

ALADIMMA: A MODEL FOR TRUE AND LASTING POST-NIGERIA/BIAFRA WAR RECONCILIATION

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Abstract

In a world that is bedeviled with constant conflicts and wars, the need for a model of conflict resolution that can produce a lasting peace and reconciliation cannot be over emphasized. While the Western world focuses on retributive justice in conflict resolutions, Africans pay more attention to restorative justice. The aim is to reconcile and restore a lasting peace between the conflicting parties. Africans, therefore, have models of conflict resolution like *palaver*, *ubuntu*, and *aladimma* for example, that focus on reconciling conflicting parties and restoring severed relationships in such a manner that the conflicting parties go away at the end not as enemies, but friends without at the same time letting the perpetrators get away with impunity. This paper explores the concept and rite of *aladimma*, an Igbo process of reconciliation. It avows to its functionality and proposes it as a model for a true and lasting post-Nigeria/Biafra war

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reconciliation. It gives a brief recommendation on how to go about it.

Key words: Restorative justice, *Aladimma*, Post-Nigeria/Biafra war, Reconciliation.

Introduction

It is now fifty-five years since the war between Nigeria and Biafra ended in what was declared, “no victor no vanquished” by the then head of state General Yakubu Gowon. The hasty integration of the Biafran soldiers into the Nigerian Army and the relative peace that is experienced today in Nigeria would appear as a sign of post-war reconciliation and peace between the parties. However, the frequent killing of the Easterners especially in Northern Nigeria and the fact that they have been edged out of the highest political position in the country since the war ended point to the contrary. In fact, the controversy generated by the book *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra* written by Chinua Achebe and the current agitations for the restoration of Biafra show that a true and lasting post-Nigeria/Biafra war reconciliation has not yet taken place as will be shown later in the paper. To achieve a true reconciliation, this paper explores the concept and rite of *aladimma*, an Igbo process of reconciliation, and proposes it as a model for a true and lasting post-Nigeria/Biafra war reconciliation. It will give a brief recommendation on how to go about it before concluding.

The Concept of *Aladimma*

Aladimma or *aladinma* (it can be written in both ways) is a concept used particularly by the people of Owerri Zone of Imo

state in Igboland, Eastern Nigeria. It is a compound word comprising *ala* – community or literally, earth, *di* – be (verb), and *mma/nma* – good. When you pull the different English equivalents together you come up with “community or earth be good”. *Aladimma* is an Igbo traditional form of reconciliation aimed at bringing justice and peace, forgiveness and healing to conflicting parties. Nkeonye Otakpo refers to it as “mediation”, which for him is the central model of settling disputes in Igbo culture.² In fact, he is right to call it mediation because the council of elders that presides in this process of reconciliation would rather like to be considered as mediators who work to restore severed relationships instead of adjudicators.³ In this sense, *aladimma* aims at restoring and preserving relationships.⁴ This is important owing to the communal life of the Africans in general and Ndigbo in particular where what affects the individual affects the community and vice versa. This shows that African, indeed Igbo morality is communitarian in nature. As Stan Chukwube says, the concern of Ndigbo is how the community evaluates an act and not how good or bad it appears to the individual. Hence, one’s action is taken to be ethical or unethical depending on how that particular action enhances or incumbers the wellbeing of others and the smooth running of the community.⁵ Just as Igbo morality is communitarian in nature, so is *aladimma* the Igbo

² Nkeonye Otakpo, *Justice in Igbo Culture* (Benin City: Malthouse Press Limited, 2009), 97.

³ Otakpo. *Justice in Igbo Culture*, 97.

⁴ Otakpo. *Justice in Igbo Culture*, 97.

⁵ Stan O Chukwube, “Renewing the Community and Fashioning the Individual: A Study of Traditional Communal Reconciliation among the Igbo” (Fordham University, 2008), <https://doi.org/AAI3312005>, 48. [“Ndigbo” here is the same as “the Igbo(s)” which is used to refer to the Igbo people in plural depending on one’s choice]

traditional form of reconciliation, communitarian in nature. This kind of worldview explains why the rebuilding and/or preservation of right relationships is of fundamental importance in African traditional justice systems.⁶ In African tradition, an individual is not respected in isolation, but in relation with the others. Hence, legal systems in traditional Africa focus attention more on restoring communal justice rather than on restoring individual justice.⁷ In this sense, *aladimma* resembles the South African *ubuntu*. Like *ubuntu*, which asks about the nature and scope of what ought to be done by offenders and the offended in order to restore a broken relationship that constitutes the very essence of humanity for victims, offenders, and supporters alike,⁸ *aladimma* aims at restorative justice rather than retributive justice. This explains why it is seen as mediation instead of the strict sense of adjudication as judgment. Both adjudication and mediation may indeed lead to justice. However, while the target of mediation is always reconciliation, adjudication pays little or no attention to reconciliation.⁹ *Aladimma* as a process of Igbo traditional form of reconciliation is, therefore, amazingly conciliatory, familiar, and non-adversary. Parties to a dispute go away after judgment as friends and neighbours, not as mortal

