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Colonialism, Economic Transformation and Youth Unemployment in Nigeria: Southeast Region in Perspective, 1914-2023.

Victoria Ozioma UCHIME, PhD

Department of History & International Relations, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbarim, Anambra State.

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***Corresponding author:** Victoria Ozioma UCHIME, PhD

Department of History & International Relations, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbarim, Anambra State.

Abstract

The contemporary Nigerian economy is highly characterised by a high rate of youth unemployment. The Nigeria Bureau of Statistics of 2020 put the country's youth unemployment rate at 33.3%. It is pertinent to note that the issue of unemployment has attracted much scholarly attention but not many studies have been done to examine the origin of youth unemployment in Nigeria. The study, therefore, seeks to examine the correlation and role of the economic transformation of the Nigerian economy occasioned by colonialism to the evolution and rise in youth unemployment in Nigeria and the southeast in particular during the period under consideration. The study relies on primary and secondary sources of data and uses content analysis and a historical descriptive approach in the analysis of its data. The study reveals that the transformation and translocation of the economy occasioned by colonialism and the incorporation of the Nigerian economy into the capitalist global order account for the origin and growth of youth unemployment in Southeast Nigeria. The work, therefore, posits there is a need for governments in the Southeast to initiate policies that will promote local industries and provide an enabling environment for these industries to strive. This, undoubtedly, will go a long way in addressing the rising youth unemployment in the region.

Keywords: Colonialism, Economic Transformation, Youth Unemployment, Southeast Nigeria.

Introduction

Over the years, unemployment among the youth has been one of the major menaces bedevilling Nigeria society. Since the country's return to democratic rule in 1999, the rate of unemployment has been on geometric increase. According to National Bureau Statistics (2020) Fourth Quarter report, the unemployment rate stood at 33.3%, an increase from the 27.1% recorded in second quarter of 2020. The unemployment rate among the young people (15-34 years) was 42.5% (National Bureau Statistics, 2020). This was the highest compared to other ages. The report further revealed that under state disaggregation, Ebonyi State had the highest rate of unemployment with 40% and poverty head count of 79.8% (Molokwu, Nwose & Alozie, 2023, p.84). The rate of unemployment in other states (Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi and Enugu) of Southeast stood at 50.07%, 44.22%, 40.16% and 31.62% respectively (National Bureau Statistics, 2020).

Several factors have been identified to be responsible for the high rate of unemployment among the youth in Nigeria specifically in South-east geopolitical zone. These factors encompass corruption, poor governance, overpopulation, non-diversified economy, among others. Udeuhele *et al* (2022, p.303) holds that the most significant factor is political clientelism, which manifested in the recklessness with which political officeholders, godfathers and other prominent politicians at various levels of governance interfere, hijack, monopolize and corner available job opportunities for their cronies and family members and friends at the detriment of the majority of qualified unemployed Nigerians.

Nevertheless, the high rate of unemployment in Southeast Nigeria is rooted in economic transformation orchestrated by colonialism. Prior to the advent of colonialism in Nigeria, the people of the Southeast geopolitical zone had already developed diversified economy that provided the young people with employment opportunities. This indigenous economic system was completely transformed by the economic policies of the British Colonial Government. This transformation resulted in the incorporation of the country's economy into the global capitalist system; stifling of local industries; monoculture, export-oriented and reliant economy; and dependency. These gave rise to weak economy that is counterproductive to creation of the needed job opportunities for the teeming unemployed youths in the post-independent era.

