overlooking basic needs. In contrast, the African system offers a holistic framework, ensuring mentees receive comprehensive assistance, including accommodation, sustenance, and healthcare (Omonijo, 2024). This culturally embedded approach fosters strong communal ties and shared responsibility for development. Greater global recognition is essential to highlight Africa's contribution to sustainable entrepreneurship and societal advancement.

The mentor (*Nna Ukwu*) acting as a proxy parent, providing holistic support from the start of mentorship until the mentee is established and ready to launch his own business is only rooted in African tradition. The model contrasts with the Western-rooted notion that entrepreneurship is innate rather than developed (Gamage & Wickramasinghe, 2012). In Igbo African contexts, developmental stages are embedded in customary practices and social norms rather than the formal rules that govern modern organisations. This mismatch exposes the limitations of Western models for addressing the needs of African entrepreneurs and underscores the urgent need for academic literature to engage with indigenous frameworks and context-sensitive approaches, such as the cultural belief systems which has hitherto neglected in academic literature.

Despite valuable contributions from scholars on Igbo culture and its links to entrepreneurship and national development, the domain of cultural belief systems remains under-explored. For instance, Kanu (2023) examines the Igbo apprenticeship system, variously referred to as *Imu-Olu* ('learning work'), *Imu-Ahia* ('learning trade'), or *Igba Boyi* ('service'), as a foundational factor in Igbo commerce. However, other studies remain narrowly focused: Idemobi et al. (2024) examined cultural practices primarily through leadership's role in venture formation, while Agozino and Anyanike (2007) analyzed *Imu-Ahia* strictly as a human capital development framework. Other scholars have targeted specific

contexts: Anugwom (2011) explored women entrepreneurs within the Niger Delta conflict, Anago (2023) highlighted the apprenticeship model's efficacy in mitigating unemployment, and Nnonyelu et al. (2023) framed Igba Boyi as an exemplar of indigenous African entrepreneurship. Furthermore, while Agu et al. (2025) investigated entrepreneurial persistence through religious and spiritual lenses, Omonijo (2025) addressed cultural habits while largely overlooking core belief systems. Although Omonijo (2026) recently provided a focused analysis of the nexus between Igbo cultural values and entrepreneurial practice, that work leaves underlying cosmological frameworks and belief structures insufficiently examined.

Given the profound influence that cultural paradigms exert on career development and societal norms, an analysis limited to values and habits remains incomplete without a rigorous investigation into these core belief systems. Consequently, while prior studies collectively elucidate vital facets of Igbo culture, they expose a critical lacuna: the mechanisms through which indigenous belief systems drive entrepreneurial motivations. Filling this empirical gap is paramount for advancing theoretical models of African entrepreneurship and designing culturally congruent, locally effective policy interventions.

Therefore, this research explores entrepreneurs' perspectives using qualitative methods, in an attempt to answer the following questions:

- (a) What cultural beliefs engender entrepreneurship?
- (b) How do Igbo cultural beliefs engender entrepreneurship?

Theoretical insights

Early theories on entrepreneurship were predominantly developed in the West, shaped largely by Western scholars who dominated the field (Omonijo et al., 2019). Prominent examples include the modernization frameworks established by Rostow (1960) and Parsons (1969). These paradigms established assumptions and analytical lenses that privileged Western pathways to economic development and entrepreneurship. Consequently, their recommendations were exported to the Global South without adequate attention to local cultural premises. As a result, the resulting policy prescriptions and theoretical models often failed to account for indigenous social structures, norms, and belief systems, significantly limiting their explanatory power and practical relevance in non-Western contexts.

Rostow's (1960) model seeks to delineate distinct stages of economic and social development by identifying criteria that mark transitions to modernity. Central to this account is the role of an elite class who, at the critical 'take-off' stage, must redirect wealth into productive investment rather than consumption. The model suggests a need for rational conformity, an implicit expectation that societies will uncritically adopt the behavioural prescriptions associated with each stage. As noted by Giddens (1991), this approach minimizes cultural variation and local agency, effectively invalidating alternative pathways to development.

Similarly, Parsons (1969) applies structural functionalism to long-term social development, arguing that societies evolve analogously to biological organisms by expanding their capacity for generalized adaptation. This adaptive advance proceeds through

structural differentiation: as social problems grow in complexity, institutions become more specialized. Within this framework, Parsons highlights extended kinship and tribal systems as persistent cultural structures that, in his view, constrain the geographical and social mobility necessary for modernization. Consequently, he characterizes these formations as obstacles, even calling them ‘enemies of progress,’ and advocates for social transformation that reconfigures traditional arrangements to align with modern economic imperatives.

