

# **The Making of History and National Center for Peace and Conflict Resolution, Amichi**

**Chijioke Onuora**

*Department of Fine and Applied Arts*

*University of Nigeria, Nsukka*

## **Abstract**

*On January 9, 1970, the leader of the Biafra, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, in a recorded speech, told his compatriots that he was flying out of Biafra in search of peace. This peace had eluded both sides in the Nigerian conflict in Aburi, Ghana, when the Ghanaian military leader tried to mediate; in Kampala, Uganda when President Milton Obote attempted another unsuccessful mediation and in Niamey, Niger as well as Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, when the Ethiopian strongman, Emperor Haile Sellasie tried, without success to broker peace between the Nigerian Government and the breakaway Republic of Biafra. However, after a devastating thirty month military campaign, the decision to stop the bloody war was achieved inside Chief Benjamin Atuchukwu's living room at Amichi in the present Nnewi South Local Government Area of Anambra State. For this reason, the Atuchukwu House was declared a national monument by the civilian government of Chief Olusegun Obasanjo in 2006. This paper attempts to examine the circumstances that gave rise to the signing of an agreement at this historic location which paved way for the official end of the Nigerian civil war. It also tries to find out the significance of this monument as a symbol of peace and how this promotes visitation.*

## **Introduction**

In its life as a nation, Nigeria has gone through some civil, political, religious and military conflicts in response to peculiar interests of its diverse ethnic nationalities and religious groups. Between 1960, when it gained its political independence from Britain and 1970, it had challenges with its census, elections and governance until the civilian government was toppled in a military coup de tats, a counter coup six months later and a pogrom where thousands of Eastern Nigerian civilians and military men domiciled in the Northern part of the country were killed in an orgy of violence. The result was a mass exodus of these people to their own ethnic regions in order to assure the security of their lives and properties. Failed attempts to resolve this crisis resulted in a secession by the Eastern region to become an independent nation and in the bid to bring them back into the federation by the force of arms the nation was

plunged into a thirty-month civil war. Four major attempts were made to bring the feuding parties to a negotiating table – one before the secession and three during the civil war that followed.

The first attempt at resolving the conflict took place at the serene, hilly presidential retreat centre at Aburi, Ghana, where General Ankra, the Ghanaian Military Head of State tried to broker peace between Odumegwu Ojukwu (representing the Eastern Nigeria) and Yakubu Gowon (the leader of the rest of the Federation of Nigeria) as well as the governors of the other regions of Nigeria and other high ranking members of the Nigerian delegation. Unfortunately, the deal that was struck at this conference was truncated by the federal side when it violated the terms of agreement earlier negotiated by both parties (Achebe, 2012, pp. 85-87). Another major attempt at peace deal took place in Kampala, Uganda, at the instance of the Ugandan president, Dr. Milton Obote. That also collapsed because despite the recognition of the state of Biafra by Tanzania, the Nigerian troops were making tremendous military gains on the battle field having taken Port Harcourt, and therefore believed strongly in the use of military force to achieve swift victory, (Forsyth, 1982, p. 96.). The Nigerian delegation, led by Chief Anthony Enahoro was therefore, recalled by his principal, Yakubu Gowon. An Organization of African Unity conciliation committee comprising the Heads of States of Liberia, Zaire, Cameroun, Ghana and Nigeria and headed by Emperor Hailie Selassie of Ethiopia convened another meeting in Niamey, Niger on July 15 1968. It also failed because both parties could not agree to open a channel to bring in much needed relief for the starving Biafran children, which was the reason for the conference. Rather it agreed to have another conference at Addis Ababa. It was also arranged by Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia between August 5 and September 9, 1968. After a month of negotiation with Nigerian delegation, the mediators were unable to convince the Biafran delegation to renounce secession, the parley stalled again forcing their host to postpone the peace talks indefinitely.

No other negotiations took place for the remaining part of the conflict until January 10, 1970, when it was obvious that Biafra was not in the position to continue the fight having lost most of its territories to the federal forces, outgunned and hungry. In the absence of General Odumegwu Ojukwu, the Biafran supreme commander who had flown out of the country two days earlier 'in search of peace', a brief meeting between the Biafran leaders led by Philip Effiong and the Nigerian field commanders, led by Olusegun Obasanjo agreed on a truce. This happened in a living room of a two-storey building belonging to a

successful businessman from Amichi, Chief Benjamin Atuchukwu. This facility, which the Biafra army initially converted to its military intelligence base during the war, immediately had historical significance as the place where the peace deal which eluded the opposing parties in the Nigerian/Biafra civil war was eventually achieved. Thirty-six years later, (precisely on January 7, 2006) Chief Olusegun Obasanjo then a civilian president of a united Nigeria, visited that site again and declared it a national monument of peace to commemorate the end of the civil war. This paper attempts to examine how Chief Atuchukwu's house was elevated to the status of a national monument and the significance of the building and its contents as a symbol of peace and a tourist destination.