Conceptual Clarification

Youth

The concept "Youth" has no universal accepted definition. Umar, Yusuf & Sagir (2024, p.2) hold the term youth is vague. Hence, there is no generally agreed definition for it. It varies from country to country, culture to culture and from continent to continent. The difficulty at arriving universal accepted definition is predicated on the parameters to be used to determine who is a youth. Age has remained a common parameter. However, Afolayan (2018, p.100) argues, it is difficult to arrive at a specific age range which is generally acceptable for the purpose of using age as parameter for determining whether an individual is a youth or not. Even where an age range is suggested, an individual's actual maturity may not correspond to their chronological age, as immature individuals can exist at all ages (Afolayan, 2018, p.100). Nevertheless, Olawole & Olayemi (2023, p.302) hold, the concept of youth could be defined by some especially in western societies as the life stages between childhood and adulthood. According to Ogwuche, Abaneme and Nwaneri (2023, p.114) youth refers to a particular period in an

individual's life. It includes a period when a person is still fresh, young, and vibrant and every other attribute that characterizes freshness. It also implies a period of an individual life when the person is neither a child nor an adult but somewhere in between (Ogwuche, Abaneme and Nwaneri, 2023, p.114). However, in Nigeria context, a youth is any individual between the ages of 18-35 year old.

Colonialism

According to Adesote and Osiyale (n.d. pp.63-64), colonialism refers to as the domination of one country by another, which is mainly achieved through aggressive and military actions or means. Ocheni and Nwankwo (n.d.p.46) defined colonialism as the direct and overall domination of one country by another on the basis of state power being in the hands of a foreign power. For Ahmed, Umaru and Yusuf (2022, p.48) colonialism refers to the project of European political domination from the sixteenth to the twentieth century's that ended with the national liberation movements of the 1960s. They further emphasized that it is the extension of a nation's sovereignty over territory by the establishment beyond its borders. It may be either settler colonies or administrative dependencies in which they ruled indigenous populations directly or displaced (Ahmed, Umaru and Yusuf, 2022, p.48). Kwon-Ndung (n.d. p.300) colonialism is the establishment, exploitation, maintenance, acquisition, and expansion of colonies in one territory by people from another territory. It is a set of unequal relationships between the colonial power and the colony and often between the colonists and the indigenous population.

Youth Unemployment

The term youth unemployment has been conceptualized by different scholars. Okafor (2011, p.361) describe youth unemployment as the conglomerate of youths with diverse background, willing and able to work, but cannot find any. Jato (2022, p.61) perceive it as a situation where young people within the age range being defined as youth (e.g., 15–24 years old, by the United Nations) who are willing and able to work and are searching for a job, but cannot find one. For Alanana (2003, p.23) it is a sociological situation in which young people, aged between eighteen and thirty years are not guaranteed full employment and security at the time their productive their productive energies are at their peak. Remigius, Nwangwu, and Njaka (2023, p.294) hold, youth unemployment is a situation of young people living without an engaged work to earn a living. From the above definitions, youth unemployment can be described as a state of joblessness of young individuals who are at their productive age.

People and Peopling of South-east Geopolitical Zone

Southeast is one of the six geopolitical zones in Nigeria. It consists of five states of Abia, Enugu, Ebonyi and Anambra states. It lies within Awka-Orlu uplands and Enugu-Awgu-Okigwe escarpment. According to Ogbonna and Urhobo (2022, p.44) the zone is located between latitudes 04° 30'N and 07° 30'N and longitudes 06° 45'E and 08° 45'E. And has a total land area measuring 29,908 square kilometres with a projected population of about 16,381,729. It shares boundary with Kogi and Benue States in the north, Cross River State in the east, Delta State in the west and Rivers and Akwa-Ibom States in the south (Ogbonna, & Urhobo, 2022, p.44). Two climatic conditions are prevalent in the zone. These are rainy and dry season. The rainy season starts in April, with short break in August known as 'August Break and ends in October. Korieh (n. d. p.234) averred that the pattern of rainfall produces two distinct patterns of vegetation in the region. The southern part of the region

is characterized by heavy rainfall that produces a dense rainforest that thinned out northwards into a savannah (Korieh, (2006, p.234). Nevertheless, many centuries of human habitation and activities have turned the whole region into secondary forest, with only pockets of forest oasis remaining. (Korie, 2006, p.22). The dry seasons starts in November and ends in March.