Critics such as Rodney (2018), Frank (1978) and Dibua (2006) argue that African societies followed autonomous development trajectories that colonialism disrupted, a disruption central to subsequent underdevelopment. Furthermore, Bui (2025) notes that Southeast Asia’s later growth complicates the modernization narrative, as that region succeeded by integrating local cultural dynamics with Western attributes, an approach largely absent in African countries. While some scholars dismiss Rostow and Parsons as outdated, their theories remain valuable for interpreting specific phenomena, such as the tendency of elites to divert resources into conspicuous consumption (Marquez et al., 2021). However, the claim that culture impedes entrepreneurship is increasingly challenged by recent studies demonstrating its crucial role in shaping economic dynamics (Bothello et al., 2023; Saputra & Havlíček, 2025). This study, therefore, seeks to confirm or refute Rostow’s and Parsons’s claims specifically regarding the influence of Igbo cultural belief systems on entrepreneurship.

Methodology

Study area

This research is situated within the Lagos Metropolis, (see Figure 1) the commercial nerve center of Nigeria and the urban core of Lagos State. The study area encompasses major Central Business Districts and key Local Government Areas (LGAs), including Lagos Island, Lagos Mainland, Surulere, and Apapa, which host a substantial density of Igbo-owned enterprises. While the regional economy comprises a diverse mix of corporate employment, agriculture, and aquaculture, it is defined by a robust trade infrastructure. The



Figure 1. The map of Lagos metropolis. Culled from Omonijo (2024).

presence of international airports and seaports facilitates extensive domestic and cross-border commerce, creating a favorable ecosystem for business expansion. Consequently, data collection was targeted at strategic commercial hubs, specifically the Ladipo Auto-Spare Parts Market, Idumota Market, and Alaba International Market, where entrepreneurial activity is most intense

Method of data collection

Primary data were collected through In-Depth Interviews and Key Informant Interviews (KIs). The study focuses on the Igbo diaspora in Lagos metropolis rather than the traditional heartland to examine how cultural practices adapt within a competitive, cosmopolitan environment. Participants were recruited using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling, leveraging internal market community networks and chain-referral techniques (Ting et al., 2025), as illustrated in [Figure 2](#). Access and rapport were significantly enhanced by the researcher's cultural positionality and competence, developed through eight years of residency in Anambra State and familial ties to the Igbo community.

Although an initial sample of 90 was projected, the final sample size was determined by the principle of thematic saturation (Cresswell & Plano, 2011). Saturation, the point where new data yields no further insights, was observed around the 70th interview. However, an additional five interviews were conducted to ensure comprehensive coverage, bringing the total to 75 participants. Fieldwork spanned six months, and despite the logistical challenges inherent in a busy market environment, the research objectives were successfully met through persistent engagement.

Data analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, facilitated by Atlas.ti software to assist in collating, storing, and coding responses. Adopting an inductive approach as outlined by Crawford et al. (2008), themes were derived directly from the data by identifying, coding, and grouping similar perspectives. For instance, under the theme Onye aghana nwanne ya ('Leave no brother behind'), responses were categorized into sub-themes such as 'brotherliness'. Specific behaviours, such as profit-sharing between peers or the recruitment of mentees from different states to foster human capital, were coded to reflect the quasi-biological bond between the Nna Ukwu (mentor) and mentee. To ensure anonymity while maintaining structural clarity, participants (mentors, key informants, and mentees) were identified using the code 'F' with a subscript number (e.g. F_1, F_2).

To ensure rigour and trustworthiness, the study employed member checking, reflexivity, and prolonged engagement. Member checking involved intermittently summarizing

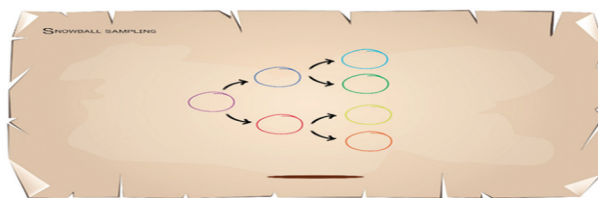


Figure 2. A chain-referral approach. Adopted from Ting et al., (2025).

submissions during data collection to confirm that participants' views were accurately captured. Furthermore, findings were reported using vignettes to preserve the original context of the responses. Ethically, the study adhered to the research principles outlined by Babbie (2013). Participation was strictly voluntary, with full guarantees of confidentiality and anonymity. This paper is derived from the author's doctoral thesis, for which formal approval was granted by the Covenant Health Research Ethics Committee (CHREC; Ref. No.: NHREC/CU-HREC/11/04/2023) for data collection conducted between 21 February 2023, and 21 April 2024.

