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Adim Chidiebere Victor
Amadi Ada Fidelia Subai



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Adim, Chidiebere Victor
Doctoral Candidate: Department of Management,
Faculty of Management Sciences,
Rivers State University, Nkpolu-Oroworukwo,
PMB 5080, Port Harcourt, Nigeria.
adimcvictor@gmail.com

Amadi, Ada Fidelia Subai
Doctoral Candidate: Department of Management, Faculty of Management Sciences,
Rivers State University, Nkpolu-Oroworukwo,
PMB 5080, Port Harcourt, Nigeria.

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to examine the entrepreneurial mind set of indigenous Igbo entrepreneurs: Critical success factors. The study is largely conceptual and adopted a review of literature. From the review of extant literature, it found that Igbo entrepreneurs are visionary, enthusiastic and result driven. The Igbos are risk-takers and intelligent entrepreneurs, who are committed in totality to economic activities as their lineage hobby. More so, for the Igbos, entrepreneurial success is not just a choice but a must. These goes to show that it is in the nature of the Igbos to also embrace viable alternatives. Individualism in the Igbo world is an understanding conspicuous in property ownership, acquisitions, productions, exchange of goods and services. This shows that both in traditional and modern Igbo world, much focus are on the economic prospects of the individual within the context of the community.

Keywords: *Igbo Entrepreneurial Mind set, Igbo Apprenticeship*

INTRODUCTION

From time immemorial, the need for socio-economic independence has engaged the attention of the Igbo people of Nigeria. This need has over the years brought the entrepreneurial skill of Igbo people to lime light. The Igbo understands entrepreneurship as a potent economic force, and a core element in the development efforts of an individual and the nation at large. For the Igbo therefore, comparative advantage among individuals has dynamically moved towards increasing competitive and qualitative entrepreneurial advancement which is the fulcrum of personal and national development. This is why despite the dynamic multiplying socio-political and economic challenges in the modern world, the Igbos exhibit overwhelming entrepreneurial strides.

Igbo people view entrepreneurship as self-employment of any sort, which bothers on continuously identifying, evaluating and taking advantage of business opportunities and initiating sustainable action to ensure success. Indeed, every entrepreneurial endeavour, for the Igbo, is also a veritable answer to the questions elicited from their experiences in their special world. It is as well understood as a search for profit based on innovation, creativity and efficient utilization of resources in a consistent Igbo cultural pattern, which is filled with vision and enthusiasm and is result driven (Chinweuba & Ezeugwu, 2017). Therefore, entrepreneurship for the Igbo people incorporates every profit and goal oriented strategies which they describe as “Ibido ahia” or “Oru” (starting an enterprise), “Izu ahia” (business transactions), “Imu ahia” (learning a trade), “Imu oru” (learning a craft or vocation), and “Igba oso ahia” (indulging in trick of marketing another’s goods with his consent at a price that raises capital) (Chinweuba & Ezeugwu, 2017).

Consequently, Igbo people are outstanding in pursuing opportunities to become active economic individuals despite the meagre resources within their control. All these are in an attempt to satisfy their deep rooted need and interest to be truly Igbo and economic reliant personalities. And to be truly Igbo is to belong by birth and action; to participate in Igbo beliefs, ceremonies and activities, and to feel at home in this universe (Ogugua, 2003). Thus, in Igbo understanding of life, to participate fully in Igbo life portends some amount of socio-economic reliance and gesture. For every true Igbo abhors idleness and tangibly contributes to the welfare and growth of the community. This economic gesture is what Igbo people prized most as “aku luo uno” (wealth that reached home). In order to be part of this reality, Igbo people everywhere struggle to transform economic resources within their control from an area of lower to an area of higher productivity and greater yield deriving strength from Igbo philosophy of life reflecting in the expression “Onye ruo, O rie” (He who works must enjoy the wealth) (Chinweuba & Ezeugwu, 2017).