The zone is inhabited majorly by the people of Igbo ethnic nationality. Like other preliterate societies, the origin of the Igbo people has been characterized by controversy. The people did not developed art of writing early. Because of this, the people depended largely on oral tradition for the reconstruction of their history. Though, the oral tradition has been significant in preserving various aspects of the history of the people, several limitations associated with it especially manipulation and loss of vital information in the course of transmission created a room for this controversy. This controversy is evident in different version of account/theories of origin of Igbo people. Madu Umeanolue (2018, p.22) hold, the origin of the Igbo people has been the subject of debates and speculation. Two hypotheses have always prevailed in these debates among historians and ethnologists. These are the outside origin and the internal hypotheses. As in the outside origin hypothesis, the Igbo tradition of origin is traceable to the East (Israel, Mecca or Egypt). Again, they emphasized that the internal origin hypothesis seems to be stronger than the outside origin one, especially when this is viewed from the area of archaeological findings by archaeologists, ethnologists and sociologists. The archaeological discovery of the Igboukwu Bronze shown that the Igbo were already occupying their present location around 1500AD (Madu & Umeanolue, 2018, p.22)

The people of the Zone are predominantly agriculturalist. Because of the presence of arable land in different parts of the Zone, the people cultivate different farm crops such as yam, cassava, vegetable, maize, cocoyam, cowpea, among others. Besides cultivation of farms, the people grown cash crops such as cashew, palm, guava, orange, etc (C. Anijah, personal communication, September, 03, 2024) prior to the advent of Christianity in the Zone, the people were majorly adherents of African Traditional Religion. However, with the advent of Christianity, the greater proportion of the populace have become Christians ((C. Anijah, personal communication, September, 03, 2024)

Diverse Economy and Youth Employment in Southeast Nigeria in the Pre-Colonial Era

Prior to the advent of British colonial masters to the present day Southeast Nigeria, the economy of the region had not only developed but also diversified. The diversification of the Igbo economy was evident in three sectors: agriculture, manufacturing/craft and trade. These three sectors of economy served as a source of employment to the youth. Agriculture was the mainstay of the economy of the people of Southeast region. In fact, Korieh (2003, p.73) maintained that agriculture was by far the most important economic pursuit of the Igbo people before and up until the beginning of colonial rule. The people had engaged in crop farming, growing of cash crops and rearing of animals. Besides these agricultural activities guaranteeing food security through availability of sufficient food, they served as sources of employment. Mbakwe (2015, p.134) averred that agriculture was the chief employment, and everybody, even children were engaged in it. Because family was the main source of labour, it became culture that every child of every family must venture into one agricultural sector or the other. Among the Abakaliki people, there

existed a culture that before a male child of every household attained puberty age and initiated into age grade group, he must had possessed a parcel of land where he carries his own farming activity. This enabled the young people to be self-reliant and created job opportunities for their peers (C. Nwanchor, personal communication, September, 13, 2024). Again, because members of most families were not able to provide the needed labour, there were opportunities for paid labour. Most of these paid labours were undertaken by the youth from the high population density areas of the region, who, for lack of agricultural land moved into areas of low density to work on farms and in order to earn a living(Iwuagwu , 2014, p.9). This was clearly evident in the migrant labour from the Ezza of Abakiliki, Mbaise, Mbano and parts of Okigwe and Owerri. Iwuagwu (Iwuagwu 2014, p.9) maintained that migrant labourers from Mbaise founded employment in Etche (Rivers State), Umunna-Okigwe, Ohaji and Nkwerre. Numerous labourers also moved into Ohaji each year from Agwa in Oguta, Okwelle, Mbieri, Akaeze and Ogoni. These labourers majorly engaged mound making and cultivation of crops. Ahamefule (2015, p.310)further emphasized that outside the farming season, male labourers were employed by women, particularly widows, to climb the palm trees and cut down palm nuts for them or to harvest fruits, like coconuts, and pear, among others. Also, some women labourers were engaged in the production of palm oil. They helped in the separating of the nuts from fibres, cracking of the nuts to collect the kernels, and others (Ahamefule, 2015, p.310).

