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OMBATSE: NIGERIAN RELIGIOUS CULT JOINS WAR ON THE STATE IN CENTRAL NIGERIA

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Andrew McGregor

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Nigeria has experienced years of sectarian violence between Christians and Muslims and endured massacres and bombings by religiously-inspired groups like Boko Haram. Now, however, with the slaughter of as many as 90 members of Nigeria's security forces, practitioners of one of Nigeria's many forms of traditional religion have challenged the state's authority in central Nigeria's Nasarawa State, lying roughly on the dividing line between the Muslim majority north and the Christian majority south.

Traditional Religion and Moral Reform in Nasarawa

The Ombatse cult is based on traditional forms of worship practiced by the Eggon ethnic group. The Eggon people of Nasarawa State are roughly divided in their religious allegiance to Christianity and Islam, but many see no contradiction in also following more traditional belief systems. The Eggon speak their own Benue-Congo language (Eggon), though traditional oral histories of the group trace their origin to Yemen. Today, they are concentrated in the Lafia, Akwanga and Nasarawa-Eggon districts of Nasarawa State.

Though Ombatse (meaning "Time has Come") has kept a relatively low profile for some years despite occasional clashes with non-Eggon neighbors and police, the traditional religious movement has embarked on a violent campaign of moral and spiritual reform implemented through forced conversions, though the campaign also draws on currents of political frustration and perennial disputes with semi-nomadic herders like the Fulani, who use the same land as sedentary agriculturalists like the Eggon.

Ombatse was allegedly formed as the result of a revelation received in a dream that called for male Eggons to purify society and rid it of social evils such as promiscuity, adultery, crime, alcohol consumption and smoking (*Daily Trust* (Lagos), November 25, 2012). One Ombatse member described the group's focus: "The sect is highly purified and its members are not into alcoholism, sexual intercourse and stealing. Our members are highly moral and dedicated to their cause only" (BBC Hausa, May 10). The group's founders have been identified as movement chairman Haruna Musa Zico Kigbu, movement secretary Zabura Musa Akwanshiki, Sgt. Alaku Ehe, Shuaibu Alkali, Iliyasu Hassan Gyabo and Abdullahi Usman.

According to the Ombatse chairman: "The religion had existed since time immemorial with a shrine 'Azhili' interceding for the people. Consequently, people linked with the 'Ombatse Group' usually ask the shrine for rain, good harvest and many other fortunes. Therefore, Ombatse Group is not a [form of] witchcraft; neither does it have anything to do with fighting wars" (*National Mirror* [Lagos], December 2, 2012).

Ombatse spokesman, Zachary Zamani Allumaga, explained the purpose of the movement and its origins in a December, 2012 interview with a Nigerian daily.

The invasion of the Europeans, Christianity and the Islamic jihad, all these influx changed the status quo. Our forefathers had their own way of worship which is the traditional way of worship before the influx. The coming of these foreigners infiltrated the place and consequently affected their style of worship. My father who is still alive practiced both the traditional religion and Christianity and he is still alive. I also have an uncle who is a Muslim and at the same time practices the traditional religion. These have all tested the two divides. I am a confirmed communicant Catholic and at the same time too, a traditional worshipper. Now, what led to us bringing back this traditional worship to our people is because of the complaints we receive every now and then from our people about the evil and vices that have pervaded our society and our state. These things were not there according to what our fathers told us. The society used to be serene and orderly till the advent of the foreigners. Some of those societal ills include murder, theft, rumor mongering, secret society and witchcraft (*Vanguard* [Lagos], December 22, 2012).

Ombatse members typically wear black clothing and bundles of charms to provide magical protection from gunfire. There is little place for women in Ombatse and they are barred from entering Ombatse shrines. Both Ombatse leaders and their opponents point out that not all Eggon are members of the traditional cult. Ombatse and all other ethnic militias in Nasarawa State were officially banned in late 2012.

Spiraling Violence in the Eggon Community

A pattern of worsening communal and religiously-inspired violence has emerged over the last year in Nasarawa State:

- June 2012 – Communal violence erupts between the Eggon and the Alago ethnic group. The latter took the worst of it, complaining that local security forces were unwilling to intervene against the Ombatse militia (*Leadership* [Abuja], July 1; *Daily Trust* [Lagos], January 19).
- Mid-October, 2012 – Several clashes erupt between Eggon and Fulani. Many of the dead were reported mutilated by machetes (*Daily Trust* [Lagos], January 19).
- November 17, 2012 – An attempt by Nigerian security forces to raid the Allogani cult center in the Nasarawa-Eggon district on November 17 to arrest the Ombatse chairman and secretary while they were conducting an initiation and oath-taking ceremony resulted in a gunfight in which three soldiers were shot. Hours later, cult members set up a barricade on the Lafia-Akwanga road and smashed cars that attempted to evade the barricade. Security forces endured abuse from the drivers of long lines of halted vehicles for their failure to remove the barricades (*Sunday Trust* [Lagos], November 18, 2012). The raid brought Ombatse into conflict with the state;

according to Ombatse spokesman Zachary Zamani Allumaga: "What happened that day at the Azhili shrine when the security operatives invaded us was reminiscent of what terrorists would do by using a suicide bomber to bomb a church. I can't still imagine" (*Vanguard* [Lagos], December 22, 2012).

- November 21, 2012 – Violence erupted in Agyaragu, a suburb of the state capital of Lafia, when Ombatse killed at least ten people of the Christian and animist Koro ethnic group (a.k.a. Jijili, Migili) with firearms, machetes and axes. Some 50 homes were also burnt to the ground (*Daily Trust* [Lagos], November 21, 2012; November 25, 2012). Following the incident, Ombatse chairman Haruna Musa Zico Kigbu denied his movement had anything to do with the communal violence: "As far as we are concerned, our rules forbid members from starting a fight and killing, and as such, we cannot be connected with violence" (*Daily Independent* [Lagos], December 12, 2012).
- January 9-14, 2013 – Seven Fulani were killed by Ombatse members in a pair of remote villages in Nasarawa State. The Ombatse members also killed a large number of Fulani-owned cattle, which they leave behind in accordance with their beliefs. Dozens may have been killed in the retaliatory fighting that followed (*Royal Times of Nigeria*, January 14; *Daily Trust* [Lagos], January 19).
- January 13, 2013 – Five Ombatse members were killed by security forces when they tried to prevent the seizure of a large quantity of arms and ammunition (*Royal Times of Nigeria*, January 14).
- February 7, 2013 – Four villages and towns in Nasarawa State experience Fulani vs. Eggon violence. Both Eggon and Fulani blamed the other ethnic group for initiating the fighting (*Sunday Trust* [Lagos], February 10; *Leadership* [Abuja], March 22).