In all circumstances therefore, Igbo people give meaning to prevalent socio-economic reality, achieving performance by harmonizing their existence with the difficulties and contradictions prevalent in the environment. It is based on this entrepreneurial gallantry that Igbo people have excelled more than their counterparts in Nigerian socio-economic context. Consequently, most entrepreneurial initiatives, commercial centres, and structures in major Nigerian cities are managed by the Igbo people. This is why Olutayo (1999) argues that of the three main ethnic groups in Nigeria, the Igbos are the most energetic parvenus in entrepreneurship, who has challenged and surpassed the established economic order of supremacy occupied by other Nigerian tribes. In fact, the 1967 secession of Igbo people from Nigeria which led to civil war was foiled out of fear that Nigerian economy may collapse with the exit of the Igbo

entrepreneurial touch (Adichie, 2014). Down in the south eastern Nigeria which is the Igbo home land and some part of Niger Delta region where Igbo people inhabit, the story remains an overwhelming entrepreneurial advancement and economic prominence. Based on this, Anyanwu (1999) observes that Igbo people no longer look up to benevolent government for salvation but are working towards self-reliance, and even contributes up to 80% of Nigeria's economy while receiving the lowest decreasing allocation from the federal government. Glaring therefore is that Igbo people believe in purposeful hard work, and personal effort filled with communal colouration. This stems from their worldview which is inculcated in them from birth as a guiding principle and a drive towards entrepreneurial performance. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the entrepreneurial mindset of indigenous Igbo entrepreneurs: Critical success factors.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Igbo Entrepreneurship/ Entrepreneur

The word Igbo entrepreneurship was derived from Igbo (culture) and entrepreneurship. This simply means planning, organizing, coordinating and controlling other factors of production and production process in Igbo learning culture. Therefore, an Igbo entrepreneur is a person who does not only coordinate other factors of production, but who from time to time seeks opportunities to make profit through his/her innovativeness, creativity, customers' satisfaction and efficient utilization of scarce resources in a consistent cultural pattern (Orugun & Nafiu, 2014). Thus, Igbo entrepreneurs are visionary, enthusiastic and result driven. These are not far from the rationale behind their undertakings in high business risk. Without policies and programmes suitable for backup and growth from any source, fountains are still made by these unique entrepreneurs in the Nigerian business environment (Orugun & Nafiu, 2014). In the real fact, it is never gainsaying that people at the rural and urban areas in Nigeria depend heavily on the Igbo entrepreneurial initiatives, inventions and efficient outcomes. The Igbo entrepreneurs have dominated Nigeria and even across the national boundary, such as South Africa, Cameroon, Ghana, Mali and Gambia, China and so on (Orugun & Nafiu, 2014).

Nigeria comprises of three major ethnic groups; Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba. Igbos are regionalized in the East, Hausas in the North and Yorubas in the West. Of all these ethnic groups, Igbos are distinguished with a unique trait which can holistically serve as a solution tool for the dynamic economic situation of developing nations of the world. These set of people are cultured particularly in the area of business (Orugun & Nafiu, 2014). There was a prior conception that most Igbo business veterans acquired their business skills from their past colonial masters. It was also argued that the post-civil war placed an agony of survival before them, which forced the rich and prominent ones among them to conceive investment of their little money for returns. The Igbo culture taught the Igbos that no condition is permanent (Achebe, 2012). No wonder the Igbos are self-contented and self-reliant. The Igbos of Nigeria are Africa's most energetic and most entrepreneurial people, (AskAfricans 2012). In line with this, Olutayo (1999) acknowledged that the Igbos, empirically are very industrious and entrepreneurial, and this is obvious to other ethnic groups. Nevertheless, the Igbos are risk-takers and intelligent entrepreneurs, who are committed in totality to economic activities as their lineage hobby. The Igbo entrepreneurs play inevitable roles that are capable of proliferating healthy state for the Nigerian economy for a distant time. In fact, their entrepreneurial activities have indisputably dominated and are still dominating all sectors of the economy of Nigeria, and even across the border.

Igbo Entrepreneurial Mindset

The Igbo entrepreneurial worldview which is the pervasive unified socio-economic picture of their cosmos is the main catalyst behind their socio-economic rhythms in the universe (Chinweuba & Ezeugwu, 2017). Uchehara (2009) affirms this reality insisting that the desirability of starting an enterprise is strongly influenced by one's worldview. Significant part of this worldview therefore is Igbo culture of praise and recognition for well-deserved wealth. This tradition of encomium is discernible even in Igbo religious beliefs, rites, rituals, festivals, folklores and myths (Oguejiofor, 2009).