Furthermore, the people of different of regions including Southeast in Nigeria had developed several industries prior to the advent of the British colonial masters. Adamu & Bello (2015, p.2) maintained that these industries technology, raw materials, labour, and markets were centred on the local resources and means. Such industries in the Southeast region included blacksmithing, pottery, wood carving, salt-making, textile production, basketry, among others. The people through these industries produced the needed products in all parts of Igboland. For instance, the salt industries in Okposi, Oshiri, and Okposi communities supplied the needed salt in the hinterland, as Uburu became the chief source of salt for Southeastern Nigeria following the abandonment of the salt industry by the coastal states to participate in Atlantic slave trade (Ihediwa, 2013, p.166). The blacksmithing industries provided the people with the essential agricultural tools such as hoe, cutlass, diggers, sickle, etc. and warfare weapons such as Dane Guns. Meanwhile, the wood carvers produced vessels such as canoes for fishing and transportation in the riverine areas; religious artefacts such as statutes for worship, masks for the masquerades; musical instruments such as Udu, Ekwe, Oja, Ogene, flutes, horns, etc.; and pestles, mortars, bowls, storage boxes, chairs, among others, for domestic use(C. Agu, personal communication on September 25th, 2024). Those in the pottery industry produced wares such as cooking pots, water jugs, storage pots, etc. The cloth weavers of Nsukka, Abakaliki, Asa and Ndoki (Akwete) produced clothing wares for the people of the region and beyond ((C. Agu, personal communication on September 25th, 2024). J.C. Chukwu contended thus:

The products of these weavers were popular and attracted demands from various parts of Igbo land. Akwete was probably the most famous among places that made use of the women's vertical loom in Nigeria. It was in Akwete the Popo cloth was designed. This cloth was highly esteemed and used by women of the Old town of Bonny.

Popo cloth was named after the coastal town of Opobo where such cloths were sold originally. All the royal cloths in Bonny were said to be woven in Akwete including Ikaki (2015, p.73).

Beyond producing the needed products, the industries provided the people especially the youth with surplus job opportunities. Ihediwa (2013, p.167) maintained that evidence suggests that Okposi and Uburu women made reasonable wealth from the salt trade. Estimates in the nineteenth century showed that an average salt producer could make ten shillings a day. Considering the purchasing power of money in the nineteenth century, ten shillings was a huge amount of money. Thus, the salt industry in Igboland provided the women with a lucrative occupation that was hardly equalled in any other part of pre-colonial Nigeria (Ihediwa, 2013, p.167).

Trading was another sector of Igbo economy that employed hundreds of youth in pre-colonial era. According to Mbalisi (2022, p.56) the origin of market and trade in Igboland is very ancient. Excavations from Igbo Ukwu sites, as recorded by Thurstan Shaw showed that as early as the 9th century AD, the Igbo were already exchanging some of their products for what they needed with their neighbours. The people mainly engaged in buying and selling agricultural produce and manufactured products. While some engaged in local trade, others were involved in long distance trade. They engaged in trading with the aim of eking living through profit maximization. To sustain trading in their household, traders had always compelled their children to learn trading from them. This in turn served as an employment opportunity for the young people ((C. Agu, personal communication on September 25th, 2024).

Colonialism, Economic Transformation and Unemployment in the Post-Independence Era

By 15th century, Europeans had already came in contact and started trading with the Nigeria people (Niger Delta) staying at the coastal region. Their relations with the people at the coastal region improved during the Atlantic slave trade as the people became suppliers of slave to the Europeans. Odeke, Agomuo, and Chukwu (2021, p.5) maintained that with switch to slave trade, the Niger Delta middlemen traders were excessively made corrupt by the Europeans who supplied them arms and lots of material gifts that encouraged wide raids for slaves to satisfy the plantation labour needs of the Europeans at Sao Tome, Fernando Po. Nevertheless, following the abolition of slave trade in the 19th century; introduction of legitimate trade and Berlin Conference of 1884/1885, the British colonial masters started struggling to gain access to the hinterland and establish effective control. This struggle resulted in the conquest of communities at the coastal region. With the conquest of coastal communities, some communities in the hinterland submitted to the will of the British colonial masters, others collaborated with them in the conquest of others. However, most of the entities that make up the present day Southeast Nigeria resisted the penetration of the British. Omeje (2013, p.372) averred that Igbo groups such as Ekumeku of Western Igbo, the Aro and the Ezza resisted the British. This resistance was successfully suppressed by the British and established colonial hegemony in all parts of Southeast region.

