



5th All Aro National Conference

ABAKALIKI 2020



- THEME:** “The Aro and the Development of South-Eastern Nigeria: Legacies, Pains and Prospects”
- SUB THEMES:** Legacies, Challenges/Pains, Prospects/Way Forward and Gender Issues
- DATE:** Saturday, 14th March, 2020
- VENUE:** International Conference Centre, Abakaliki

COMMUNIQUE

The conference was well attended and very successful in organization and achievement of the objectives and purpose. The Governor of Ebonyi State, Engineer David Nwaeze Umahi, was represented by his Chief of Staff, Chief Dr Emmanuel Offor Okorie. It featured eleven well researched and eloquently presented papers. The three sessions were chaired by His Lordship, Justice Nnenna Otti, Rev Dr Torty Onoh and Mazi Dave Okoro Imoko, respectively. The Aro royalty, elites, academia, intelligentsia, including students and members of many social organizations, were in attendance.

The lead paper was presented by Professor Emeritus, Mazi Okoro Ijoma, titled “**About the Aro People: Facts and Fiction**”. The paper defined Aro, its people and geographical location, including Aro Ulo and Aro Uzo (Aro in diaspora). He addressed perceptions and the image of the Aro. According to him, though Aro enjoyed considerable patronage in historical and anthropological literature, there are writers who rather portray “pernicious Aro influence” in South-Eastern Nigeria and beyond, obviously for some political motives. The truth of Aro contributions to the socio-cultural development of South-Eastern Nigeria as a whole must be recognized. He described Arochukwu and its neighbors in the homeland. Arochukwu, he noted, has over the century maintained a high degree of cordiality with its immediate Igbo and non-Igbo neighbors of Abam, Ututu, Ihechiowa, Isu, Ito, Asang, Makor and Biase. These communities are pre-eminently farmers and they supply Arochukwu with food stuffs. The Aro devoted themselves to trade and commerce in a healthy symbiosis with its neighbors. He also did justice to Aro diaspora and neighboring communities, their successes, challenges and the way forward.

A paper by Professor Joseph O Nwankwo of Alex Ekwueme Federal University, Ikwo, Ebonyi State, was titled “**Phytomedicinal and Food value contributions of selected indigenous Aro Plants to other Igbo and South Eastern Nigeria**”. He highlighted selected instances of interesting and significant contributions of indigenous Aro plants to the food culture and traditional medicine practices of the South-Eastern Nigeria. Among the popular food items are vegetables like Adudu (Oha in other dialects), Ahuji (Nchagwu), Evoro (Ehuru), etc. Significant phytomedical contributions from Arochukwu to Igbo land include anti cancer agents from Akarilu (Akilu in other dialects), Ugba (Ugbaka), etc. Also, anti-HIV-1 agents from Okazi (Ukazu), Evoro (Ehuru), etc. Many other such food items are named after Aro in the consuming communities, such as Ede Aro, Achi Aro, Ogiri Aro, to mention but a few. The Aro suffix signifies their origin. The widespread Aro settlements in Igbo land and beyond explain the existence of certain food items in those places, and underscore the significance of Aro contributions to the health and general wellbeing of this geographical region.

In a paper presented by Mazi Professor Paul Ugbuaja of Federal University of Technology, Owerri titled “**Animating role of Aro in Diaspora in the Educational, Economic and Religious life of Igbo Nation – A Case of Mazi Njoku Amagwu**” he made the point that the Aro dominated commerce, politics and religion in Igbo land in pre-colonial times, and so credit goes to Igbo Aros that the Igbo nation today is what it is in education, business, enterprise, corporate organization and management. During the period from 15th century to early 18th century, the South-Eastern region of Nigeria was characterized by great population movement. It was during this time that Aro colonies abroad (diaspora Aros), from Niger Delta to as far as the Equatorial Guinea was founded. However, the strong Aro confederacy was attacked by the British colonists and defeated in 1902. That made it easy for the British to take over control of the Eastern part of Nigeria. But