⁶ Babu Ayindo, Sam Gbaydee Doe, and Janice Jenner, *When You Are the Peacebuilder: Stories and Reflections on Peacebuilding from Africa* (Harrisonburg: Eastern Mennonite University, 2001), <http://www.emu.edu/ctp>., 37.

⁷ Ayindo, Doe, and Jenner., 37.

⁸ Charles Villa-Vicencio, *Walk with Us and Listen: Political Reconciliation in Africa* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2009)., 118.

⁹ Otakpo, *Justice in Igbo Culture*., 98.

enemies.¹⁰ In this sense, *aladimma* is for the Igbo what *palaver* is for the Bantu people.

The concept of *aladimma* can also be deduced from Innocent Asouzu's complementary ontology of *ibuanyindanda*. In this ontology, the individual exists in relationship with the others. "All matters of redress are better pursued in the spirit of reconciliation and mutual forgiveness and not in the spirit of atonement about past wrong only."¹¹ Like *aladimma*, the ontology of *ibuanyindanda* maintains that true reconciliation is impossible if we forget that an individual is inseparable from the community, and focus more on retributive justice rather than on restorative justice.¹² With a mindset on the complementary ontology, Asouzu avers that "all issues of positive cultural exchanges would take a natural course and in harmony with the type of conditions that make for understanding among diverse peoples", otherwise, "no meaningful discourse can take place and no measures directed at changing interpersonal relationship would have any meaning."¹³

Aladimma and its procedure as will be seen in its rite, could be likened to the proceedings of a traditional Thembu court, which Nelson Mandela recalled in *Long Walk to Freedom* and quoted by Villa-Vicencio.¹⁴ In this court, everyone was free to speak.

¹⁰ Otakpo. *Justice in Igbo Culture*, 100.

¹¹ Innocent Asouzu I, *Ibuanyidanda: New Complementary Ontology beyond World-immanentism, Ethnocentric Reduction and Impositions*, (Zweigniederlassung Zürich: LIT VERLAG GmbH & Co. KG Wien, 2007), 244-45.

¹² Asouzu., *Ibuanyidanda*, 13.

¹³ Asouzu. *Ibuanyidanda*, 22.

¹⁴ Villa-Vicencio, *Walk with Us and Listen: Political Reconciliation in Africa*, 129.

Perpetrators and victims of violence were given listening ears while they tell their tales before everybody. The aim was to restore severed relationships.

The Rite of *Aladimma*

Reconciliation could be between two or more people, families, clans, or communities, etc., as the case may be. The procedure of *aladimma* is the same in each of these cases but with little nuances. For example, while the head of the family or a chosen person presides in nonpublic *aladimma*, the king or the head of the council of elders presides in public or community ones. For the purpose of this paper, attention will be on public or community *aladimma*.

As far as *aladimma* is concerned, it is the victim who usually initiates the process of reconciliation, or, the restoration of justice and reestablishment of strayed relationships. However, the community can initiate it by summoning the conflicting parties especially when the conflict threatens the wellbeing of the whole community as it often happens. Cletus Obasi attests to this. He avers that it the community can bring conflictants into the rite of settlement without the conflictants requesting for it, particularly, when the community sees the conflict as a threat to peace and harmony.¹⁵ In this case, the community is seen as a victim. This mode of initiating reconciliation is captured by Robert Schreiter's view, which sees repentance as being the onus of the perpetrators

¹⁵ Cletus O Obasi, *Ethnic Conflict and Reconciliation in Nigeria: A Way Forward* (Owerri: Clacom, 2010), 110-11.

of violence, and reconciliation and forgiveness as the prerogative of the victims of violence.¹⁶