Like other colonial power, the primary interest of the British colonial masters was economic. Settles (1996, p.7) holds that the economic goals of colonialism were simple: to provide maximum economic benefit to the colonizing power at the lowest possible price. To the British, French, and Germans, the primary colonizing

nations, the individual needs of their colonial subjects were not important. Instead the desire to "vertically integrate" the colonies of Europe by controlling production from start to finish became the overriding goal of colonial agents (Settles, 1996, p.7). To achieve this purpose, the British Colonial Government undertook certain actions and introduced policies that culminated in economic transformation in all parts of their colonies including Southeast Nigeria. This transformation negatively impacted the indigenous economic sectors especially the local industries.

Importation was one of the policies introduced by British to achieve its economic interest. Prior to the advent of colonialism, the people of different regions in present day Nigeria including Southeast region was already exporting their locally manufactured goods overseas. Shaibu and Ogoh contended thus:

Before the country was colonized by Britain, during the second half of the 19th century, the various nationality groups that currently make up Nigeria were largely an agricultural people. They were food self-sufficient and produced a variety of commodities that were exported overseas. British colonial administrators amalgamated the nationality groups in 1914 into a larger economy for exploitation for the benefit of British industrial classes. Under colonial rule, Nigeria remained an agricultural country, exporting raw materials to Britain and importing from it finished goods (2015, p.121).

The importation did not only created room for the local markets to be flooded by foreign products, but also de-marketing of the locally made goods. Owing to the mechanized industries in Europe, the foreign products were relatively cheaper, more standard and attractive when compared to the local manufactured goods. These made the foreign products the first and the preferred choice of the people of the region during the colonial era (C. Arua, personal communication, October 05, 2024). To ensure the total displacement of locally manufactured goods by foreign, the British adopted certain strategies. Ajor, Erim & Majuk (2011, p.86) maintained that British officials applied direct and indirect, subtle and intimidatory tactics or means to stifle local salt production and thereby encourage importation from the metropolis. Because of this, the local industries were adversely affected. The continuous influx of European substitutes to products of smiths in Southeast Nigeria caused stunt in the growth of the industry. Again, the demand for local salt produced in Uburu, Okposi and Enyigba communities in the present Ebonyi State, almost ceased for the obvious advantages mechanized metropolitan industries had over manually produced items of the local industries(2015, p.51).

In the similar vein similar, the British colonial economic policies were tilted towards favouring exporting of cash crops and minerals. Mbakwe(2015, p.137) maintained that even though agriculture was the mainstay of the Igbo economy and constituted the main source of income for the rural dwellers, not much effort was made by the colonial administration to modernize and commercialize agriculture, especially in the area of food crop production. Rather, their emphasis was on cash crop production for export purposes. The interest of the British in the export of cash crops was to ensure the steady supply of raw materials to industries in Britain and other European nations. To achieve this, the British employed several measures. These included persuasion, coercion, taxation and creation of new department. O. Iwuagwu (2014, p.3) averred that with the introduction of direct taxation, the farmers had little option but to adopt the export/cash crops, which guaranteed them

ready cash. Again, the colonial through its agricultural departments encouraged peasant production, and local farmers to sell large quantities of palm oil to British trading companies. In 1903, Nigeria exported 131,898 tons of palm kernels and 54,257 tons of palm oil to Europe. By 1929, the value of exports had increased more than sevenfold, and export volume fivefold (2003, p.139). Korih(2003, p.139) averred that with the emphasis on export production, the British introduced a capitalist structure in which colonial officials, merchants and traders regulated prices and dictated the processes of production. Driven by an ever-increasing requirement for cash, the Igbo expanded cash crop production and moved from a substantially subsistence economy to a peasant economy.