Results

The socio-demographic analysis of the *Nna Ukwu* mentorship system reveals a clear structural distinction between mentors and mentees, emphasizing practical experience over formal qualifications. Mentors are exclusively married individuals, predominantly aged 36–45 (56.67%) and 46–55 (25%), with limited formal education, 75% hold only a primary school certificate (45%) or no formal schooling at all (30%). This reinforces the value placed on accumulated business wisdom and family stability as prerequisites for leadership. Conversely, mentees are entirely single (100%) and under 18 years old (100%), illustrating a cultural model where early-stage apprenticeship and financial independence are prioritized steps that must precede marriage. While mentees show slightly higher educational attainment, with 60% having secondary education, none possess higher education degrees, confirming that the system favours practical business training over academic advancement.

RQ1: What cultural beliefs engender entrepreneurship?

As shown in Table 1, six cultural beliefs were identified from respondents as key facilitators of entrepreneurship, without any contradiction. Specifically, each was explained within the framework of locally designed business mentorship. These beliefs play a crucial role in shaping business practices, fostering sustainability, and reinforcing traditional mentorship methods. Below is a brief analysis of each cultural belief and its contribution to entrepreneurial development.

Participants across all three markets identified the theme *Onye aghana nwanne ya* as a fundamental driver of enterprise formation. Yet, this view was tempered by accounts of broken trust and exploitative demands. These ambivalent effects suggest a paradox: while

Table 1. Themes/beliefs, interpretations and percentage.

S/N	Themes/beliefs	Translations in English
1	Onye aghana nwanne ya	'An Igbo entrepreneur does not leave his brothers behind in business'
2	Onye Igbo anaghi enye nwanne ya azu, kama o na akuziere ya otu esi azu	'An Igbo entrepreneur does not give his brothers fish, but teaches him how to fish'
3	Onye Igbo kwenyere na obu onye nche nwanne ya,	'An Igbo entrepreneur is his brother's keeper in business'.
4	Onye Igbo ekwesighi idi umengwu n'oru	'Entrepreneurial laziness must not be found in any Igbo businessman'.
5	Ana enweta aku na uba site na azumahja'	'Wealth is achievable in business'
6	Ofoosisiadimeofia	'A tree does not make a forest'

Culled from Omonijo (2024).

the belief system successfully drives grassroots human capital accumulation, it can limit broader commercialisation. Thus, its sustainable impact depends heavily on the interplay between communal reciprocity and formal institutional frameworks.

The belief *Onye Igbo anaghi enye nwanne ya azu* was unanimously endorsed as the bedrock of entrepreneurial development. Participants affirmed that this cultural emphasis on skill transfer over charity drives the apprenticeship system. While a key informant noted that wealthy individuals might bypass this stage due to existing resources, the majority of participants maintained that for the average entrepreneur, this system is indispensable. Given the modest backgrounds of most apprentices, this model of incremental human capital accumulation remains the primary vehicle for business success.

The third theme centers on the belief *Onye Igbo kwenyere na obu onye nche nwanne ya*, a view that was consistent across participants at all three sites. It signifies the protection and promotion of one another's commercial interests through mutual support, referrals, and cooperative practices. Although self-interest is a pervasive social force, in this context the key informants explained that it manifests as reciprocal obligation and shared benefit, so that participation in these networks typically yields advantages for all parties involved rather than leaving some disadvantaged.

The fourth theme *Onye Igbo ekwesighi idi umengwu n'oru*, emerged consistently across all sites. Participants described hard work as a normative imperative: industriousness is expected, laziness is socially sanctioned, and sustained effort is treated as the primary route to economic advancement. This ethic is visible not only among Igbo traders themselves but is also recognized by non-Igbo observers who frequent Igbo commercial spaces. A simple visit to any market confirms the participants' accounts: bustling stalls, long hours, and intensive labour practices embody a cultural logic that valorises perseverance, skill acquisition, and continuous reinvestment in enterprise.

The fifth theme, *Ana enweta aku na uba site na azumahia*, was endorsed by all participants, in the three sites studied as a central belief. *Aku* (wealth) is a prized ideal in Igbo parlance, valued across social strata: the poor view business as a pathway to upward mobility, while the wealthy focus on preserving and expanding their assets, mainly through entrepreneurial activities. Participants described entrepreneurship as both an aspiration and a practical strategy for accumulating and sustaining wealth, with commercial activity framed as the primary route to economic security and social status.

