

The Imu Ahia Project
Lagos, Nigeria
University of Richmond
Amarachi Ugochukwu '24 (UWC Robert Bosch)
May 1st – June 25th 2022

Problem: Nigerian youth unemployment has increased dramatically in recent years. According to Trading Economics, youth unemployment in Nigeria is currently at 53.4%, which is among the highest in the world. Considering the relationship between youth unemployment and crime rates, which in Nigeria specifically takes the form of violent kidnappings and terrorism, it is important offer an alternative to time consuming formal education.

Project background: Inspired by Nigerian sociologist Peter Ekeh's argument that traditional forms of public organization are the most viable paths to development in post-colonial nations, I will base my project off the traditional apprenticeship system of *Imu Ahia* to combat unemployment. *Imu Ahia* (literally "learning the market" in Igbo) entails businessmen taking in poor youth in their community to teach them their craft. While being housed and fed by the business owner, the youth complete their training, which can take anything between 8 months to 10 years. Upon completion, former apprentices are offered a settlement by the business owner to go out and open businesses of their own, after which, according to the cultural agreement, they will later go on to continue the apprenticeship cycle. *Imu Ahia* is a large commitment and highly valued and respected in south-eastern Nigeria. Igbo communities, including local tradespeople, are at the core of my project.

Imu Ahia has been a crucial part of Igbo culture for centuries but became especially important to the economic viability of the Igbo people after the Biafran war in 1967, which left Igbo people with insufficient infrastructure and drastic demographic changes related to the war. Despite that, the *Imu Ahia* system has largely been credited for the entrepreneurial success amongst Igbo people today. Given that business owners can usually only take on around 5 to 7 apprentices in their lifetime, this project considers how best to innovate and increase the scale of the system, while also maintaining the traditional community aspect that has made it so successful. As an Igbo person myself, my project will involve my social network in Nigeria to preserve this community aspect of *Imu Ahia*.

Project Objectives and Activities: My project is founded on the premise that solutions to indigenous people's problems can be solved by using ancient knowledge and systems that worked in the past, adapting those to the present, and using technology and other modern tools to scale them.

The Business School approach, which uses a classroom setting, contrasts with application-oriented apprenticeship models like *Imu Ahia*. *Imu Ahia* apprentices gain much more than conceptual and academic knowledge of business. The system prepares them with real life scenarios. However, while a classroom can teach over 20 people at the same time, masters within *Imu Ahia* tend to only be able to take up around 5 apprentices in their lifetime. Thus, my project will focus on scaling the ancient practice and making it more efficient. The proposed project has three parts:

First, we will work with local masters of electronics trade, as well as former and current apprentices, to codify what they believe is crucial in conducting *Imu Ahia* using structured interviews. The questions and informed consent procedures for this initial research component are currently receiving IRB approval from the University of Richmond. I have discussed this research with my uncle, Oliver Nnona, who is chairman of TYP consulting, along with Dr. Michael Olabisi, a Nigerian professor of development economics at Michigan State University. Questions for masters include: What is the first thing you were taught/ you teach your apprentices, what makes a good student, what does a typical day look like (using a timeline)? Most importantly, we will emphasize identification of 'tricks of the game' that have made masters and former apprentices successful.

Second, we will collect the interview information and summarize it in a short handbook. The handbook will outline the tricks and important aspects of learning the specific trade according to the masters. The interviews will also be recorded and uploaded to YouTube. This will help spread the word surrounding *Imu Ahia*, provide firsthand information about the cultural practice and spark interest in this severely understudied traditional form of organization.

Having gathered and distilled the knowledge surrounding electronics trade, we will work closely with the masters, Dr. Olabisi, and former apprentices to develop a full curriculum for two intensive workshops, each of which will last 3 weeks. We aim to train 30 people in total in the trade. The youth participants will be recruited via family members and friends in Lagos and Enugu using printed flyers, Instagram pages, our YouTube channel, as well as word of mouth. Recruitment in Lagos will start 1 month prior to my arrival, with low barriers to entry to mimic conditions in traditional *Imu Ahia*. Workshop teachers will be the masters from the first part of the project. Upon completion of the program, students will be awarded a certificate, a stipend for participation, and will have the opportunity to network with other locals in their field at a networking event. This will allow for students to be taken up by local masters for further *Imu Ahia* training as well. They will additionally be put in contact with microfinance NGOs (specifically FINCA) during the networking event. Both will serve as an extension of the usual settlement in *Imu Ahia*. My cousin, Ikechukwu Ogbodo, is a recent engineering graduate at the University of Nigeria who is interested in electronics trade and has ties in the mostly unregulated/informal electronic trade sector (typical for a majority of businesses in Nigeria). His connections will help us in the workshop. Furthermore, TYP consulting, my uncle's consulting firm, will aid in networking and outreach for the project.

Lastly, TYP consulting will assist in setting up and managing a database with the contact information and future plans of all participants, in order to check in again with them and promote collaboration between them. This is also used to track their success in the area of electronic trade and make sure that there is a network they can fall back on which is in the spirit of traditional *Imu Ahia*. Sustained by TYP and me personally, this will in part replace the community aspect of *Imu Ahia* explained earlier. In addition, we will conduct further interviews with former apprentices after the completion of the project to document their opinions on the project as it relates to traditional *Imu Ahia*.

Timeline:

Week 1: Arrival, getting to know local masters of trade, former apprentices, and current apprentices, reach out to future trainees to check in with their workshop availability.

Weeks 2+3: Conduct structured interviews with regular check ins with Dr. Olabisi, record YouTube videos and develop structure for the handbook ("*Imu Ahia*: Electronic Trade"), construct handbooks.

Week 4: Brainstorm and construct the workshop curriculum, check in with venue, talk to my cousin's friends and engineers at the University of Nigeria for further input.

Week 5+6+7: Conduct the two training programs (simultaneously) based on curriculum from week 4.

Week 8: Setting up database at TYP consulting, reflections.

Project impact on peace and expected outcomes: There is a strong relationship between poverty (presented here as synonymous to long term joblessness) and crime rates. Using community effort via tradition to combat youth unemployment will help bring economic stability into regions such as southern Nigeria. Moreover, employing traditional systems evokes a greater sense of responsibility towards the sustenance of such programs as opposed to structures established during colonization. This project previews the future of effective community-based economic development in former colonies.