Once *aladimma* is initiated, a preliminary investigation, necessary to clear the way and set things in motion usually by an authorized senior member of the council of elders follows immediately.¹⁷ The date for the hearing is fixed and communicated to the parties. If any party refuses to honor the invitation, the council of elders uses every persuasive means, like sending a bosom friend of the party in question, to talk the party into collaborating. Where persuasion fails, the party faces ostracism. The same holds when a party refuses to accept the decision reached by the council of elders.¹⁸ This ostracism is very important. It carries a serious weight because in an Igbo cultural environment very few persons, if at all, can survive ostracism, which is envisioned to inspire an obstinate person to respect and honor the authority of the council of elders and the desire of the community.¹⁹ On the day of the hearing, people gather in an open court²⁰ where the parties and their witnesses are led in an oath before they are allowed to present their cases and bear witnesses respectively. First of all, the complaining party presents its

case followed by the defendant. If there are witnesses, they are invited to testify and are cross-examined. Disputants are questioned by members

¹⁶ Robert J Schreiter, *Reconciliation: Mission and Ministry in a Changing Social Order* (New York: Orbis, 1992)., 21.

¹⁷ Otakpo, *Justice in Igbo Culture.*, 74.

¹⁸ Otakpo. *Justice in Igbo Culture*, 76.

¹⁹ Otakpo. *Justice in Igbo Culture*, 76.

²⁰ Victor C Uchendu, *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria* (New York: Holt, Rinehart Winston, 1965)., 71.

of the council. Witnesses are also questioned and the parties may then engage in an exchange of views. Comments and then questions from the audience are also entertained.²¹

This procedure is meant to help the parties tell their narratives before the audience and before each other. Narrating their stories in this form, elicits remorse and repentance from the perpetrator and forgiveness from the victim. It is therapeutic in nature, and helps to facilitate the route to reconciliation.

When everyone has spoken and has been listened to, three, five, or seven senior members of the council including, occasionally, some persons from the audience are nominated to serve as jurors (*ume*). The jurors retire to an inner chamber to deliberate and recommend judgement to the council. In some cases, parties to a dispute are asked to excuse themselves from the deliberation in order to allow a fruitful exchange of views on the basis of the evidence presented by both sides.²²

The odd number of the jurors is intended to facilitate things in case a consensus has to be reached by vote. After the jurors have made their recommendation to the council, the presiding member of the council would now summarize the discussion recapitulating what both parties and their witnesses have said. He, the presiding member of the council makes known to the whole

²¹ Uchendu. *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria*, 75.

²² Uchendu. *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria*, 75.

assembly the decision of the council based on the consensus reached from different opinions that informed the jurors' recommendation. In fact, the eyewitnesses' evidence is usually the most favoured in reaching a verdict. Circumstantial evidence and evidence based on hearsay are admissible, but they carry less weight in reaching a verdict one way or the other.²³ Normally, a verdict is given, bearing in mind that the intention of the whole reconciliatory process is to restore mutual relationships. Hence, the spirit and letter of the law are not rigidly followed when giving verdict.²⁴ A verdict usually includes a compensation that should be paid to the victim by the perpetrator. The compensation is often negotiated and agreed upon by both parties. It is meant to repay the life of the victim materially. People's character in the community differs from one another. And members of the community know to a great extent how each individual behaves. Knowing how a person behaves, helps to determine the value or level of trust that should be placed upon his or her testimony. If there is any reason to doubt a person's statement, he or she is seriously questioned to ascertain whether he or she is telling the truth. If the person is found to have given false testimony, thereby deceiving the council, he or she is strictly punished.²⁵ The decision, however, is not forced on those who disagree with it. Rather, a persuasive means is used to get them to comply with the decision. Whereby persuasion does not work, which rarely happens, the disagreeing party is ostracized as earlier mentioned. The fear of ostracism can make a party reluctantly accept the verdict of the council. When this is the case, a further step is taken

²³ Uchendu. *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria*, 100.

²⁴ Uchendu. *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria*, 101.