Urbanization was another policy of the British colonial masters that contributed to the stunt of local industries in the Southeast Nigeria. Prior to the advent of colonialism, there was a complete absence of urban centres in the region. Obiakor & Ibeh (2022, p. 225) argued that two major reasons could be given as to why the eastern Igbo lacked pre-colonial urbanization and these were: the socio-political system of the pre-colonial Igbo and the geographical location of eastern Igboland. However, according to Ezenniaa, Onuorah & Uwajeh(2021, p.143) the arrival of the British, spurred a revolutionary trend towards developing urban cities throughout Igbo-land. Consequently, many areas where the British established administrative headquarters, mining and notable commercial centres was transformed into urban centres with modern infrastructural facilities like good railway, road network, schools, hospitals, modern markets and potable water supply etc. The British limited most of the economic activities and social amenities to these urban centres. Because of this, there was a massive migration of young from the rural areas to the urban centres. This did not only resulted in the overpopulation of the centres, but abandonment of locally industrialized areas. Thus the villages were abandoned for the aged who died and almost could not transfer their economic know-how to the younger generation (Ezenniaa, Onuorah and Uwajeh., 2021, p.143).

Molokwu, et al (2023) argues that colonialism altered the extent and character of migration in Africa. The colonial plantation economy, communication system, transportation system, monetization of the economy, educational, and administrative system, among others, reconstructed the traditional societies in Africa and provided the impetus for massive individual migration across the continent; thus, increasing and changing the nature of traditional intergroup relations. This massive rural urban migration set the stage for unemployment for the teeming population of the urban youth in due course. The post-colonial government bias policy in the allocation of infrastructure in the urban centres to the neglect of the rural area has sustained the rural – urban migration which contributes significantly to urban unemployment as the urban centres do not have the capacity to employ the teeming youth population in them.

Southeast Nigeria faces numerous developmental obstacles, especially, in its rural areas where the majority of the population lives in poverty, suffers from illness, is unemployed, and has insufficient access to social services. The Federal and state governments have prioritized rural and community development ever since independence. About thirty-seven community development and poverty reduction programmes were conducted in Nigeria between 1984 and 2002 in order to address the concerns of poverty and the provision of social services to communities.

Nonetheless, it would seem that Nigeria and southeast rural villages haven't experienced any substantial changes since they continue to be marked by widespread poverty, a lack of infrastructure and social amenities, and a high unemployment rate, among other issues (Uchime, et al, 2021, p. 2322)

Moreover, the land alienation policies of the British had adverse effect on the indigenous economy and technology. To effectively control land in different parts of the colony (Nigeria), the British colonial government promulgated different land policies such as Native Lands Acquisition Proclamation (1900), Crown Lands Management Proclamation(1906), Native Land Acquisition Ordinance (1908), Lands and Native Rights Proclamation (1910), among others. These policies culminated in dispossessing the people of their land and altering the indigenous land system. I. Onwuzuruigbo(2019, p.142) holds:

Dismantling customary land tenure was considered prerequisite for consolidating colonial power and authority and, more importantly, alienating land from small-scale agricultural producers, transforming them into landless labourers desperately needed by capitalist employers and granting land ownership and use rights to foreign corporate bodies, businesses and individuals.

These policies discouraged local artisans and adversely affected the growth of indigenous science and technology which prior to colonialism depended upon these portions of land(Momoh, 2020, p.14). Ossai(2024, p.47) posited that the acquisition also disrupted the local economy by depriving indigenous people of productive agricultural land, leading to decreased household incomes and agricultural productivity.