### **The Making of a National Monument and National Center for Peace and Conflict Resolution**

Some places around the world became heritage sites because of their outstanding universal value to mankind, particularly when viewed from historical, artistic and scientific perspectives. In other words, their immense importance derive from their historical, aesthetic (or scientific), ethnological and anthropological strength and appeal. One therefore, would want to know why a simple two-storey cement family house, constructed by a local businessman just before the Nigerian civil war could attain the importance of a national monument. But looking at the criteria for the inclusion of cultural properties on the world heritage list, Chief Atuchukwu's House may not qualify as much as it does under the law guiding the designation of monuments in Nigeria as contained in the National Commission for Museums and Monuments Act, Chapter 242. Under this act, the commission could establish and maintain museums associated with warfare, history and education. Consequently, being the facility which not only housed the Biafran Intelligence Department during the civil war, but also the physical structure inside which the epoch-making ceasefire negotiations and agreement that technically brought the war to an end took place, it assumed an impressive status of a national monument and a tourist destination.

On the 7<sup>th</sup> day of January 2006, the President and the Commander-in-Chief of the Nigerian Armed Forces, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo while on a visit to Anambra State, paid a special courtesy call to Chief Benjamin Atuchukwu at Umudim, Amichi where in January 12, 1970, he negotiated with and obtained the instruments of surrender from the Biafran leadership under Major General Philip Effiong. Noting that Chief Atuchukwu's building hosted the ceremonies marking the cessation of hostilities between the Nigerian Federal troops and the defunct Biafran

troops, which was obtained through negotiated agreement in “the Building”, Chief Obasanjo expressed his intention to declare the building “a national monument, and a center for peace and conflict resolution” (Fourth Republic 3rd National Assembly First Session. No 34. Wed. Nov 7. 2007, p. 157).

On the 13<sup>th</sup> day of January, 2006, the Executive Governor of Anambra State, His Excellency, Dr. Chris Nwabueze Ngige, in consent to the president's declaration, unveiled a commemorative plaque to that effect on the building on behalf of the president. Thereafter, the member representing Nnewi Federal Constituency moved a motion to that effect at the National Assembly. Having been debated on and voted for by the National Assembly on Wednesday, 7<sup>th</sup> November, 2007, it was resolved:

1. That as from the 13<sup>th</sup> day of January 2007, the building known as Chief Benjamin Obijiofor Atuchukwu's House situated at Amichi town, Nnewi South Local Government Area, Anambra State shall be a National Monument and National Center for Peace and Conflict Resolution in view of the role of the building in hosting meetings, negotiations and ceremonies that led to the cessation of hostilities between the Nigerian Federal Troops and the defunct Biafran Troops on 13 January, 1970.
2. That having been so designed, the Federal Government of Nigeria through the National Commission for Museums and Monuments should take over “the building, pay adequate compensation to the owner, develop it, and allow public access to the building.
3. That a National Center for Peace and Conflict Resolution shall be established by the Federal Government at the site of the building and other places to be determined by the Federal Government to enable the center function effectively as a research institute (Fourth Republic 3rd National Assembly First Session. No 34. Wed. Nov 7. 2007, p.152).



Plate 1: Chief Benjamin Atuchukwu's House at Amichi



Plate 2: Bust of Late Chief Benjamin Atuchukwu (Died 2008)

On the 13<sup>th</sup> February, 2012, an exhibition to formally launch the center took place at the living room of the first floor of Chief Atuchukwu's two storey building and the exact room where the cessation of hostilities was negotiated and signed in January 13, 1970.