²⁵ Uchendu. *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria*, 100-01.

to ensure that a true and lasting reconciliation is achieved. The parties are made to bond in a covenant (*igba ndu*), which “is symbolically administered between them as a lasting remedy to their conflict and a vehicle in the promotion of justice and reconciliation.”²⁶ Referring to this kind of covenant, Cyril Okorochoa says:

Igba-ndu is usually a covenant between two persons or groups whereby one under oath promises to do nothing that will prove harmful or detrimental to the other’s progress or well-being. It literally means joining (*igba*) lives together into an integral and permanent union with a view to reinforcing and sustaining them. ... *Igba-ndu* is not only used to strengthen and perpetuate friendships or relationships, it is sometimes used as a means of establishing a permanent truce between warring communities.²⁷

Since covenants are always made with rituals, which usually involve the blood of animals, the parties are taken to the sacred place or shrine where the covenant will take place under the supervision of deities and ancestors. There, the verdict is reenacted, and the animal is presented to the deities and ancestors who witnessed to the rites. The conflicting parties, share a common meal prepared with part of the animal as a mark of

²⁶ Obasi, *Ethnic Conflict and Reconciliation in Nigeria: A Way Forward*., 108.

²⁷ Cyril C Okorochoa, *The Meaning of Religious Conversion in Africa: The Case of the Igbo of Nigeria* (Vermont: Avebury Grower, 1987)., 112.

reconciliation and healing.²⁸ If, however, the verdict of the council is willingly accepted by the parties, a simple meal is shared in which, both parties, their witnesses, and the whole assembly take part. Communal meal which is a sign of unity and sharing deepens personal relationships in the African tradition.²⁹ Even the ancestors share in this meal because of the African communitarian way of living in general and Ndigbo in particular. Africans believe in the participation of ancestors in meals, which is delineated by the action of some elders, who present part of the food at the shrine or throw them out of the door before taking their own; an action, which re-enacts the tie of relationship and unity between the living and the dead.³⁰ Concerning this form of meal, Mutiso Mbinda as quoted by Cletus Obasi says:

*A meal so shared, therefore, is not only a symbol of unity but also brings about transformation in the community. Human social solidarities are renewed and reconciliation is effected in the process of being together and sharing a meal. A family sharing a meal together deepens the meaning of life: the past, present and future are celebrated and given meaning.*³¹ (Italics is from the original).

The Christian perspective of the Eucharistic meal parallels the ritual meal of *aladimma*. Referring to the Eucharistic meal, Brian Hearne says: “It is no accident that the abiding sign of the

²⁸ Okorocha. *The Meaning of Religious Conversion in Africa*, 111.

²⁹ Okorocha. *The Meaning of Religious Conversion in Africa*, 113.

³⁰ Okorocha. *The Meaning of Religious Conversion in Africa*, 113-

14.

³¹ Okorocha. *The Meaning of Religious Conversion in Africa*, 114.

presence of Christ in the Christian community is a meal. In a meal, people come together, renew their strength, and share not just food but also friendship. A meal is a sign of reconciliation and peace, of hope that God's purpose in creation is being fulfilled."³² The participation in *aladimma* meal by both parties is, similarly, evidence that trust and confidence have been restored. It is a sign that the parties are willing and ready to implement the decision of the council, which in turn will usher in the desired reconciliation between the two parties.

There are several points that emerge from the procedure of *aladimma* as presented here. These points are well portrayed in Otakpo's description and analysis of Igbo dispute settlement procedure. He listed the following seven points:

1. The oath administered to both parties and their witnesses is intended to enforce the morality of truth....
2. Decisions through jurors (*ume*) are intended to ensure that arbitrary decisions are avoided. It is to ensure compliance with the community's standard of fairness, objectivity and truth....
3. Parties can object to the inclusion of persons deemed, in their opinion, to be unsuitable for jury service on the grounds of prejudice, bias or a lingering old quarrel. Any person selected for jury service can refuse without offering reasons for refusing to serve;

³² Brian Hearne, *Struggling for a New World* (Kenya: AMECEA Gaba Publications, 1993), 72-3.

4. Relations and friends of both parties are normally excluded from jury service;
5. Issues not originally pleaded are not normally argued;
6. Overt mechanisms are employed to ensure that both parties do not end up as enemies, no matter the final outcome;
7. No decision is made unless both parties are heard. Not only are they heard, the complainant and the defendant are simultaneously heard in each other's presence. Their witnesses are also questioned in the presence of everyone, including the parties to a dispute.³³

The ability of *aladimma* to bring the victim and the oppressor not only to face each other in dialogue but also to tell their narratives while being listened to makes it outstanding as a process of reconciliation. *Aladimma* as a traditional form of reconciliation works to restore justice and severed relationships between warring or conflicting parties among Ndigbo as we have seen. This paper argues that it can work too in restoring justice, and severed relationship that exist between Nigeria and Biafra.