In fact, the Igbos view wealth as a means of gaining social prestige and acquiring social befitting rank. This stems from Igbo cosmological view of human existence encapsulated in their proverb "Nwata kwochaa aka, osoro Okenye rie nri" (A child that washes his hands dines with the Elders) (Chinweuba & Ezeugwu, 2017). Based on this worldview, the traditional Igbo people flaunt their expanse lands, large farms and abundant harvests, their large compounds marked by numerous houses and peopled by wives, offspring and dependants which are the fruits of their entrepreneurial efforts. This accords them recognition and titles from the society such as "Ozo", "Oba", "Ichie", "Ochiliozuo", "Osirioha", "Ogbuehi", to mention but a few. It then means that one is judged worthy of attaining the social rank in Igbo context based on his large wealth and philanthropic deeds felt by the community. Most importantly, this tradition serves as an incentive towards purposeful entrepreneurship in the Igbo society. Hence for the Igbos, entrepreneurial success is not just a choice but a must (Chinweuba & Ezeugwu, 2017). Though acquisition is in human character, Igbo culture which stems from their worldview lays much emphasis on it as a mark of distinction in the society.

In addition to the cosmic socio-economic wellbeing, riches and material achievements, wealth for the Igbos have a very important eschatological implication. Thus, in Igbo metaphysical understanding of existence, no one who dies poor deserves a place among the ancestors (Enwe nta, enwe imo) (Oguejiofor, 2004). As such, one's honest acquisition accords him admission into the club of the Ancestors in the afterlife, and even guarantees him reincarnation. This eschatological reality stemming from their worldview is indeed part of the drive behind the Igbo ambitious and competitive entrepreneurship. No wonder, the Igbos reflect entrepreneurship and its fruits even in their naming culture. Thus, names like "Oruamaka" (work is good), "Oruoma" (good work), Oruebube (glorious work), Orunna (work of the father), Ifeadiogo (wealth is available), Ubaka (wealth is greater), Ubanozie (wealth has taken the proper position), etc abound among the Igbos, pointing to their entrepreneurial and acquisition attitude. In fact, in order to belong to this cultural recognition, admiration and reward, Igbo people display all the economic initiative, characteristics of hardworking and astute trading (Dioka, 1997).

Nevertheless, part of the Igbo entrepreneurial understanding of the universe is enshrouded in their proverbs. As such, the Igbo takes to heart expressions like; "nke anyi bu nke anyi ma nkem bu nkem" (our own is our own but my own is my own), "aka aja aja na-ebute onu mmanu mmanu" (hard work yields wealth), "anoro ofu ebe ekiri Mmanwu" (implying that one need to explore other alternatives), etc (Chinweuba & Ezeugwu, 2017). In these ways, the individual is inspired to indulge in honest purposeful work to acquire a personal wealth. These goes to show that it is in the nature of the Igbos to also embrace viable alternatives. "This is why there is hardly any part of the world you do not see an Igbo man" (Ogugua, 2003). In fact, Igbos are pragmatic people that generally rely on positive results despite cultural stipulations. This has

also formed the basis for the pervading cultural alienation and new ways of life evident in Igbo nation. It then stands that the Igbo entrepreneurial mind-set portends an Igbo economic philosophy. This is a materialistic philosophy incorporating the needful dialectics of the community, individual and the eschatological anticipations in achieving economic performance.

Yet, in this dialectics, the individual is responsible and achievement must be personal (Oguejiofor, 1996). Supporting this assertion, Nwala (1985) argues that this is so because in Igbo traditional economy, the means of production and the products belong to the individual. Based on this, Ekei (2007) avers that individualism in the Igbo world is an understanding conspicuous in property ownership, acquisitions, productions, exchange of goods and services. This shows that both in traditional and modern Igbo world, much focus are on the economic prospects of the individual within the context of the community.

Since individuals make up the community that make up the society, the economic success of the individuals is also the economic success of the society at large. Most importantly, these postulations show that from the beginning, the Igbos are already equipped for entrepreneurship through their worldview. This is what Achebe (1998) meant when he submits that “Igbo culture being individualistic and highly competitive, gave the Igbo man an unquestioned advantage over his compatriots in securing credentials or advancement in Nigerian society.