The theme, *Ofuosisiadiemeofia*, harvested equally received unanimous endorsement: every participant described it as a foundational belief that places collaboration and networking at the heart of business success and everyday life.

RQ2: How do Igbo cultural beliefs engender entrepreneurship?

Onye aghana nwanne ya

Deducing from participant data, this belief is deeply rooted in Igbo culture and reinforces a strong ethic of communal support and shared prosperity. A key subtheme, captured by the notion of 'leaving behind', refers not to abandonment but to the refusal to withhold help when it is needed; participants reported that such refusal is rare among Igbo entrepreneurs. Assistance is not parochial but reciprocal: both helper and helped gain from a transaction in the moment and reap further benefits in subsequent ventures. This interpretation highlights the centrality of mutual aid, mentorship, and collective

advancement in Igbo entrepreneurial practice and signals a moral concern for others in a world where self-interest often predominates. Specifically, a subset of *Nna Ukwu* explained that:

The concept of 'leaving someone behind' is antithetical to Igbo business traditions. Success is viewed through a communal lens rather than a parochial one, ensuring that both the privileged and the less privileged benefit from economic arrangements (F₁). As several key informants emphasized:

The belief in Onye aghana nwanne ya serves as a powerful motivator, drawing prospective entrepreneurs toward mentorship and business ownership (F₂).

Indeed, when an individual is provided with a safety net against poverty and offered a clear path to progress, the impact is profound, especially in a developing nation like Nigeria, where systemic intervention is vital for uplifting the underserved. This belief fosters a robust culture of mutual support, reinforcing the Igbo tradition of collective elevation. Historically, Igbo entrepreneurs have played a pivotal role in human capital development, offering mentorship and financial aid to others regardless of their specific community or state of origin. However, this support is conditional; it is strictly withheld in cases of theft or criminal behaviour, so as to ensure that ethical integrity remains the cornerstone of entrepreneurial growth.

Under this theme, an expansive understanding of 'brotherhood' emerged as a pivotal sub-theme. A hallmark of Igbo culture, this concept extends far beyond biological ties, embracing individuals from diverse communities as kin. This inclusive definition fosters deep social cohesion and solidarity within the ethnic group. As one mentor aptly noted:

The belief in Onye aghana nwanne ya provides a strong foundation for mutual support and encouragement, particularly for the igba-boi (apprentices), who rely on training and financial assistance to establish their businesses (F₃).

Based on these viewpoints, this cultural principle has been instrumental in attracting prospective entrepreneurs to mentorship initiatives. More often than not, the spirit of brotherhood is needed to success in life when such is given at every stage of career development, moral boost is received to forge ahead. It serves as the cornerstone of the Igbo Trade Association and the indigenous apprenticeship system, sustaining these institutions since their inception.

Similarly, a subset of mentees highlighted the psychological and financial security provided by this system and it goes to demonstrate the impact on mentees confidence and mobility. One of the mentees stated that:

The belief in Onye aghana nwanne ya instills the confidence needed to pursue rigorous business training and secure startup capital. It fosters a spirit of togetherness and assurance. Personally, I have experienced this power firsthand: despite being from Abia State and my mentor being from Anambra, he took me under his wing. He provided training, accommodation, feeding etc. In return, I dedicated myself to promoting his enterprise, knowing he would provide the necessary capital for my own 'settlement' upon completion (F₄).

This framework of mutual support and shared responsibility creates a profound sense of belonging. It drives mentees to succeed not only for personal gain but as a tribute to their families and the broader community.

Onye Igbo anaghi enye nwanne ya azu, kama o na akuziere ya otu esi azu'

The views expressed by the Nna Ukwu (Masters) underscore that this theme encapsulates the importance of empowerment through knowledge sharing and skill development, rather than mere handouts. They further elaborated that by 'teaching brothers how to fish,' Igbo entrepreneurs equip prospective business owners with the expertise necessary for long-term economic independence and financial stability. As one participant articulated:

This belief has become a cornerstone of Igbo business culture, fostering a spirit of self-sufficiency and industriousness (F₁).

The key informants explained that this process creates a sustainable lineage of success:

Through the indigenous Igbo mentorship model, my mentor taught me the ropes of business and provided the capital to establish my own venture. I have since trained numerous mentees and continue to train others today, perpetuating a cycle of empowerment and independence. This approach is far more meaningful than financial handouts, as it enables individuals to become self-sustaining and contribute to the greater good (F₂).