Aladimma: A Model for a True and Lasting Post-Nigeria/Biafra Civil War Reconciliation

In his speech to mark the end of the Nigeria/Biafra civil war, General Yakubu Gowon said:

³³ Otakpo, *Justice in Igbo Culture.*, 75-6.

Now, my dear countrymen, we must recommence at once in greater earnest, the task of healing the nation's wounds. We have at various times repeated our desire for reconciliation in full equality, once the secessionist regime abandoned secession. I solemnly repeat our guarantees of a general amnesty for those misled into rebellion. We guarantee the security of life and property of all citizens in every part of Nigeria and equality in political rights.³⁴

It appears General Gowon equates reconciliation with general amnesty. Or, he thinks that granting general amnesty and reintegrating the soldiers who fought on the side of Biafra into the Nigerian Government Army, will automatically lead to post-Nigeria/Biafra civil war reconciliation. In fact, as Achebe points out, there are several global observers who believe that Gowon's actions after the war were generous and praiseworthy. Lots of discourses talk about how the Igbo were perfectly integrated into Nigeria.³⁵ However, Achebe thinks differently. For him the Igbo are yet to be integrated into Nigeria.³⁶ He judges the actions of the federal government soon after the war as outright hostility rather than conciliatory.³⁷ To buttress his point, he cites a quotation few others have already cited, including himself in his *The Trouble with Nigeria*. He says:

³⁴ Max Siollun, "Nigeria's Great Speeches," n.d., <http://maxsiollun.wordpress.com/great-speeches-in-nigerias-history>. (Accessed 04/01/2013).

³⁵ Chinua Achebe, *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra* (New York: Penguin, 2012), 235.

³⁶ Achebe. *There Was a Country*, 235.

³⁷ Achebe. *There Was a Country*, 234.

After the conflict ended the same hard-liners in the Federal government of Nigeria cast Igbos in the role of treasonable felons and wreckers of the nation and got the regime to adopt a banking policy which nullified any bank account which had been operated during the war by the Biafrans. A flat sum of twenty pounds was approved for each Igbo depositor of the Nigeria currency, regardless of the amount of deposit.³⁸

It could be recalled that General Gowon, during his speech at the end of the Nigeria/Biafra civil war, avowed that Nigeria as a nation will never go back to the debates that embodied the agitations and complaints of Biafrans, which led to the civil war.³⁹ Gowon saw those debates as “fractious”, “sterile” and “selfish.”⁴⁰ A decision at the end of a civil war, not to revisit the debates that led to the war, no doubt, sounds like a decision of someone who has the interest of the nation at heart. It is probably the reason, 53 years after the civil war, those who fought on the sides of Nigeria and Biafra respectively have never sat face to face to talk about what caused the war, what happened during that war, and how to resolve it. If they have, maybe, this writer cannot recall. However, this paper does not blame General Gowon and those who believe his post-war actions towards the Easterners who fought on the side of Biafra were “magnanimous and laudable.” Neither does it blame Achebe and those who consider General Gowon’s actions as non-conciliatory. The fact is that

³⁸ Achebe. *There Was a Country*, 234. [Italics mark the beginning of his citation]

³⁹ Siollun, “Nigeria’s Great Speeches.” (Accessed 04/01/2013).

⁴⁰ Siollun. “Nigeria’s Great Speeches.”

General Gowon's concept of reconciliation lacks those procedures that lead to a true and lasting reconciliation as Nigerians and indeed Africans understand it. This is where *aladimma* stands out as a model. Robert Schreiter, for example, would see General Gowon's reconciliation as a hasty peace.⁴¹

According to him,

this approach is supposed to put the violent history behind us and allow us to begin afresh. Not surprisingly, this kind of reconciliation is often called for by very perpetrators of violence who, either having seen what they have done or having realized the potential consequences of their actions, want to get on to a new and different situation. They want the victims of violence to let bygones be bygones and exercise a Christian forgiveness.⁴²

It appears this is really what happened in the case of General Gowon's actions after the Nigeria/Biafra civil war. Being a Christian, he probably wanted to exercise a Christian forgiveness by letting the bygones be bygones.⁴³ However, Schreiter makes it clear that reconciliation as a hasty peace is actually quite far from Christian reconciliation even though it bears a superficial resemblance to it.⁴⁴ It could be argued that General Gowon entered into this "hasty peace" type of reconciliation with the aim to avoid a new outburst of violence that could result if Nigerians and Biafrans were to narrate their stories of the war as two parties

⁴¹Schreiter, *Reconciliation*, 18.