Mazi Ugboaja opined that the Aro did not waste time brooding on their defeat but quickly formed trading partners with the Europeans. They imbibed western education quickly knowing that knowledge is power. The Aro were therefore, trail blazers in the pursuit of education. That is why they were recognized as beke mbu (first Europeans). As a result of their educational inclination, Professor Kenneth Onwuka Dike was appointed the first Vice Chancellor of the University of Ibadan. Also, Professor Eni Nkoku was appointed the first indigenous Vice Chancellor of University of Lagos to the annoyance of people who preferred an indigene of lower rank.

He emphasized the astuteness of Aro in business. So the Aro were the first to practice the apprenticeship system of training and establishing young people in business. Aro entrepreneurial initiatives rubbed-off on the rest of Igbo who now dominate business beyond the coast of Nigeria – up to China. Mazi Njoku Amagwu, he noted, was the first Chief Priest of Arochukwu kingdom with mystical powers. About 400 years ago, the Oba of Benin hired him for protection. His descendants on the way back home settled and formed prominent Aro communities in the present day Imo and Anambra states, thereby contributing to Igbo development.

The paper by Dr Orji Ogbonnaya Orji which was delivered by Dr Nnenna Onoh was titled **“A Historical Perspective on Aro Settlements and Challenges: The Example of Aro Ohaozara in Ebonyi State”**. He drew from his parent's accounts to establish that the Aro who settled in Ohaozara were largely traders. According to Dr Orji, as much as 34 Aro settlements exist in Ohaozara with a population of about 24, 000 mostly from Ugbo, Ugwuavor and Amoba. There are also people from Asaga and part of Amuvi. He noted that there are also Aros elsewhere in Ebonyi State and prominent ones for that matter. For example, Mazi Orji Ikokwu, a settler from Ugwuavor, became the king of Nkalagu for over six decades. The early Aro settlers enjoyed cordial relations with their host communities, unlike the experience in recent times when Aros have found themselves being discriminated against in places where their fore fathers had called home. This, he opined, occasionally led to communal clashes unfortunately. And, it has become a major challenge to Aros in disapora. He therefore, recommended that Nzuko Aro conducts a comprehensive study on facts, issues and challenges of Aro settlements in Igbo land with a view to finding solutions.

Mazi Sam Ohuabunwa, OFR, MON, MPIN, presented a paper titled **“The Aro and the Development of South-Eastern Nigeria: Imprints in the Oil Rivers”** He quoted WAG Ormsby Gore who observed “that the Igbo and the Ibibio were formerly under the Aro and that the breakup of the Aro power by the British left a vast mass of people leaderless”. He congratulated AANC for organizing this year's event and urged them to remain regular so as to keep reminding our young ones of the rich Aro history. On imprints, Mazi Ohuabunwa noted that before the arrival of the Whiteman, the Aro had established trade routes across the two sides of Rivers Niger and Benue which they then exploited in trades with the Whiteman, first on slaves when it was legal, later on palm oil, palm kernel and timber. They brought other items to trade, including gin, whisky, George wrapper, tobacco, mirror, etc to the hinterland using relay trading mechanism. Many Aros then settled and flourished along the coast. They became the earliest leaders in community development working with the Whites to establish schools, health centers, etc. The rise and fall of Aro empire (1400 to 1902) by Mazi S. O. Onwukwe , according to him, captured the almost legendary exploits of the Aro leading to its rise, and the difficulties that rolled it back, including the Nigerian civil war that resulted in abandoned property policy in today's Niger Delta areas. He observed that luckily, today all over the oil rivers, Aro are back and fully participating in the development of their host communities. He urged Aro to improve in one thing – political participation instead of making much investment and sacrifices for the development of their host communities, and then leave them to determine the Aro fate using political power.