The exhibition titled "Nigeria: Path to Peace and Reconciliation" was declared open by the Director General, National Commission for Museum and Monuments, Yusuf Abdullahi Usman. In his speech at this event, Usman noted that "while the National Commission for Museum and Monuments as an institution has documented the content and character of the civil war in the National War Museum Umuahia, the exhibition in Amichi is a celebration of the peaceful resolution of the war" (Usman, 2012, p.2). This shows clearly that though the two establishments addressed the events of the Nigerian Civil war, their functions remain distinct from each other, despite the fact that many of the areas covered at the National War Museum display at Umuahia were summarized in pictures at Amichi. Particularly distinct in the Amichi exhibition are the kola nut (oji) and white chalk (Nzu), both of which symbolize peace among the Igbo people. The arrangements of pictures follow historical sequence.

The exhibition at Chief Atuchukwu's house consists of a display pictorial history of Nigeria, including the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial Nigeria. These photographs and drawings adorn the walls of the living room in the following order:

### **Traditional Rulers –**

The Attah of Igalla in 1854 (Plate 3).

The Shehu of Bornu, Mohammed Al-Amin El Kanemi (1814-1835) (Plate 4).

Oba Ovonramven of Benin (1883-1914) (Plate 5).

Chief Nana Olomu of Itsekiri (1883-1916) (Plate 6).

Oni of Ife receiving Homage from Leo Frobenius. (Plate 7).

Obi of Onitsha and his Wives. (Plate 8.)

Oba Akitoye I of Lagos. (Plate 9.)



Plate 3: The Attah of Igalla in 1854



Plate 4: The Shehu of Bornu El Kanemi



Plate 5: Oba Ovonramven of Benin.

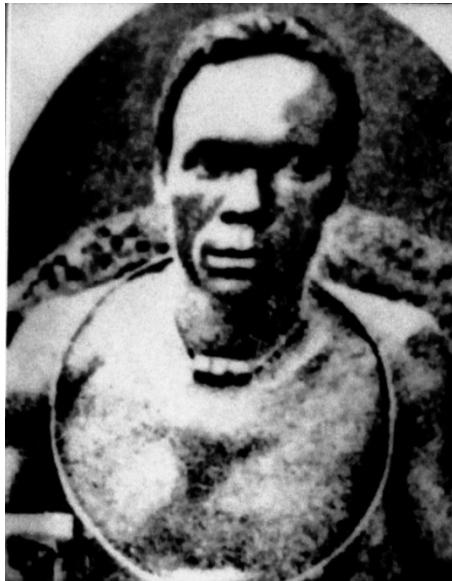


Plate 6: Chief Nana Olomu of Tsekiri



Plate 7: Oni of Ife Receiving Homage



Plate 8: Ohi of Onitsha and his Wives.



Plate 9: Oba Akitoye I of Lagos.

### **Colonial Governors**

Lord Lugard, Governor General (1914-1919)  
Sir Bernard Buordillon, Governor General (1935-1943)  
Sir Arthur Richard, Governor General (1943-1948)  
Sir John Macpherson, Governor General (1948-1954)  
Sir James Robertson, Governor General (1954-1960)

### **Geo-political Power Structure of Nigeria in 1963**

President Nnamdi Azikiwe  
Prime Minister Abubakar Tafawa Balewa  
Sir Ahmadu Bello (Premier of Northern Nigeria)  
Dr. Michael Okpara (Premier of Eastern Nigeria)  
Chief Obafemi Awolowo (Premier of Western Nigeria)  
Chief Dennis Osadebe (Premier of Mid-Western Nigeria)

### **Pre-Civil War Military Regimes**

Major-General A.T.U. Aguiyi Ironsi, Head of State (Jan. 1966-July 1966)  
Plate 10.  
General Yakubu Gowon, Head of State (1966- 1975) Plate 11.  
Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu, Leader of the First Military coup in Nigeria (Plate 12).

**The Biafran Leader and Locally-made Arms**

General Odumegwu Ojukwu, Leader of Biafra

A Biafran made Armoured Car

A Nigerian made Assault Boat

Biafran made Bombs, *Ogbunigwe* and Rocket Launcher

A place was also designated for the Host, Chief Benjamin Atuchukwu, the traditional ruler of Amichi, Igwe Ofobuike Ezeoke, the Director General National Museum and Monuments, the Governor of Anambra State as well as the President of the Federation of Nigeria.



Plate 10: Maj. Gen. Aguiyi Ironsi.