⁴²Schreiter, *Reconciliation*, 19.

⁴³Schreiter, *Reconciliation*, 19.

⁴⁴ Schreiter, *Reconciliation*, 19.

facing each other. This could be deduced from the statement never to go back to the debates that led to the civil war as mentioned in his end of the war speech. Schreiter faults this kind of reconciliatory methodology. He says:

Reconciliation as a hasty peace, while often motivated by an urge to get beyond violence, is not true reconciliation. It covers up the enormity of what has been done and tries to foreshorten the process. It is often driven by the fear that remembering the violence of the past will lead to a new outbreak of hostility. But suppressing the memory does not take the violence away; it only postpones its expurgation.⁴⁵

In this case, *aladimma* has an advantage. While it brings the conflicting parties to tell their narratives facing each other, it tries at the same time, through its mediative approach, and its focus on restorative justice, and the aim to restore severed relationships, to ensure that reprisal or new outbreak of hostility is ruled out.

One could not expect that true reconciliation between Nigeria and Biafra has taken place when the agitations that led to the civil war have not been addressed as can be seen from the echoes coming from Achebe and others. Of course, no reconciliation is possible without liberation. Schreiter correctly argues that reconciliation can only take place when the nature of the crime committed is recognized, and its circumstances for continuing or recurring are removed. Freedom is not just freedom from the vicious condition, but also freedom from the structures and processes that allow and

⁴⁵ Schreiter, *Reconciliation*, 21.

encourage viciousness.⁴⁶ This is exactly why General Gowon's process of reconciliation has not and cannot achieve a true and lasting post-Nigeria/Biafra civil war reconciliation. But how can it, when the lives of those who suffered in that war especially Biafrans have not been fundamentally repaired, as true reconciliation requires?⁴⁷ *Aladimma* has again, an advantage here. For its process not only brings psychological healing to the victim, but also economic and political healing through the compensation which the council of elders will tell the perpetrator to pay the victim. Therefore, this paper strongly proposes it as a model that will lead Nigeria and Biafra to this desired goal.

It is true that *aladimma* is a traditional form of reconciliation among Ndigbo who formed the greatest bulk of those who fought on the side of Biafra. However, the concept and procedure of *aladimma* are not totally foreign to the rest of the tribes in Nigeria, because the concept and procedure of *aladimma* are common to Africans, albeit, in various forms. Consequently, *aladimma* is an ideal model for a post-Nigeria/Biafra war reconciliation. It should be recalled that the closest reconciliatory effort that gave rise to the Aburi Accord⁴⁸ that would have brought a peaceful resolution to the conflict between the federal government of Nigeria and the Eastern region (Biafra) and consequently averted the bloody and horrific civil war, failed at the implementation level. It failed because it lacked what

⁴⁶ Schreiter, *Reconciliation*, 21.

⁴⁷ Schreiter, *Reconciliation*, 21.

⁴⁸ Onyegbula, *The Nigerian-Biafran Bureaucrat.*, 137-38. Aburi Accord was the agreement reached between the Eastern region (Biafra) and the federal government of Nigeria, in a mediated meeting held at Aburi in Ghana, January 14, 1967.

aladimma possesses – the power to ensure that the decisions reached are implemented.

Western forms of reconciliation are good and work pretty well within the cultural locations that evolved them. However, they use categories and procedures, very often foreign to Africans, just as the African forms of reconciliation use categories and procedures foreign to Westerners. For example, while Western forms of reconciliation, like the court system, may not hesitate to use jurors whom ordinarily the disagreeing parties would not accept, many African traditional forms of reconciliation would not do it because while Western forms are more concerned with retributive justice than restorative justice, African forms are aimed at restorative justice. Again, African traditional forms of reconciliation which provide room for the conflicting parties to tell their narratives facing each other, allow other voices to be heard that are often not heard in a conventional courtroom.⁴⁹ The negotiated decision making in the African traditional forms of reconciliation aimed at making the conflicting parties depart not as enemies, but as friends, is lacking in the Western forms. Owing to all these and more, no Western models of reconciliation can be a model for a true and lasting post-Nigeria/Biafra war reconciliation. They lack the spirit of *aladimma* which underscores the reconciliatory process among Ndigbo who are the majority that fought on the side of Biafra. *Aladimma*, *palaver*, and *ubuntu* originating from Africa are good models for a true and lasting post conflict resolution in Africa in general. But in this particular context of post-Nigeria/Biafra war reconciliation,