These views align closely with the perspectives of the mentees. One mentee noted the distinct advantages of this belief system compared to Western or formal vocational models:

This belief has been instrumental in nurturing entrepreneurs across Igboland. It offers a unique opportunity to learn the intricacies of business management without incurring financial costs, requiring only dedicated service, while providing guaranteed access to startup funding. This is a privilege not typically found in other apprenticeship models (F₃).

Consequently, the emphasis on self-sufficiency is a powerful draw for the system. It resonates with individuals who value autonomy and self-reliance, attracting serious-minded entrepreneurs seeking to take control of their economic destiny. In contrast, systems that perpetuate dependency hold far less appeal for those seeking to forge their own paths and achieve lasting self-sustenance.

Onye Igbo kwenyere na obu onye nche nwanne ya

As explained by the subset of Nna Ukwu, being a brother's keeper entails actively caring for and safeguarding one another's well-being, a practice that strengthens loyalty and patronage within Igbo business mentorship. By upholding this belief, Igbo entrepreneurs cultivate a network of trust, ensuring that mentorship remains a sustainable and impactful tradition.

As highlighted by key informants, Igbo entrepreneurs consistently uphold the belief of being their brother's keeper in business, ensuring that the interests of all parties involved are protected. For example, when a middleman brings customers to a shop, a structured profit-sharing ratio is established to fairly compensate each party. This system fosters trust, encourages collaboration, and reinforces the Igbo tradition of mutual support in entrepreneurship, allowing businesses to thrive within a network of shared success. This protection fosters a sense of security and support, encouraging many Igbos to enroll in business mentorship that provides the necessary guidance to establish and run a successful business enterprise.

The subset of the mentees who are currently under training said:

I experienced this firsthand. My master took me under his wing, providing for my daily needs while I lived in his house. In return, I protected his business interests by attending to

customers, selling goods, managing the store, and performing other duties to support his business F_1 .

This mutual support and protection are hallmarks of the indigenous Igbo business mentorship. It promotes a spirit of solidarity and collective success among Igbo entrepreneurs.

Another subset of key informants emphasized that:

acting as a brother's keeper within the Igbo business community manifests in multiple ways and they are deeply rooted in cultural traditions of mutual support and collective growth (F_2). Such as explained include:

Firstly, this belief fosters an unwavering commitment to assisting one another, ensuring business success is a shared endeavor rather than an individual pursuit.

Secondly, it encompasses the acceptance and development of mentees, providing them with the necessary guidance, financial assistance, and business resources, whether in the form of capital or goods, to establish their ventures.

Beyond the training period, this support remains intact, as graduated mentees are expected to uphold the core values of loyalty and integrity in their business dealings, reinforcing the importance of ethical entrepreneurship.

Furthermore, mentees maintain strong ties with their *Nna Ukwu* even after completing business training, signifying the lasting impact of mentorship. This communal approach ensures that business mentorship is not merely a temporary arrangement but a lifelong commitment to mutual success. By fostering enduring relationships built on trust and shared prosperity, the Igbo business model guarantees sustainability across generations, strengthening the community's tradition of economic resilience and collective advancement.

The subset of mentees explained that:

this belief revolves around the principle of ensuring the availability of goods among Igbo businesspersons in times of supply. If a shop owner lacks a particular item and a customer requests it, he promptly seek assistance from another Igbo entrepreneur who has the required supply. Once the transaction is completed, a structured profit-sharing formula is applied, ensuring fairness for both parties F_3 . This practice not only facilitates seamless business operations but also reinforces the communal spirit of Igbo entrepreneurship. By fostering a network of mutual support and solidarity, this belief system strengthens business relationships and ensures economic sustainability within the community.

The responses from other mentees suggest a strong demonstration of communal living among the Igbos, which is deeply rooted in their business culture. As explained, *the belief of being one's brother's keeper is evident, where mentees reside with Nna Ukwu and their families during the mentorship period. This unique aspect of the culture provides mentees with access to comprehensive support, including food, clothing, healthcare, transportation allowance, and financial support to establish their own businesses after completing their training F_4 .*

This all-encompassing support system is a hallmark of the Igbo business culture, setting it apart from other apprenticeship systems in Nigeria and making it an attractive career path for young Igbos.

‘Onye Igbo ekwesighi idi umengwu n’oru’

The summary of participants responses on this theme is centred around diligence and the ‘service-for-settlement’ ethos. Settlement means granting the graduated mentees funds and goods, as the case maybe to commence their personal business. This cultural belief is therefore, firmly anchored in the principle of industriousness. Within the Igbo commercial framework, hard work is a prerequisite; laziness is strictly prohibited and never tolerated. This ethos is deeply ingrained in the indigenous Igbo business mentorship model, where the concept of ‘service for settlement’ holds sway.

