

RESEARCH PAPER

The evolution of apprenticeship in Benin

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ABSTRACT

Apprenticeship is one of the oldest forms of transmission of knowledge and professional skills. In Benin, it historically developed within family and community settings before undergoing profound transformations linked to economic, social, and institutional changes. Today, in a context characterized by the predominance of the informal sector, artisanal apprenticeship remains a major tool for the socio-professional integration of young people and skills development. The evolution of apprenticeship in Benin reveals a gradual transformation from a family-based and informal system towards increasingly organized and institutionalized forms. This change is reflected both in the spatial evolution of apprenticeship, its organizational structures, and its mechanisms for skills recognition. This paper analyzes the main transformations that have shaped the evolution of apprenticeship in Benin, with particular emphasis on its spatial development, the transformation of its organizational forms, and the evolution of mechanisms for skills recognition and certification.

Key words: apprenticeship, craftsmanship, Benin, vocational training, enterprise

INTRODUCTION

Apprenticeship is an ancient phenomenon closely linked to human history. As a training system, it has undergone continuous evolution in its organizational forms and mechanisms for skills recognition. Initially practiced within the family sphere, apprenticeship

gradually expanded into urban areas as a result of rural migration and the growth of artisanal activities. This evolution contributed to the emergence of small and micro-enterprises, which today account for nearly 45.6% of economic units in Benin. Traditional apprenticeship is primarily based on workplace practice. Learners initially serve as

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helpers or assistants before progressively acquiring apprentice status under the supervision of a master craftsman within a system increasingly structured by artisans themselves.

Since the early 2000s, the Government of Benin has introduced the dual apprenticeship system, combining workplace-based practical training with theoretical and practical instruction in specialized training centers. This approach seeks to strengthen the complementarity between theory and practice in vocational skills development. At the same time, mechanisms for skills recognition have become progressively institutionalized. Following a period characterized by social recognition and certificates issued by artisans and their professional associations, the Traditional Apprenticeship Completion Examinations (EFAT) marked an important step toward formal certification. Subsequently, the Certificate of Occupational Qualification (CQM) and the Certificate of Professional Qualification (Certificat de Qualification Professionnelle, CQP) were introduced and are now officially recognized within the framework of West African Economic and Monetary Union (Union Économique et Monétaire Ouest-Africaine, UEMOA) regulations.

Apprenticeship in Benin therefore appears as a dynamic system whose evolution contributes significantly to the modernization of vocational education and training and to the enhancement of

youth employability.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on a qualitative, historically oriented approach grounded in documentary analysis of scientific, institutional, and regulatory sources related to apprenticeship in Benin. It adopts a diachronic reading of apprenticeship forms and certification systems, complemented by a comparative perspective with vocational training policies in developing countries.

The analysis draws on specialized academic works, institutional documents, legal texts, administrative reports, and statistical data related to professional certification systems in the craft sector.

SPATIAL EVOLUTION OF APPRENTICESHIP

Apprenticeship and the school of life

In ancient times, villages were composed of families occupying clearly defined geographical spaces and performing specific roles in community life. Each family contributed to the functioning of the community through specialized activities.

Families were mainly engaged in weaving, blacksmithing, pottery, hunting, construction, pharmacopoeia, funeral rites, divination practices, and various socio-cultural activities.

This community-based organization

enabled intergenerational transmission of skills through observation, imitation, and daily practice.

Apprenticeship within the family circle

Within specialized families, skills were transmitted from generation to generation. Boys were trained alongside male relatives such as fathers, uncles, or cousins, while girls learned from mothers, aunts, or female cousins. Apprenticeship was therefore a natural extension of family and community life.

Apprenticeship beyond the family circle

Due to demographic growth and market saturation at the local level, the family system gradually weakened. Some skilled artisans were forced to leave their communities in search of better living conditions. Away from their families, they began to accept apprentices who had no family ties with them. This marked a shift in apprenticeship, which gradually moved beyond its strictly familial foundations, opening a new phase in its historical evolution.

Apprenticeship during the colonial period

Colonization contributed to the expansion of apprenticeship through the emergence of new professions linked to the economic exploitation and infrastructure development of the Dahomey colony. Public works led to the development of trades such as masonry, carpentry, joinery, bricklaying, and heavy machinery operation. The importation of

manufactured goods (bicycles, mopeds, radios, typewriters, sewing machines, vehicles, *etc.*) also fostered the growth of maintenance and repair occupations. Local labor was trained and employed in production and service sectors. Over time, many skilled workers became self-employed, leading to the emergence of micro and small craft enterprises specializing in mechanics, electronics, winding, electricity, welding, woodworking, and maintenance services. These craftsmen gradually opened their workshops to apprentices, contributing to the expansion of vocational training in newly emerging colonial-era trades.

Apprenticeship after independence

Following independence, urban development and increasing population needs led to the expansion of artisanal enterprises. These enterprises continued their tradition of in-house vocational training, making apprenticeship more accessible to young people.

EVOLUTION OF APPRENTICESHIP MODELS

Unorganized apprenticeship

Unorganized apprenticeship represents the oldest form of vocational skills transmission within the artisanal sector. It is essentially an informal learning system characterized by the absence of explicit regulations governing the relationship between the master craftsman and the apprentice. In this model, the acquisition of competencies relies primarily on participation in productive activities without

a clearly defined pedagogical framework.