⁴⁹ Villa-Vicencio, *Walk with Us and Listen: Political Reconciliation in Africa*, 124.

aladimma has an advantage over the others, being a process of reconciliation already in use by majority of one of the parties involved in the conflict. This is why this paper feels *aladimma* has no rival as a model for a true and lasting post-Nigeria/Biafra war reconciliation. In fact, it is important to recognize this great form of reconciliation which restores severed relationships without giving room for the immunity of perpetrators. A Policy Advisory Seminar on United Nations Mediation Experiences in Africa recognizes this importance when reporting on African forms of reconciliations it says:

In Africa, traditional cultural norms, mechanisms, and systems for promoting reconciliation without permitting impunity, must be recognised. For example, among the Acholi of Northern Uganda, indigenous reconciliation processes involving truth-telling; the demonstration of genuine remorse; the delivery of reparations; the request for forgiveness; and the granting of mercy; provide a system for reconciliation while seeking at the same time to ensure that perpetrators do not get away with immunity for human rights abuses. In this regard, local communities may have different views on reconciliation and restorative justice in contrast to Western legal systems which tend to place more emphasis on prosecution and retributive justice.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Murithi et al, “Policy Advisory Group Seminar Report” (Cape Town, 2006), [http://www.ccr.org.za/images/stories/Vol_16-UNMEA_Report_Final.pdf.%0A %0A.](http://www.ccr.org.za/images/stories/Vol_16-UNMEA_Report_Final.pdf.%0A%0A), 23.

If the above citation is to be taken seriously, then, Nigerian legal system which is modeled on the Western legal system cannot bring a true and lasting reconciliation between Nigeria and Biafra because it lacks the features of *aladimma*.

Lots of testimonies have been received from people or communities who either went through or witnessed this form of reconciliation. Chukwube has some of these testimonies as given by his informants. For example, Mark, one of Chukwube's informants, testified that:

There was no animosity again between the offender and the offended after reconciliation. I think it was because all of them contributed to solving the problem. If it were a unilateral decision there would not be real peace and reconciliation. But because the people acted together, that sense of vindictiveness was no longer there.⁵¹

Ngozi, another informant of Chukwube, expressing her own feelings and what she saw after one of the sections of *aladimma* she participated in said:

After the communal meal of reconciliation we had in my extended family, you could see joy radiating from everybody's face. There was no longer apprehension when approaching your brother or sister. Everybody was now free with the rest. You could see love radiating and notice that everybody

⁵¹ Chukwube, "Renewing the Community and Fashioning the Individual: A Study of Traditional Communal Reconciliation among the Igbo.", 122.

was longing for peace. People were hungry to interact but because of the anger and resentment they couldn't do that. Immediately [after] reconciliation was concluded and people knew that everything was settled, they started hugging each other. When there is resentment you are left alone and can't interact with others. Moral offense ties our hands and feet. It paralyzes relationships.⁵²

There is no doubt, proposing *aladimma* as a model for a true and lasting post-Nigeria/Biafra war reconciliation can raise thought provoking questions. For example, is it not possible that *aladimma* works for Ndigbo as a process of genuine and lasting reconciliation because it is operating within a particular cultural location that holds the same view? Considering the context of the nation Nigeria with hundreds of multicultural tribes distinct from one another, how would *aladimma* work? Who does what; and how? Bearing these questions in mind, this paper will recommend in the next section an adaptable procedure of *aladimma* that will bring about a true and lasting post-Nigeria/Biafra war reconciliation.

Recommendation

Taking into consideration the other tribes that are involved in this reconciliation issue, this paper is not advocating that *aladimma* must be applied exactly the way it is done among Ndigbo. This does not mean that the procedure of *aladimma* is completely

⁵² Chukwube., "Renewing the Community and Fashioning the Individual: A Study of Traditional Communal Reconciliation among the Igbo.", 121.