The Igbo Apprenticeship System

Of particular interest in the entrepreneurial foundation of the Igbos is the apprenticeship system (Igba Odibo/Igba Boyi). This is an Igbo entrepreneurial induction strategy whereby young Igbos are inducted by a business/vocation mentor (Oga/Madam) into a particular entrepreneurial venture. This venture can be a trade, an enterprise or a vocation. The process of apprenticeship is however preceded by a period of three months trial to test the suitability of the inductee. In this entrepreneurial apprenticeship system, the apprentice (Boyi) is expected to serve the mentor unreservedly as he/she learns the trade, vocation or craft. This service is indeed grounded in Igbo cosmological understanding of “Onye fee Eze, Eze eruo ya aka” (he who serves the King shall be King thereafter). At the end of this traditional business school and service which at times stretches up to seven years, the mentor performs the “settlement”. This comprises of aiding the apprentice financially and otherwise in starting his/her own business or vocation based on the earlier agreement with the apprentice’s family. Once this is done, the apprentice (Boyi) is now on his own, free from the mentor.

Most of the apprentices often join their mentors at an early stage while some mentors prefer high institution graduates because of the nature of their enterprise (Chinweuba & Ezeugwu, 2017). Obunike (2016) praises the entrepreneurial performance of the Igbos which he linked to this Igbo apprenticeship strategy positing that the Igbo entrepreneur hardly waits for government funds to venture into the business of their choice. “Igba-odibo” (traditional Business School) has remained a source of livelihood and a means of being employed that aids and incubates entrepreneurs to stand on their own, raise capital for business, and actively engage in economically worthwhile ventures.

Thus, the Igbos without government assistance are dynamically moving from trade to industry and factory. These industries are scattered in cities of such as Nnewi, Enugu, Onitsha, Aba, Awka, Owerri, Lagos, Kano, Kaduna, and even beyond the shores of Nigeria. Thus, Igbos

produce many things at the moment like Innoson (IVM) Cars, Motor parts, Motorcycle parts, plastics, iron casts, steel products, Shoes, Clothes, electric cables, building materials, pipes, paints, milling machines, etc. which contributes immensely to Nigerian economy. These industries and factories of course have ties and links with most Asian entrepreneurs in Japan, China, Korea, Taiwan, etc. who acts as entrepreneurial advisers (Chinweuba & Ezeugwu, 2017).

The induction strategy of Igbo entrepreneurs has continued to progress because of its advantages. It encourages business expansion, networking and diversification, helps the entrepreneurs to have an edge over other competitors and is highly profit driven. More so, the inductee gains adequate exposure and insight into the business, gains self-employment, knows the customers, producers, importers, middlemen, regardless of their locations, and acquires adequate entrepreneur-customers relations and business skills necessary for performance. At the heart of Igbo apprenticeship system are unique and major traits of courage, perseverance and determination which surpass entrepreneurial risks, dilemma, loss, ugly experiences and enormous economic impediments in the modern world. These unique traits, Forrest (1995) submits are part of the significant strength of the Igbos over every denial, hardship, discipline and risk proneness that goes with entrepreneurship.

Impact of the Igbo Apprenticeship System on Entrepreneurial Success

The Igbo entrepreneurs are known to be very successful in their lines of businesses because of their effectiveness in business operations. Among the Igbo, wealth is determined through a number of factors such as: the development projects launched in one's community – as the saying goes: “Aku ruo ulo, o kwuo ebe o si” (developmental projects declare one wealthy) – and how many Odibos one coaches in his community, as Igbo is aggressively communal rather than individualistic. Wealth, therefore, is only a means of acquiring social prestige among the Igbo people. That is why, business success is not hidden away among the Igbo. Igbo entrepreneurs believe that success in their businesses is not a choice but a must. Circumstances like poor background and illiteracy are not limiting factors but a reason and strength of success. Successfulness connotes effectiveness: effective entrepreneurs are successful.

Business success is defined as the ability to choose an appropriate objective to achieve a given business objective. Drucker (1967) defines effectiveness as doing the right thing, thus equating it to efficiency. Feather (1988) notes that a successful business owner possesses entrepreneurial characteristics involves being effective in daily activities, goals, and objectives can be translated into overall entrepreneurial effectiveness, and hence success in the long run. Although Burnett (2000) notes that it is difficult to empirically measure the rate of entrepreneurial business successfulness because developing the tools to measure it has been problematic, Karvin (2013) outlines the variables of measuring entrepreneurs' business successfulness as: profitability, reputation, growth in number of employees, growth in number of customers, and different target audiences. Business successfulness has no universally accepted definition, but it is formulated as according to what a particular author believes to be the most relevant objectives and goals to be achieved in a particular business; therefore, the “business successfulness of the Igbo entrepreneurs” is measured hereby as: relationship marketing and business networking, business profitability and expansion, employment creation ability and capital/fund generation for businesses.