This form of apprenticeship is characterized by the apprentice's status as a helper or assistant, the absence of formally established mutual commitments between the parties, the indefinite duration of the training period, and the lack of predefined learning conditions. It is also distinguished by the absence of a written contract or any formal document regulating the training relationship.

Unorganized apprenticeship therefore constitutes the most representative form of informal learning traditionally practiced within family settings and artisanal enterprises. For many years, it served as the principal mechanism for the intergenerational transmission of occupational knowledge and skills.

Self-organized apprenticeship

In response to the absence of structured public vocational training initiatives, artisans gradually developed self-regulated mechanisms for training young people. This evolution led to the emergence of self-organized apprenticeship, characterized by a higher level of organization and structure in the training process. This mode of apprenticeship is mainly based on observation, imitation, and the gradual reproduction of occupational skills and work practices. Competency development occurs through a progressive integration into production or service delivery activities. The training pathway generally follows several successive stages.

The first stage is the inactive appren-

ticeship phase. During this period, apprentices mainly perform auxiliary tasks such as cleaning workshops, maintaining equipment, and running errands. This stage allows them to become familiar with the work environment and to acquire the discipline and behavioral norms associated with the occupation. The second stage is the semi-active apprenticeship phase. At this level, apprentices develop their observational skills and begin to participate in simple work activities under the supervision of the master craftsperson or more experienced apprentices. The third stage corresponds to active apprenticeship. Apprentices are progressively involved in technical operations and undertake increasingly complex tasks under the guidance of the master craftsperson or the assistant master. The final stage is that of assistant master (sub-master). At this level, the apprentice has acquired substantial experience and contributes to the supervision of junior apprentices while assisting the master craftsperson in managing production activities and customer relations.

These stages can be broadly grouped into three major phases: An observation and socialization phase, a progressive integration into productive activities phase, and a responsibility and professional autonomy phase.

Dual apprenticeship

Dual apprenticeship represents a significant evolution of traditional vocational training systems. It constitutes a modernized form of artisanal apprenticeship based on the integration of

workplace training and institution-based learning.

Unlike traditional apprenticeship, which takes place entirely within the enterprise, dual apprenticeship combines periods of practical training in the workplace with periods of theoretical and practical instruction in a vocational training center. This complementary approach aims to strengthen technical competencies while providing learners with the theoretical and technological knowledge required for effective occupational practice.

Within this system, workplace training remains predominant, accounting for approximately 75% to 80% of the total training duration. Vocational training centers provide theoretical instruction, technological education, and complementary practical exercises.

The dual apprenticeship approach is founded on the pedagogical principle that theory and practice are mutually reinforcing dimensions of learning, a concept often associated with Immanuel Kant, who emphasized the interdependence of theoretical knowledge and practical experience.

In Benin, dual apprenticeship was institutionalized in 2003 as part of broader vocational education and training reforms. The program extends over a period of three years and leads to the award of the CQP, established in 2005 to provide formal recognition of competencies acquired through apprenticeship training.

EVOLUTION OF SKILLS RECOGNITION

Non-certified apprenticeship

Initially, apprenticeship was entirely managed by master craftsmen, who alone decided when training was completed. Skills recognition was purely social, without formal certification. However, graduation ceremonies served as symbolic public recognition of skills.

Certification by master craftsmen

Master craftsmen later began issuing completion certificates specifying the trade, duration of training, and identities of both apprentice and master. These certificates were formally awarded during public graduation ceremonies marking the transition from apprentice to artisan.

Certification by professional associations

From the mid-1990s, craft associations became involved in issuing apprenticeship completion certificates. They organized graduation ceremonies under their institutional authority while maintaining recognition of the master's role.

EFAT certification system

The creation of communal associations led to the establishment of EFAT. These examinations standardized skills assessment at the communal level. First EFAT: Malanville (1997), Kandi (2002), Djougou (2004). Two generations exist: First generation, organized by craft organizations only; second generation,

involving local authorities (municipalities).

Official certification (CQM and CQP)

Public authorities introduced two main certificates: CQM (for fully enterprise-based apprenticeship and CQP (for dual apprenticeship). Between 2013 and 2025, 377,409 candidates obtained the CQM, while 12,089 obtained the CQP (2005–2022). These certifications now constitute the main institutional framework for recognizing vocational skills in Benin's artisanal sector.

CONCLUSION

The evolution of apprenticeship in Benin reflects a historical transformation from family-based transmission systems to increasingly structured and institutionalized training frameworks. These changes demonstrate the adaptability of the artisanal apprenticeship system to economic and social transformations, particularly through dual apprenticeship, EFAT systems, and the institutionalization of the CQM and CQP. However, challenges remain, including formalization of apprenticeship relations, improvement of training quality, sustainable financing, curriculum adaptation to technological change, and enhancement of youth employability. Overall, apprenticeship remains a strategic lever for skills development, youth employment, and structural trans-

formation of the artisanal sector in Benin.

DECLARATION

Article version statement

This article has been reviewed and preliminarily edited. It is intended solely for use at the 10th Research Conference of the International Network for Innovative Apprenticeship (INAP). The final version will be published in *Vocation, Technology & Education* (<https://www.vtejourn.com>).

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