Under this arrangement, mentees reside with their mentors and their families, providing comprehensive business and domestic services. Where necessary, many mentees sleep within the business premises to ensure security, transitioning from business activities during the day to domestic responsibilities in the evening. This immersive setup systematically discourages indolence and fosters a rigorous work ethic, as evidenced by the enthusiastic participation of mentees observed during fieldwork. Daily tasks, such as inventory management, stock logistics, supply procurement, and retail operations, serve as practical demonstrations of the centrality of hard work in the apprenticeship system.

The mentor’s perspective is mainly on accountability and standards. One interviewed Nna Ukwu emphasized the cultural intolerance for sloth:

The Igbo business mentorship places a strong emphasis on diligence. Both mentors (Nna Ukwu) and mentees are expected to uphold a high standard of productivity and commitment. To ensure efficiency, the system establishes well-defined roles and responsibilities for each party, fostering accountability and clarity in expectations (F_1).

The key informants further elaborated that this structured approach does more than build professional discipline; it instills a drive for excellence. According to him, *by embedding these values into the model, the tradition ensures that mentees evolve into self-sufficient, skilled entrepreneurs capable of contributing to long-term economic sustainability* (F_2).

Similarly, the summary of the mentee’s experience on this them is mainly on resilience and ambition. One participant shared his personal journey:

During my business mentorship, I worked diligently both in the shop and at home to ensure the success of my training and my master’s business, knowing this was the path to receiving support for my own venture. No mentor would tolerate laziness, as it directly hinders success. Instead, they emphasize dedication as a fundamental pillar of the culture (F_3).

This witness reinforces the structured expectations that translate into entrepreneurial success. By instilling these values, mentors ensure that mentees develop the discipline, resilience, and business acumen necessary to navigate a complex commercial landscape.

‘Ana enweta aku na uba site na azumahja’

To sum the views of participants on this theme, business as a cultural and economic vocation was discovered. In Igbo culture, therefore, commerce is a highly esteemed vocation and it is recognized for its profound potential to generate wealth and communal prosperity. Consequently, a significant number of Igbo youths enroll in the traditional business mentorship, an apprenticeship system designed to provide the technical skills

and financial scaffolding necessary to establish independent enterprises. According to one of the mentors,
this path is pursued not merely for immediate income but as a strategic means to accumulate wealth and secure long-term financial stability (F₁).

Key informants emphasized that beyond its economic appeal, business serves as a vital platform for the development of human capital through mentorship. It provides the financial resources required to address complex social and cultural obligations. The system equips individuals with the assets necessary to build resilient and sustainable enterprises. One of them stated that:

This deeply ingrained entrepreneurial tradition does more than foster individual wealth; it ensures business continuity, allowing family and community enterprises to thrive across generations (F₂).

Mentees further reinforced that business is viewed as a revered career path within Igbo society. It is highly valued for its capacity to drive economic prosperity, with the mentorship system remaining the preferred route for aspiring entrepreneurs. This structured pathway offers a clear and reliable trajectory toward financial independence. *The participants also noted that:*

This time-honoured approach has produced a significant class of wealthy entrepreneurs by facilitating a unique reciprocal exchange: mentees provide dedicated service in return for comprehensive training, mentorship, and the eventual capital to establish their own ventures. Through this immersion, mentees acquire firsthand experience, practical skills, and the ethical foundations necessary for enduring success within the Igbo business community (F₃).

Ofuosisiadiemeofia

Respondents explained that the belief in *Ofu osisi adi eme ofia* is predicated on cooperative practices, including resource pooling, information sharing, strategic referrals, and collective bargaining. These practices effectively convert social ties into tangible economic advantages, lowering entry barriers for new entrepreneurs and providing a cushion against market risks. The theme generates and sustains dense networks of trust and reciprocity that accelerate firm growth, expand market access, and enhance institutional resilience. Its unanimous acceptance among participants signals that collaboration is not merely an instrumental tool, but the core organizing principle of entrepreneurial strategy within these communities. One of the mentors stated that:

To thrive in both commerce and life, one must cultivate relationships and prioritize collaboration (F₁).

This principle resonates deeply within the Igbo worldview, driving engagement in mentorship systems that facilitate networking and partnership-building across the region. Such connections foster business transactions and social bonds that often endure for a lifetime.