Business Expansion/Opportunity Utilization:

This involves opening many outlet stores/branches for the current business and diversification into a new business. Establishing branches at different locations, cities, and even abroad is very common among Igbo entrepreneurs as a means of business expansion and utilizations of opportunities. Adams (2013) argues that some entrepreneurial traits and skills acquired through apprenticeship are strongly related to business expansion and success. These entrepreneurs identify and utilize the opportunities identified in their surroundings to establish businesses in different locations and cities since opportunities are not known to all parties at the same time, and some individuals are more sensitive than others and can either exploit or think up particular opportunities that others have not yet realized (Shane & Venkataraman, 2000). The “Igba-odibo” concept has been used by some of these entrepreneurs who established business for their “Odibo” in different places. This also enables them to settle their “Odibo” from the proceeds of such outlet store.

Business/Customer Networking:

Access to networks is essential to develop business ideas, meet potential clients, suppliers, and business partners, understand the market together with its changes, opportunities, and weaknesses, and obtain strategic information, cooperation, and support. Researchers found that social networks provide links between the entrepreneur, resources, and opportunities and that several personality dimensions of perceiving opportunities affect entrepreneurship (Timmon, 1978; Wesh & White, 1981). Studies have accordingly shown that network relations can be a source of business success (Aldrich & Zimmer, 1986b; Burt, 2000). They must collaborate with other firms to gain access to information, skills, expertise, assets, and technologies, and thus leverage their internal resources. It helps to increase the number of customers (within and outside the city), the volume of sales per day and the market shares of the entrepreneurs. Networking and meaningful networks are an opportunity hallway for the entrepreneur as they develop broad social and professional networks, which can promote opportunity detection (Wiklund & Shepherd, 2005b; Granovetter, 1973). Igbo entrepreneurs are excellent networkers: networking spirit is one of the major reasons of the existence of Igba-Odibo. During this period, one is exposed to almost all the importers regardless of their location: Aba, Onitsha, Lagos, Kano, and even outside the country like China, Cotonou, Ghana, etc. They know where to buy their goods at all time and their major customers. They hardly stay at one place; they move from Onitsha to Lagos, from Lagos to Aba or even outside the country in search of goods to either import or export. Networking skills confer Igbo entrepreneurs’ advantages over their competitors as they can order goods both locally and internationally on credit.

Factors that Drive Igbo Entrepreneurial Ventures

Three basic variables appear to drive Igbo entrepreneurship: Their personality traits, their customs and their environment. These three variables are also related. The culture of a people relates to their pattern of thinking, feeling and potential acting that were learnt by the people through life experiences. It is a form of mental programming common to a people (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010). Unlike culture the personality of an individual is his or her unique personal set of mental programs that need not be shared with any other human being. Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov (2010) call it is the software of the mind and asserts that it is based on traits that are partly inherited from the genes and partly learnt from the culture as well as unique

personal experiences. Personality they say is thus specific to an individual, culture is specific to a group while human nature is universal (Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 2010). Environment as used here is the place God in his infinite mercy and wisdom decided to give to a people as their portion on earth on creation day. Both culture and personality are functions of the environment.

The environment of the Igbo is economically unfriendly. They have to put up with a lateritic soil, badly leached by weather and prone to gully erosion in many places. The land mass is small in relation to population and so it is continuously fragmented by inheritance. So, commercial farming is difficult Federal Government presence and the presence of multinationals in terms of job creation is nil. From childhood the Igbo learns to survive within this environment through self-employment or migrate for greener pastures. They have had no job prospect and have had to earn their living the hard way through “ike ke ta orie” (Survival by hard labour) which is basically entrepreneurship (Chinweuba & Ezeugwu, 2017). This involves personality traits that include resilience, tenacity, opportunity seeking, achievement oriented, risk taking and ambition (see <https://www.naija.ng>). These personality traits abound among the Igbo and make them individualistic

The culture of individualism among the Igbo is understandable. With a background of hard environment the Igbo has to secure himself first before becoming his brothers' keeper. It is this culture of personal interest first that helps him nurture his business from a micro and humble beginning to a Small or Medium Enterprise (SME) and lastly to a large enterprise. Secondly, seeing that there may be no help coming from elsewhere the Igbo develops internal locus of control that makes him daring and achievement oriented (Chinweuba & Ezeugwu, 2017).