foreign to the other cultural tribes in Nigeria in particular and in Africa in general. All the paper is saying is that, a workable adaptation of it that will suit the context of the parties involved should be worked out. In this context, it recommends that the whole Continent of Africa be seen as a larger community where the conflicting parties – Nigeria and Biafra belong. The Leaders of all the African countries including the chairpersons of African Union (AU), and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) respectively, should be considered as members of the council of elders except the Nigerian leader for no one is a juror in his or her own case. Biafra as the victim of the war, should initiate the reconciliatory process by bringing the case to African Leaders who henceforth will be referred to as members of the council of elders. The members of the council of elders should select one or two reliable members among them to make the preliminary inquiries; after which they should choose a neutral and convenient place, fix the date for the hearing, and communicate to Nigeria and Biafra, the conflicting parties, who then, should attend with their witnesses. When all have gathered, the representatives of Nigeria and Biafra, and their witnesses should be led to an oath using symbols of oath taking from their various cultural locations. The fear of swearing with a symbol, the efficacy of which, the parties know, will help to elicit the desired truth-telling. After the oath, the representatives of Biafra, who, as it were, are the complainants, should be allowed to tell their stories first followed by the representatives of Nigeria. Then, the witnesses of both parties should be heard and questioned. After which, the representatives of both parties are given another opportunity to engage one another in an exchange of views. Opportunity should be given to the audience who would want to speak. Not only will this procedure make the stories of

the parties be heard by others, it will also create an opportunity for the parties to tell their narratives in each other's presence; an act which will dispose them for the reconciliation they seek for. When everyone has spoken, the members of the council of elders should then select some members of the council of elders (usually odd number) to serve as jurors. No juror should be imposed on any party for any reason. The jurors have to make recommendations to the members of the council of elders based on what the conflicting parties, their witnesses, and the whole assembly, have said. The presiding member of the council of elders should then pronounce the verdict without imposing it on the parties. This whole process is to ensure that retributive justice is not administered at the expense of restorative justice that is needed. If a party should fail to attend the hearing, or accept the verdict reached, the members of the council of elders should use persuasion to get the party to comply. Where persuasion fails, the party should be economically and politically sanctioned. While persuasion serves to ensure that impositions are avoided, and helps to create room for a restoration of mutual relationships, sanction aids to scare the parties from disrespecting the decisions of the members of the council of elders, thus, showing that perpetrators and offenders cannot get away with impunity.

The meal aspect requires no special procedure since what is important is that the parties, their witnesses, and the whole assembly, including the ancestors share and eat meal together as a sign of trust and reconciliation. Everywhere, especially in Africa, covenants aim at establishing a bond between the parties. Therefore, where a need for a covenant arises in the process of using *aladimma* as a model for a true and lasting post-Nigeria/Biafra war reconciliation, I recommend that the

representatives of Nigeria and Biafra be taken to a shrine unanimously chosen by both parties, and the covenantal rite of the place should be used. Shrine here refers to various worshiping places of all the religions within the vicinity. This will ensure that things are not imposed on the parties, and consequently dispose them for the desired reconciliation. If the feature of *aladimma* as recommended here is applied, there is confidence that there will be a true and lasting reconciliation between Nigeria and Biafra after 53 years of horrific civil war that claimed millions of innocent lives most of whom were children that were starved to death. It will put to a permanent end the current renewed agitations for the restoration of the Biafran Nation. If need be, that Biafra should be restored, it will be through a mutual and peaceful agreement done through a referendum that will keep Nigeria and Biafra good neighbours.

Conclusion

It is clear from the above analysis that General Gowon's general amnesty to the Biafran soldiers after the Nigeria/Biafra civil war did not and cannot achieve a true and lasting reconciliation between the parties. It is not because General Gowon probably did not want a true and lasting reconciliation but rather, because his mode of reconciliation lacks what it takes for such reconciliation to come by. Again, it is obvious that the Western form of dispute settlement cannot lead Nigeria and Biafra to the desired post-war reconciliation because, like General Gowon's mode of reconciliation, it is devoid of the quiddity that results to such reconciliation. The modern Nigerian legal system, being an offshoot of the Western legal system, has no answer to that. It is only African traditional modes of dispute settlement that can

provide the basis for a true and lasting post-Nigeria/Biafra civil war reconciliation. Amongst them, *aladimma* is most favored owing to its vantage point of being the mode of reconciliation in use among Ndigbo who are the majority that fought on the side of Biafra, one of the disputing parties.

This paper explored the concept and *modus operandi* of *aladimma*. It proposed and argued that it should be used as a model for a true and lasting post-Nigeria/Biafra civil war reconciliation. This paper does not in any way claim to be exhaustive. It is open for more research. While it encourages folks to come up with a better adaptable version of *aladimma*, it maintains that *aladimma* is a model for a true and lasting post-Nigeria/Biafra civil war reconciliation.