Key informants elaborated on how this belief promotes entrepreneurship through mentorship:

Just as a tree cannot thrive in isolation, a businessman, regardless of his personal wealth, cannot achieve sustained success without a robust support network. Each individual plays a vital role in the business ecosystem. Mentees, far from being mere trainees, are integral to the prosperity of the Nna Ukwu. Indeed, in many Igbo communities, the number of successful mentees a master has 'settled' serves as a primary metric of his social wealth and cultural influence (F₂).

Mentees further noted that their contributions are indispensable, *particularly as a Nna Ukwu advances in age; their labour becomes the backbone of daily operations. Conversely, the Nna Ukwu provides structured training, financial scaffolding, and moral guidance, ensuring the mentee's transition to independent entrepreneurship. This interdependence reinforces the communal essence of Igbo business culture (F₃).*

The findings reveal a fascinating dynamic of lifelong integration: *Nna Ukwu* maintain close, enduring relationships with their graduated mentees. They continue to seek information, connections, and strategic support from their former apprentices, particularly in areas like marketing and 'talent recycling.' This arrangement essentially integrates graduated mentees into the mentor's extended business team for life.

This mutually beneficial relationship is characterized by symbiotic mutualism, where all stakeholders, mentors, current mentees, and graduates, derive continuous benefit from their interactions. By fostering a network of reciprocal support, this belief ensures that collaboration remains the cornerstone of Igbo entrepreneurial success.

Discussion of findings

The study found six core belief systems relevant to entrepreneurship development in Igbo society, and how it does that is succinctly outlined below:

Onye Aghana Nwanne Ya

The study highlights *Onye Aghana Nwanne Ya*, a core cultural belief in Igbo society that mandates collective mobility to ensure no individual, family, or community member is left stranded in poverty. In practice, its entrepreneurial impact drives established Igbo entrepreneurs to actively seek out, mentor, and integrate kin into their business networks. These findings directly challenge Western atomistic individualism by demonstrating that economic security is built on communal social safety nets and relational capital rather than isolated self-interest.

Onye Igbo Anaghi Enye Nwanne Ya Azu, Kama O Na Akuziere Ya Otu Esi Azu Azu

The findings for this theme illustrate a comprehensive approach to human capital development in Igbo society. Across various communities, the principle of *Azu* (centered on teaching one how to fish rather than giving them fish) prioritizes capacity building within entrepreneurship. Culturally, this belief system encapsulates a philosophy of self-reliance, practical skill transmission, and sustainable empowerment over passive dependency. Pragmatically, this ethos serves as the philosophical engine of the world-renowned Indigenous Igbo Business Mentorship, wherein young protégés are taught trade secrets, management practices, and financial literacy before receiving startup capital to launch independent ventures. Theoretically, these findings reconceptualize human capital development, shifting it from a formal Western institutional model into a highly effective, community-embedded vocational framework.

Onye Igbo Kwenyere Na Obu Onye Nche Nwanne Ya

The study's findings on *Onye Igbo Kwenyere Na Obu Onye Nche Nwanne Ya* reflect a collective commitment to human capital development within kin and family networks in entrepreneurship in Igbo society. Culturally, this belief system emphasizes communal

guardianship, ethical responsibility, and joint accountability among relatives and trade partners. Pragmatically, its entrepreneurial impact serves as an informal governance mechanism that reduces transaction costs, minimizes opportunism, and replaces formal legal enforcement with robust intra-ethnic trust and social sanctions. Theoretically, this demonstrates how indigenous socio-moral norms generate 'high-trust' economic markets without relying strictly on formal legal or regulatory infrastructures.

Onye Igbo Ekwesighi Idi Umengwu N'Oru

The findings regarding this belief hinge on the dignity of labour and the cultivation of an industrious ethic within Igbo society. Culturally, it acts as a strong moral stance against sloth, framing hard work, grit, and diligence, *Oru*, as fundamental obligations and markers of adulthood. Pragmatically, its entrepreneurial impact instills a relentless work ethic and deep resilience, *Igbo Enwe Ezi*, in enterprise owners, driving high risk tolerance, extended operational hours, and long-term perseverance amidst harsh economic conditions. Theoretically, this framework serves as an Afrocentric parallel to Weber's (1934) Protestant Work Ethic, and McClelland (1967) Need for Achievement (nAch) proving that rigorous work ethics are deeply rooted in indigenous African value systems.