Plate 11: Gen. Yakubu Gowon



Plate 12: Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu

### **Traditional Objects of War and Peace**

Attached to the wall on one end of the room is a glass case similar to what is displayed at the National war Museum, Umuahia. Its contents include some objects of war namely, gun, sheathed sword, bow, wrist charms, arrows and spear. Objects of peace include white chalk (*nzu*),

kola nut (*oji*), staff of authority (*ofo*), metal staff of authority (*ngwu Ogaliga* or *Oji*) wooden flute (*oja*) and an elephant tusk. (See plates 13- 17) The objects of war and some of the displayed photographs seem to represent the summary of what is contained in the National War Museum, Umuahia, sited about sixty kilometers away, and managed also by the National Commission for Museums and Monuments. The designers of the exhibition seem to have taken some of the artifacts from the traditional warfare gallery which showcased the evolution of weapons. Sheathed sword, bow and arrows were selected from the shock weapon section while the spear was selected from the javelin and spear subdivision. The two leather-made wrist charms also have affinity with the exhibits at the regalia and charms section while the locally made gun connects with the firearms section. These together with historical and war photographs displayed at the Amichi exhibition have their replicas at the Armed Forces Gallery and the Civil War Gallery sections of the National War Museum, Umuahia. The two establishments, no doubt, are related but the introduction of these objects of war and some reproduced photographs from the war museum provides a vivid background for the Amichi project, and subsequently the addition of the objects of peace.

Of all the objects of peace, the kola nut (*oji*), white chalk (*nzu*) and a twig of Delarium Senegalese plant (*ofo*) are the most important to the Igbo people because of their strong connection with Igbo worldview and belief. *Oji* and *nzu* are strong Igbo symbols of hospitality and “are regarded as having ritual power, are sacrifices and function as facilitators of communication between men and between men and gods” (Cole and Aniakor, 1984, p.62). For example, the Igbo belief in the spiritual and the supernatural is amply demonstrated during prayer with kola nut as the priest/community leader begins by inviting all the influential gods and spirits of the community to come and partake in the ritual communion and also to become part of the event that brought the parties together. For this reason, every decision taken in that assembly automatically got the spiritual seal of the invited spirits and any defaulter was believed to be answerable to them too. Kola nut is used for prayer and the Igbo people believe that without prayer there is no life and the maxim, *onye wetalu oji wetalu ndu* validates this claim. Also, among the Igbo, white symbolizes purity, holiness and inner beauty. When a European says “as white as snow” its parallel among the Igbo would be “as white as *nzu*”. The white chalk features prominently both in private and public shrine rituals during purification sessions. *Ofo* is related to other staff of authority like the *ngwu agiliga* (wrought Iron Staff) and *odu* (Carved Ivory tusk) but it is more primordial. According to Afigbo (1972, p.21) this twig

These objects of peace on display, particularly the *oji*, and *nzu*, more than prayer materials are symbols of a sacred agreement entered into by the feuding parties (Nigeria and Biafra) in the presence of spiritual witnesses. Also, the leadership symbols represented by the *ofo*, *ngwu agiliga* and *odu* are physical reminders of the charge to the community leaders anywhere in the world that good governance and economic growth can only thrive in an environment of peace.

The exact table, on which the peace treaty between the leaders of the Federal and Biafran Forces was signed, is strategically positioned at the middle of the room. Surrounded by many chairs, it was made the focal point of the entire exhibition (plate 18).



### Plate 13: Objects of War and Peace



Plate 14: Local Kola Nut (*Oji*).



Plate 15: Local White Chalk (*Nzu*)



Plate 16: The *Ofo* Staff of Authority



Plate 17: The *Oja* Wooden Flute



Plate 18: The Table on Which the End of Hostilities was Signed

### **Chief Benjamin Atuchukwu's Residence as a Symbol of Peace and Reconciliation**

In their respective memoirs, Generals Olusegun Obasanjo (1980) and Philip Effiong (2003) never associated the two storey building which housed the residence and office of the Biafran Directorate of Military Intelligence with Chief Benjamin Atuchukwu; instead they linked it to Bernard Odogwu, the Director of Military Intelligence in the defunct Biafra. Surprisingly too, Odogwu's two hundred and seventy-one paged book, *No Place to Hide* (1985), also failed to acknowledge the owner of the house from where he operated and lived for several months of the Nigerian Civil War. Built between 1964 and 1965 in a large family compound known for settling local village and family disputes, the imposing two-storey structure became very important in the events which unfolded during the last days of the bloody Nigeria/Biafra conflict. This is because the building became the operational base of the Biafra struggle and also accommodated the Head of State, General Philip Effiong, between January 12 and 14, 1970. "The building", as it was referred to by Obasanjo and subsequently the Nigerian National Assembly in 2006 and 2008 respectively is a symbol of Biafra's reconciliation with Nigeria and a demonstration of the supremacy of Peace over War.

