

**The Imu Ahia Project**  
**Lagos, Nigeria**  
**University of Richmond**  
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### Summary

The Imu Ahia Project centers primary data collection on the Igbo traditional apprenticeship system *Imu Ahia* and tests its scalability in an experimental workshop setting. The aim is to explore culturally aware approaches to development in sub-Saharan Africa, by employing ancient methods local communities feel connected to, and publicizing findings on a project website.

### Project Description

As an aspiring development economist with roots in south-eastern Nigeria, I spend a lot of my free time doing research on pressing issues in the region. Rooted in my background as a third nation child, I am very frequently confronted with the differences between both of my homes, be it either through my parents' anecdotes or through past visits to Nigeria. One core memory of my first visit was that of a billboard in Lagos calling citizens to pay their taxes to finance a new highway. When inquiring about this, I was simply told that the government was not trustworthy enough to pay taxes to. At the same time however, Nigerians are more than comfortable with paying into traditional communal funds ('Susu'), which are similarly distributive in nature. It was then that I knew that my angle in development economics would be one focusing on traditional systems. I strongly believed that within such systems lies great potential in sustainably connecting with developing communities. Accordingly, my project centered primary data collection via semi-structured interviews with local traders and apprentices involved in the Imu Ahia system. More precisely, the aim was to use the primary data to gain a deeper understanding of the system, and then translate my findings into a workshop that heavily draws from the Imu Ahia system. My background as an aspiring economist led me to employ an experimental approach as well, in line with the scientific method used in economics.

(*Imu Ahia* (literally "learning the market" in Igbo) entails businessmen taking in poor youth in their community to teach them their trade. 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 respected in south-eastern Nigeria. Igbo communities, including local tradespeople, are at the core of my project.)

My host site Lagos was mainly chosen due to the Lagos Business School which I was closely working with. Several professors there (namely Dr. Ogechi Adeola) have done research in the field. Additionally, I had access to resources and connections in the Lagos area through my family. As a non-local, though Nigerian, it can be difficult navigating spaces that are deeply cultural and informal. Lagos as a melting pot of different ethnicities, the largest city, and home to many of my relatives made it much easier to conduct my project. Additionally, I conducted the workshop in Ajegunle, Lagos with the Ajegunle Business School, relatively low level of development in the area which would allow me to make an impact where it was most needed.

Changes to my project were mainly in the timeline. This was due to informal nature of the apprenticeship system, Lagos' traffic, and public transportation which made it extremely difficult to predict when what would happen. Corruption unfortunately permeates almost every aspect of

everyday life in Nigeria as well. In trying not to conform to such practices I experienced some complications in the settlement process for workshop participants. Relatives of participants had tried to intimidate them into giving them some of their settlement money is only one example of complications I faced. Thus, I had to push back my workshop to factor in more time for interviews and planning, condense two workshops into one, and extend the time spent setting up the website. These experiences, however, reflect the nature of the subject I am dealing with and the area I want to specialize in, preparing me for potential research I may be conducting in the future.

No other funds were raised for the sake of this project.

After having worked closely with Dr. Ogechi Adeola of the Lagos Business School on the project, I will continue working with her on a research paper centering the workshop experiment. The aim is to further analyze the model I developed and improve it for reimplementation in the future. The central question for the research paper is to what extent the Imu Ahia system can be scaled in a condensed workshop setting. I hope to then run a revised workshop using funds raised through the project website. The workshop will be supported by the alumni of the project who I am still in contact with. Many of them vowed to return as facilitators for the project, which is in line with traditional Imu Ahia, and a central part of the mutualistic incentive structure I wished to draw from.

### Reflection

Peace may generally be defined as the absence of conflict. Drawing from my experiences running The Imu Ahia Project however, true Peace appears to require much more. It draws from a sense of mutualism that consists of a net of interdependence, creating an equilibrium in a community. In southeastern Nigerian communities Imu Ahia contributes heavily to creating such an understanding of togetherness.

My project's aim was to create an in depth understanding of the Imu Ahia system and to investigate how the mutualism in the system can be scaled and replicated. Not only did the project itself help participants directly by equipping them with skills and capital to establish themselves, but it is also piloted in innovating an age-old system that has supported the Igbo people through hardship. In other words, peace was built through giving young participants an opportunity to engage in legal activities to make a living, but it also established connections and a framework that would allow for such a project to easily be replicated elsewhere. Ultimately, this pilot project was the first of its kind to actively use a traditional system of economic organization and build an innovated system that similarly relies on mutualism.

The project's pilot workshop consisted of different modules that reflected what we learnt local traders thought was crucial for learning a trade. Fireside chats and Q and A sessions however, revealed that the needs of participants transcended technical skills. Discussions often times went back to Nigerian governance, leadership, and future plans. I learned that several of the participants had engaged in online fraud before for their personal upkeep as a result of the current public University association 's strike and high rates of unemployment. Participants also frequently expressed feeling helpless and discouraged with the situation of the country. Though a bit sad about the situation, I was happy to have created a space where people were able to openly communicate about issues which would in other circles be dangerous to talk about. It was important for me to establish the workshop setting as a safe space, in line with traditional Imu Ahia, even if some issues may be difficult to address.

I learned that development issues are not as straight forward as they may seem and that decision making for people affected is much more complex than it may seem at first. Conducting my project thus required a skillset that was not only organizational and pragmatic, but also flexible and attentive to accommodate for the uncertainty that emotions entail.

### Personal Statement

Local communities not only want to be heard but need to as well. In the process, you will discover that there are often times systems in place to support each other, and ancient knowledge that transcends your personal understanding of 'helping'. It is there where we must connect with locals, put away our biases, and begin to build. – Amarachi Ugochukwu