These British colonial policies did not only integrated Southeast economy into the capitalist system, they created room for non-industrialization and dependency through importation of finished goods; monoculture economy through dependence on single product; overpopulation through rural-urban migration; and continuous scaling of production in advanced countries through export of raw materials. Maekae (2021, p.72) hold that lack of industries in the colonial period made Nigerian colonial economy incoherent and disarticulated as the agricultural sector could not gain from the manufacturing sector and there was no forward and backward linkage in the economy.⁶² This situation (discouragement of industrialization in Nigeria) made the colonial Nigerian economy depend on the mother country for her industrial manufactures (Maekae, 2021, p.72). Shaibu & Ogoh (2015, p.121) further emphasized that colonial economic policies shaped future independent Nigeria's economy, particularly in marketing, labour supply, and investment. The process of colonial rule and formal economic exploitation ended in 1960, but left Nigeria a relatively strong but undiversified economy. The grave consequence of these effects of colonial economic transformation had weakened the economy that it cannot create the needed job opportunities for the youth.

Uchime and Molokwu, (2023) maintained that colonialism laid the foundation for uneven regional development in Nigeria, privileging administrative and commercial centres in the North and Southwest while marginalizing the Southeast. Under British rule, extractive economic policies, indirect rule, and limited investment in infrastructure in the Eastern Region resulted in structural underdevelopment. Although the Southeast produced a significant portion of Nigeria's revenue through palm oil and later petroleum,

much of the economic surplus was extracted without proportional reinvestment. This structural imbalance contributed to post-independence political tensions that culminated in the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), also known as the Biafra War. The war devastated the Southeast's economy, destroyed critical infrastructure, and caused widespread loss of human capital. After the war, the federal government's "No Victor, No Vanquished" policy was not fully implemented in practice. Instead, punitive economic policies (such as the 20-pound ex-gratia payment to Biafrans regardless of their pre-war bank holdings) and military-led centralization further marginalized the region.

Drawing from Eyeh, E., Molokwu, U.C., et al. (2023), the foreign involvement in Nigeria's internal violent conflicts—particularly during the Biafra War—highlights how external actor's exacerbated internal fractures rooted in colonial legacies. Their analysis underscores the manipulative roles played by foreign powers in prolonging conflicts for strategic and economic gains, which in turn entrenched regional inequalities and stifled post-war recovery, particularly in the Southeast. This aligns with the broader trajectory of colonialism-induced economic disarticulation, where extractive colonial policies prioritized resource exploitation over regional development. The Southeast, once a vibrant commercial hub, suffered immense destruction during the war and faced systemic marginalization afterward, including inadequate federal investment and poor industrial regeneration. This historical continuum, from colonial economic structuring to wartime devastation and post-war neglect—amplified by foreign interests—has culminated in persistent youth unemployment and underdevelopment in the region from 1914 to 2023, despite the Southeast's high educational attainment and entrepreneurial potential.

The long-term effects of these historical injustices are evident today in the form of high youth unemployment in the Southeast. Despite having one of the most educated youth populations in the country, the region suffers from inadequate industrial base, poor federal investment, and limited access to federal employment opportunities. This unemployment crisis is compounded by insecurity, infrastructural decay, and migration of industries from the region, creating a sense of economic hopelessness among youth. The result has been a rise in youth restiveness, emigration (notably the "Japa" syndrome), and in some cases, support for separatist agitations. Thus, youth unemployment in Southeast Nigeria cannot be understood in isolation but must be contextualized within the historical continuum of colonial marginalization and the socioeconomic aftermath of the Biafra War.

Molokwu and Uchime (2020), in their work *"Traditional Religion, Christianity & Gender-Based Violence among Women of South-eastern Nigeria,"* offer critical insights into the socio-cultural transformations brought about by colonialism and Christianity, especially as they intersect with gender relations and structures of power. Their analysis reveals that colonial rule not only reconfigured political and economic structures in Southeast Nigeria but also disrupted indigenous institutions and belief systems, particularly those that governed gender roles and communal responsibilities.