Three days after Effiong took over the administration of Biafra following General Ojukwu's departure to Ivory Coast, he was compelled to make a broadcast both to the Biafran nation and the Nigerian Government on the need for peace having come to the realization that the differences with Nigeria should be settled by peaceful negotiations

(Effiong, 2003, p.295). This brought about a chain of events that brought Chief Benjamin Atuchukwu's house to limelight. As soon as Effiong was done with his speech, he could not return to his administrative headquarters at Orlu which was already being overrun by the Federal Troops; instead, he headed for Chief Atuchukwu's house at Amichi from where he presided over Biafra for the next two days.

It must be noted here that one Captain Sali Mohammed, who was led to Atuchukwu's house on the 13<sup>th</sup> of January while the Biafra leadership waited for response to Effiong's speech, arrived with cartons of beer and thus created an atmosphere of camaraderie in the house (Odogwu, 1985, p.175). Odogwu clearly observed that "Captain Mohammed was exceptionally good and well behaved" (Odogwu, 1985, p.176).

Consequently, General Effiong constituted a party with the mandate to establish contact with more senior members of the Federal troops at Owerri. On their way, they ran into Lt. Col. Akirinade (Obasanjo's Second-in-Command) who decided that they return to Amichi for a meeting. However, after Akirinade reported back to Obasanjo that afternoon, Obasanjo still made what Effiong considered a surprise visit that same evening to dialogue with the Biafran representatives. These difficult discussions which were held in the living room and bedroom of the first floor of Chief Atuchukwu's house<sup>11</sup> produced an understanding that Peace should reign. Part of the discussion centered on getting the Biafran Leaders to renounce secession and accept the twelve state structure and for Obasanjo to reassure the people of their safety when he makes his broadcast. Atuchukwu's house not only provided the space for the negotiation of Peace, it also afforded the erstwhile compatriots the opportunity to meet themselves again after long months of bitter struggle. For example, Obasanjo in his *My Command* (1980), recounts how he warmly and emotionally embraced David Ogunewe who had been his senior officer in the 5<sup>th</sup> Battalion in Kaduna before the Nigerian Independence. Bernard Odogwu also gave an account of a meeting between Obasanjo and Major Oyewole and Col. Ademoyega, the two Yoruba officers who fought on the Biafran side of the conflict. Though they appeared embarrassed on meeting Obasanjo, their tribesman, their fears were quickly allayed. Obasanjo made one more appearance on the morning of the January 14, 1970 before he went to the Mobile Radio Biafra at Obodo Ukwu to make his broadcast.

With the declaration of Chief Benjamin Atuchukwu's house as a National Monument for Peace and Conflict Resolution by President Olusegun Obasanjo in 2006 and its subsequent passage into law by the Nigerian National Assembly in 2008, the Building and its contents,

including the symbolic objects of war and peace as well as the table on which the peace treaty was signed remain symbols of peace and reconciliation for Nigerians.

## Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated how an ordinary physical structure rose to prominence as a result of unique historical events that linked it to the end of the Nigerian civil war, as well as important activities of some of the *dramatis personae* involved in the negotiation of the ceasefire in January, 1970. The building and its contents represent, among other things, a physical manifestation of a closure to a painful and gruesome conflict which challenged Nigeria's unity shortly after her independence from the colonial British government and a beacon of hope for those currently involved in one form of violent conflict or the other that it is possible to achieve peace through non-violent means. The contents of the permanent exhibition mounted inside the main room of the Centre for Peace and Reconciliation, in the form of photographs and cultural symbols of and war are in continuous dialogue with every tourist to the centre, with the intent of highlighting the futility of war as a way of resolving conflicts. In other words, in this era of endless agitations and conflicts between individuals, families, communities, ethnic nationalities, religious organizations and countries, the Centre for Peace and Reconciliation tourist facility offers a rallying point for reflections, dialogues peaceful resolutions and solutions. It is also a monument to the triumph of peace over war. Consequently, as a unique and the only one of its kind in Nigeria at the moment, this site remains a very important historic, therapeutic and educative tourist attraction for both Nigerians and foreigners.

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