Ana Enweta Aku Na Uba Site Na Azumahja

The findings for this theme demonstrate that wealth is actively achievable through strategic commercial endeavours, a perspective closely tied to the strong entrepreneurial drive of the Igbo people. Culturally, this belief explicitly validates commerce, trade, and enterprise as noble and legitimate pathways toward sustainable wealth accumulation *Aku na Uba*. Pragmatically, its entrepreneurial impact socializes individuals from an early age to view market opportunities, negotiation, and trade as primary engines of personal and social mobility, rather than relying on agrarian or public-sector employment that is very scanty in contemporary Nigeria. Theoretically, these insights directly refute classical modernization theories (e.g. Parsons, 1969; Rostow, 1960) that framed traditional African societies as inherently fatalistic or resistant to commercial expansion.

Ofu Osisi Anaghi Eme Ofia

The finding on this final theme highlights the role of collective synergy and social network capital in Igbo enterprise. Within its cultural context, it asserts that individual wealth remains vulnerable without surrounding communal prosperity. In practice, this mindset fosters powerful trade associations, town unions, market cooperatives, *Esusu*, and renowned commercial clusters such as Aba, Onitsha, and Nnewi. Finally, the theoretical connection demonstrates how economies of scale, industrial clustering, and collective action can be successfully realized through indigenous social capital instead of formal corporate monopolization drive of Western scholarship.

Taken together, the six core Igbo cultural tenets, demonstrate that indigenous belief systems actively drive entrepreneurship through socialization and relational norms. This socio-cultural architecture stands in stark contrast to Western frameworks that valorize atomistic individualism (Assmann & Ehrl, 2021). These empirical insights align directly with Ajekwe (2017) regarding the motivational power of indigenous paradigms, while decisively refuting the modernization theories of Rostow (1960) and Parsons (1969), which historically mischaracterized African

tradition as a 'pre-Newtonian' impediment to economic development. Instead, this research establishes that traditional African institutions function as dynamic economic assets and engines of growth. Furthermore, while the findings acknowledge the rise of an elite merchant class, these actors embody Schumpeter's (1939) vision of social leadership, reinvesting in community empowerment and human capital through systems like Igba Boyi, rather than engaging in the conspicuous consumption described by Rostow.

By and large, by corroborating Becker's (1964) human capital development theory, these findings demonstrate that the strategic deployment of indigenous cultural governance is foundational to sustainable African entrepreneurship and long-term societal advancement.

Conclusion

Considering the above findings, the study concludes that Igbo cultural beliefs accentuate profound impact on entrepreneurship development in Nigeria, particularly through the indigenous business mentorship. The findings reveal that traditional mentorship serves as a culturally embedded mechanism for fostering business success, ensuring knowledge transfer, economic sustainability, and the reinforcement of communal solidarity. Therefore, rather than being obstacles to entrepreneurship and national development, Igbo cultural beliefs form the backbone of an enduring business tradition that has propelled generations of entrepreneurs to success. The belief of *onye aghana nwanne ya* and the expectation that apprentices remain loyal to their mentors illustrate the deep interconnectedness within Igbo commerce.

Thus, any attempt to locate barriers to entrepreneurship and broader economic growth should shift focus away from cultural beliefs in Igbo society and instead examine external structural or policy-related challenges. Recognizing and harnessing Igbo cultural beliefs can provide strengths and valuable insights for government functionaries to foster an environment where entrepreneurship flourishes to drive innovation, and secure economic resilience for future generations.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, this study advocates for the institutionalization of cultural entrepreneurship programs and mentorship initiatives, supported by robust policy frameworks at all levels of government. To ensure the continued evolution of the Igbo business model and its replication in other contexts, it suggested that:

Other ethnic and cultural groups should be encouraged to explore their own heritage for human capital development and entrepreneurial proficiency. By identifying indigenous mechanisms that drive wealth generation and job creation, nations can foster inclusive economic growth that is culturally resonant rather than externally imposed. This approach celebrates Africa's rich cultural diversity and recognizes heritage as a primary driver of socioeconomic progress.

Rather than attempting to replace traditional systems with Western-style individualistic models, policy interventions should aim to strengthen and scale existing social mechanisms. This can be achieved through:

- (i) Formalizing Training: Integrating aspects of the apprenticeship model into vocational technical education (TVET) curricula.
- (ii) Access to Credit: Creating specialized credit facilities that recognize the 'guarantor' role of the Nna Ukwu or communal associations as a form of social collateral.
- (iii) Market Linkages: Developing digital platforms that enhance the existing 'talent recycling' and supply chain networks across the diaspora.

Lastly, by harnessing the unique strengths of various cultural groups, African states can create a more prosperous and diverse economic landscape. This shift from 'modernization as Westernization' to 'development through culture' offers a replicable model for community-based growth that reduces poverty while preserving the social fabric of the continent.

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Author contributions

CRedit: **Dare Ojo Omonijo**: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Software, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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