In a paper presented by Professor Nnenna Kanno of Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, Umudike, Abia State, titled **“Some Arochukwu Women and Activists: Legacies Bequeathed and Sustainability”**, she mentioned prominent Aro women such as queen Ngbokwo Udo Omini – the Eze Aro 1799-1825. Her exploits and peaceful reign, tranquility and progress were memorable. Ma Mgbokwo Okicho was a great mobilizer and organizer of women for peace and war. Two of her daughters, Ngbocha and Ngbeke, were exemplary hardworking administrators and planners. Ndi Onoh Ngbokcha hall in Ugwuakuma and Okoro-Ngbeke hall in Atani serve as memorabilia. Professor Kanno identified another prominent Aro woman, Ma Rebecca Mgugbo Okwara of Amannagwu village, a descendant of Okoro-Nkachukwu and the mother of Ma Maria Emmanuel Ochiabutor Achinivu. She was a great associate of Mazi Alvan Ikokwu, a woman mobilizer in craft-making, body designs and domestic science. Mama Ngboro-Ocha Iroka, was a unique administrator and intercessor. She led women to resolve crisis that arose as regards monthly stipends the then government authority paid. Mama Alice Ijeukwu Nwafor, of Ibom village wrote the first Igbo PREMIERA used in teaching

Igbo language. Other prominent Aro women, according to her, include Mama Ngboro Ekeagba, Mama Ugwuidia James Inyama of Atani, etc. The legacies they bequeathed included filial love, unity of purpose, sorority, etc. All these legacies, Professor Kanno opined, need to be sustained and transmitted to future generations.

The paper by Dr Kanu Ohuche titled **“Aro Diaspora Communities and Emerging South East Regional Development Initiatives: Understanding the Issues for new Engagement”** aimed to enlighten Aro communities on the emerging regional development initiatives, for deeper understanding and effective participation. He presented a brief primer on Aro diaspora communities and regional development in the South East as well as a brief history and achievement of regionalism in Nigeria. Next, Dr Ohuche discussed the causes and consequences of abandoning regionalism in Nigeria’s development and appraised the restructuring debate and South East regional development initiatives. Finally, he identified the opportunities for new engagement of Aro diaspora communities and made specific recommendations how the South East can engage in the development of Igbo land such as providing manpower for the implementation of the South East Regional Development Initiatives, mobilizing communities to pool resources together to invest in regional projects, mobilizing funds from Aros in diaspora to take advantage of the investment opportunities when they take off, mobilizing high network Aro diasporas to be part of equity investment club in the regional projects when they are launched and making themselves available for leadership positions when the need arises for some of the projects and programmes of South East Regional Development Initiatives

The paper by Mazi Frank Agodi Kanu, Executive President, All-Aro USA (AAUSA) titled **“Reintegration Contribution”** was presented by Hon Mike Ukoha. He noted that AAUSA was formed based on the concept of reintegration of the Aros. That is to integrate Aro Ulo and Aro diaspora (Izuogu, Ajalli, Ajatakiri, Oru, Izombe, etc) in various states and cities under one umbrella, AAUSA. According to the paper, the Aros have drifted and their pre-eminent cultural, economic and social and historical pedestal almost denigrated. Perhaps, with AANC and AAUSA, we now have an opportunity to halt the drift, to unify all Aros wherever they may be. According to Mazi Agodi, AAUSA disapprove behaviors amongst some Umuaro that do not support Aro integration, especially chat groups where some of their members were conveniently removed without reason, noting that AAUSA is desperately looking to collaborate and partner with Nzuko Aro General and/or any viable organization to fully utilize their equipped medical clinic in provision of basic healthcare to Aro-chukwu community and skill training for the youths. All Aro (USA), under the current administration, he opined, believes in the “IGWEBUIKE” philosophy “Aggregating Our Resources” as its mission statement suggests; and committed to fostering peace, unity and understanding among Aros.