Although they are basically individualistic, they have collectively also developed a culture that is based on kinship networking (or umunna) in order to survive Onwuejeogwu (2010) has demonstrated how the in system (Umunna) is used in entrepreneurship training among the Igbo: A successful entrepreneur picks up a nephew or a young cousin and puts him under internship in his own line of business for some years until he is able to freelance on his own with the seed or endowment capital the “Master” will give him. While on his own the young fellow also tries to mentor another relation and the group develops entrepreneurially. Another aspect of the Igbo culture that encouraged hard work from time immemorial is disdain for begging.

Meir (1976) had also upheld the Igbo social structure as one of the causes of their upwardly mobile and achievement oriented character. According to Meir a young man among the Igbo can become a member of a certain honorary society, the Ozo where the entry requirements are strong character, occupational success and wealth creation. So from childhood the Igbo learns that he ought to strive for achievement if he is to be successful, recognized and accepted in Igbo societies inspite of his father's socio-economic background. There is nothing like son of who? in bestowing honour in Igboland. It is personal achievement that matters.

Igbos High Risk Taking Phenomenon: A Critical Success Factor

Igbos are the most fearless ethnic group in Nigeria, who see risk as a means of exploiting opportunities. They do businesses under very harsh environments where there are no well-planned city arrangements that can make business less stressful, convenient with full functional infrastructure (Dibia, 2013). The type of risks that would have paralyzed an average entrepreneur is their step-up opportunity. Igbo risk taking phenomenon can be viewed from the

following outlines: Little or no phobia for death through high level of commitment, the choice of business with long term period of payback on investment capital, optimism on future business growth and aversion of fear concerning business mortality, establishment of businesses in a harsh business environment, uncertainty about; loss of capital if business process failed, loss of honour, prestige and paying job if the business failed and patience to invest without minding the future fall in the value of naira. The secret of this Igbo in Nigeria is embedded in their ability to take risk and transform it into opportunities, and this has often led to their business success in the economy. The Igbo have recorded successes in their various ventures across Nigerian regions and borders in the recent time. Central to the attainment of these successes is the high level of solidarity amongst them (Olutayo, 1999).

Some of the observed business success factors in the Igbo businesses are:

- i. Ability to cope in a dynamic environment
- ii. Ability to organize, reorganize and forecast
- iii. Ability to delegate responsibilities
- iv. Ability to utilize business opportunities
- v. Apprenticeship training
- vi. Energetic and hardworking spirit
- vii. Courage
- viii. Confidence
- ix. Critical thinking
- x. Curiosity to learn
- xi. Creative and innovative skill
- xii. Determination
- xiii. Independence
- xiv. Optimism
- xv. Perseverance
- xvi. Risk-transformation skill

CONCLUSION

The personality characteristics of the Igbo are strong drivers of their entrepreneurial success. Also, the culture of the Igbo which encourages individuals reward and migration also drives entrepreneurial risk- taking initiatives and resultant success. The entrepreneurial performance of Igbo people from ancient to contemporary times is dynamic and continuous. But Igbo entrepreneurs have been successful because of their practice of right business strategy and effectiveness. These practices are however propelled by principally by their entrepreneurial mind-set and attitude which views economic achievement an incentive that calls for higher achievements.

This paper recommends that Government and Policy Makers should provide the necessary support and right institutional framework that would catalyse the Igbo entrepreneurial spirit through the provision of loans, provision of constant electricity, good road networks and most importantly, making policies that encourages the indigenous consumption of products arising from Igbo entrepreneurial ventures in terms of clothing, spare parts and automobiles. Furthermore, as a way of enhancing the industrialization of Nigeria, other ethnic nationalities in Nigeria can imbibe certain entrepreneurial philosophy of the Igbo like courage, willingness to start small, perseverance and determination over entrepreneurial risks.

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