These disruptions contributed to a shift in societal norms that formerly offered women certain socio-economic roles and protections. The imposition of Western patriarchal systems under colonial administration marginalized women from formal

economic participation and leadership, thus weakening the communal safety nets and kinship-based support systems that had once contributed to social cohesion. The consequences extended beyond gender relations and contributed to broader social dislocation and economic vulnerability.

This colonial legacy of structural displacement dovetails with the patterns of economic transformation in postcolonial Nigeria. From the colonial era through the post-independence oil boom and into neoliberal economic reforms, Southeast Nigeria has often been economically sidelined. The collapse of agriculture and artisanal economies, combined with the destruction caused by the Biafra War (1967–1970), left the region struggling to rebuild under limited federal support.

These historical and economic changes have deeply affected youth in the region. The weakening of traditional economic structures, compounded by persistent underinvestment and state neglect, has led to chronic youth unemployment. The cultural and spiritual alienation—partly resulting from colonial-era Christianization, as Molokwu and Uchime discuss—has further disoriented communal responses to economic crises. For instance, the erosion of communal rites of passage, vocational apprenticeship systems, and indigenous mentorship roles has diminished pathways for youth economic integration.

Thus, a clear line can be drawn: colonial cultural reordering and economic centralization weakened both gender relations and youth empowerment frameworks in Southeast Nigeria. Post-independence development models have failed to reconstruct these disrupted systems, leaving young people—male and female—vulnerable to poverty, unemployment, and social alienation. Consequently, youth unemployment in the Southeast is not simply a product of recent economic failure but the result of a century-long structural disempowerment rooted in colonial legacies and exacerbated by war and uneven national development.

Colonialism established the economic and political structures that continue to shape Nigeria's post-independence trajectory, particularly in the Southeast. As explored by Nwasumba and Molokwu (2020), the enduring legacies of colonialism have complicated post-conflict management and state-building in Nigeria, with globalization often amplifying internal disparities. The Southeast, already marginalized during colonial rule, suffered further disenfranchisement following the Biafran War, with federal economic policies exacerbating inequality and underdevelopment. This historical context is crucial in understanding the persistent unemployment and economic stagnation in the region.

The economic transformation of Nigeria, particularly in the post-1980s neoliberal era, has not favoured the Southeast. In their analysis of Nigeria–Cameroon economic relations, Molokwu and Uchime (2020) argue that regional diplomacy and trade have often sidelined internal developmental concerns, especially those of economically vulnerable zones like the Southeast. Their subsequent study (Molokwu, Uchime & Chukwudi, 2021) emphasizes how international legal and economic frameworks—such as the ICJ judgment—impacted national priorities, often at the expense of inclusive economic planning that could have revitalized border economies and created jobs for local youth populations.

Furthermore, contemporary governance challenges have worsened youth unemployment. Uchime, Molokwu, and Ewa (2024) demonstrate that ineffective digital governance has not only failed to curb cybercrime but, paradoxically, contributed to its spread

among disillusioned youth. This phenomenon is particularly acute in the Southeast, where educated yet unemployed young people—products of historical neglect and economic exclusion—turn to cybercrime as an alternative livelihood. Taken together, these studies reveal how the interplay of colonial legacies, uneven economic transformation, and poor governance has entrenched youth unemployment in Southeast Nigeria from 1914 to 2023.

Conclusion

This paper demonstrated an obvious and undeniable link between colonial economic transformation in Southeast Nigeria, and the persistently high rates of youth unemployment in contemporary Nigeria. The Colonial Government purposely structured the colonial economic system to serve the interest of the Britain and other European nations. This colonial economic system was majorly concerned with exporting raw materials to Europe and creating markets for manufactured goods imported from Europe. As a result of this, local industries were stifled; skills development was limited; and dependent and monoculture economy was created. This economic structure of the Colonial masters was inherited at independent and had contributed immensely to the high rate of youth unemployment ravaging the country. To properly address the issue of youth unemployment in the Southeast region in particular and the country at large, there is need for a complete departure from the inherited economic structure. Revitalization of local industries and consolidating the diversified indigenous economy would sustainable jobs for the teeming Nigeria youths.

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