Mazi Ohiaerinwa Ogbonnaya Okoro delivered a paper titled **“The Aro and the Development of South-Eastern Nigeria: The Arondizuogu Diaspora Example”** where he highlighted their geography, the agricultural and natural resources that abound within the environment, their non-Aro neighbors as well as their categorization based on the seminal work by Dike, K O and Ekegiuba, F (1956). The two great writers on Aro diaspora, according to Ohiaerinwa O. Okoro, alluded to the seeming amorphous, loose, hydra-headed indeterminate and faceless nature of Aro diaspora scattered all over Eastern Nigeria and beyond. The paper used several Arondizuogu villages to illustrate longstanding affinity of mutual ties, mutual goodwill, mutual understanding, cooperation and co-existence with their non-Aro neighbors, which, according to him, exist until today. Moreover, he noted that of all agencies and facilitators of these undying ties and links, the most potent and sustainable is inter-communal, inter-clan and inter-sub-ethnic marriages. On legacies, Mazi Ohiaerinwa O. Okoro referenced the statement by Professor Jerome Okonkwo, to the effect that “a successful man is one who has a successor” to buttress the many successes recorded by sons and daughters of Arondizuogu in commercial enterprises, transportation, education, etc. On pains, he recounted several challenges that have afflicted the community in politics, commerce, cultural development, etc; while on prospects, he mentioned seven ways in which the future of the community could be secured by conscious efforts of everyone, especially the leadership. He recommended the Aro undeniable character and trait of adaptability and resiliency, as well as, entrepreneurial spirit and natural diplomatic sophistry as survival strategies in the new era.

Mazi Ernie Onwumere, Ugwuaro submitted a paper titled **“The Role of Aro Merchants in the Development of Commerce in pre colonial Eastern Nigeria”** where he noted that the history of South-Eastern Nigeria

and the role of the Aro people were usually centered on the slave era thus, not much effort is made by researchers to document the role of the Aro in the development and governance of the region in the pre-colonial era before the coming of the colonial government. He noted that in the pre colonial era, Aro merchants developed the region in commerce, religion and governance. That is the origin of the sobriquet, Beke Mbu, meaning the original government. The Aro merchants developed the major markets in Eastern Nigeria. The exchange of goods and market organizational structure that promoted orderliness was introduced in the markets. Trading days were allocated to enable traders to travel to different markets in the region. Examples included the establishment of Bende Market, Uzuakoli Market, Eke Imeoha, Iboko, Nwofe, Orié Egbe, Uburu, Izekwe, Okuku, Eke Oba , Ehamufu to as far as Mamfe in Cameroun where they procured special horse species. The aim of opening each market was to promote trade in the pre-colonial era, Mazi Ernie noted.

The paper by Mazi Emma Kanu Ivi, Ogeneukwu Aro, was titled “**The Aro Contributions to the Development of South Eastern Nigeria: Special focus on Aro Contributions to the Economic and Socio-Cultural Development of Ebonyi State - Legacies, Pains and Prospects**”. He noted that Aros and Ebonyi people have been linked with each other historically, economically and culturally for centuries long before the Whiteman came. They are both Igbo speaking and share common ancestral belief in Chukwu Abiama, the creator of heaven and earth. We have Aro domiciled outside their land, including Ebonyi State, to facilitate their trade and other lucrative enterprises. The Aros were respected for their intelligence and sagacity, he noted. This helped them to build strong relationship with the people they came into contact with. In the olden days, Mazi Ivi opined, people from Aro host communities went on pilgrimage to consult Ibin Ukpabi for solution to their problems. Prominent Ebonyi citizens served as go-between in these pilgrimages. This later metamorphosed into settlements. The Aro worked hard and in the process helped in developing their host communities. Many towns in Ebonyi state trace their origin to Arochukwu, including people from Afikpo and Edda. Finally, Mazi Ivi observed that the relationship between Ebonyi and Arochukwu is deep and historical and should be made to get stronger and better to the glory of GOD.

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