



Some of the torched houses in Mgbowo, Enugu

Deaths as cultural festival turns violent

THE people of the rural community of Mgbowo Town in Awgu Local Government area of Enugu State have never dreamt nor experienced anything akin to what befell them Saturday July 8. The traditional civility and serenity of the ancient community were eroded, shattered and laid waste by a rampaging force purportedly brought in to keep order and peace. When the dust settled, no fewer than eight young people had been mowed down by the invaders.

On the day, the people had woken up to a cheery sunny morning. The organizers of the town's Annual Cultural Day were in high spirits and very grateful to God for the wonderful and conducive weather. They rose early and began to set up canopies and arrange chairs and tables at the Boys Secondary School, Mgbowo, the usual venue of the Fiesta. As this was going on, they noticed the presence of policemen, making some of the organizers to pause and ponder. The Police team reportedly told those on hand that they had orders to stop the fiesta from being held there or being held at all.

Perhaps, following the insistence by the organizers to go ahead with what they maintained was part of their age-old Ikeji (New Yam festival), some of them were reportedly arrested by the Police and taken into their waiting vehicles. They were later released. As the news of the police presence and the unfolding drama spread, more youths started converging at the venue to see what was happening.

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They were later reportedly urged by their leaders to go home and freshen up in readiness for the upcoming cultural binge. This cultural fiesta is usually celebrated a couple of weeks after the town's Ikeji New Yam Festival. The Ikeji began on Sunday June 18 and would have climaxed and ended with the cultural fiesta during which there was always the exhibition by masquerade, dancing troupes, display of agricultural products, palm wine and culinary preparations to show the culture of Mgbowo people. A beauty pageant was also expected to take place on that day.

But what happened and how did a festival that should have been full of merriment end in disaster?

■ Chris OJI, ENUGU ■

Unconfirmed but widely held belief in Mgbowo today is that, the newly recognized Igwes of the two autonomous communities created out of the ancient Mgbowo town were against the holding of the fiesta. Their grouse allegedly being that not only had they not authorized the event, that it was being held at the instance of a rival group who felt that the creation of the autonomous communities in Mgbowo did not follow the due processes of the Autonomous Community Act 2002 of Enugu State and who consequently did not recognize their relevance in the governance and affairs of Mgbowo. As a result, it was alleged, that the two Igwes went to the Enugu State Police Command and asked the Police to stop the event which they had alleged, was also going to be used to crown a certain Chief Columbus Egwuonwu Oleka as the Ohaire II and clan Head of Mgbowo, over and above the autonomous communities' Igwes.

Ever since the death of the late Ohaire I, Eze Lawrence Nwosu Ukah in 1996, a successor had not been chosen, instead the rulership of the town had been left in the hands of the traditional Prime Minister, Chief Gregory Uhio, the Ikenga Mgbowo. Pursuant to having an Ohaire II, a chieftaincy constitution review committee was created in 1998 with Professor Denis Mkpallata Ekpete as the Chairman. The final constitution was to have been promulgated in the year 2000 but was shelved because of alleged meddling with the contents by the then President General of the Mgbowo Improvement Union – the apex town union of the community, Prof. Joels Okoro Akpa. Promulgation was suspended until 2001. In 2001, a chieftaincy screening committee was reportedly set up in consonance with the tenets of the chieftaincy constitution. The committee was headed by Chief Emmanuel Nwadinwa Ude, who now is

the Igwe of one of the two new communities carved out of Mgbowo.

While this committee did its job, the demand for the creation of autonomous communities was said to have been deftly midwived by the then Mgbowo Improvement union, MIU, President General, Prof Joe Okoro Akpa ostensibly to scuttle the on-going process for the selection of an Ohaire II.

However, this demand was sent to the Government of Enugu State, which after rejecting the initial demand for seven communities, decided to create just two for Mgbowo out of five traditional villages, with a total population exceeding 50,000 persons.

The President General allegedly did not report to the MIU the government's decision to create only two communities, contrary to the people's expectation, before unilaterally implementing the decision and creating the communities.

Many Mgbowo people cried foul contending that if the autonomous communities were conditions for attracting government patronages, then Mgbowo deserved more than two as even less populous neighbouring communities had up to five communities.

They also posited that the emergent two communities were big enough to exist on their own and that they could make nonsense of the sacred unity of Mgbowo town which they said was both physical, cultural and spiritual. This group of people while not rejecting the newly created communities insisted that for the unity of Mgbowo to be preserved, that an Ohaire II be selected and that his stool backed by the MIU should serve as the major unifying factors of Mgbowo. They had reportedly brought their argument to the MIU General Assembly where it was resolved to set up a 10-man Committee charged with identifying all the things that bound Mgbowo together as well as resolving all the conflicts arising from the autonomous communities issue, and also to proffer the way forward that would

engender unity in diversity.

Before this committee could come up with an interim report during the subsequent MIU General Conference, the Unionists said, one of the communities, Ekpulato, had already installed its own Igwe without due consultation with the MIU and recourse to the 10-man committee.

Petitions emanated from every corner to the MIU alleging unwholesome handling of the issue. At this point, a battle line was drawn between the unionists who insisted on having a central Igwe and the autonomy group who sought to maintain the new order. This scenario soon engulfed and overwhelmed the MIU as the unionists now were suspicious of and opposed vehemently, the Dr. Bernard Ekpete-led executive which they said was sympathetic to the autonomy group and whose mandate they said had long expired.

In April 2005, alleged plans by the Unionists to push for elections was scuttled as the delegates from MIU branches abroad moved for adjournment, arguing that they lacked the mandate to partake in the elections during the December 2005 General Conference, an unusual thing reportedly happened. Automatic gun wielding policemen, some of whom were clad in the dreaded Bakassi attire with red head gears to match, not only engaged in preventing some Mgbowo citizens from accessing the Boy's Secondary School, Mgbowo Examination hall venue of the meeting but came in and positioned themselves at strategic positions in the hall.

Given the tense and intimidating atmosphere, the conference could not progress and it took the combined appeals of Dr. C.J.G. Orjioke, former Federal Permanent Secretary and Chief Barr. Anthony Oguguo, former Imo State Governor to calm the situation. That meeting later progressed into the early hours of the night and upon the suggestion of Orjioke, it was adjourned to 10.00am the next morning December, 28. However, the MIU executive were totally absent at the resumed meeting as they said the circular for the meeting stipulated it was a one-day event.

Other members and delegates insisted the circular they got had talked of a two-day conference which they said had been the MIU tradition but the exco was said to have contended that a second circular was issued canceling the first and that the meeting was only for one day.

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During Easter festivity, the Ekpete executive was prevented from holding their General Conference billed for Community Primary School, Ezioha, Mgbowo following a court injunction restraining them at the instance of Dr. Udede exco. After this, there was so much muscle flexing between the factions as they struggled for the soul

of Mgbowo town. This was the setting prior to the 2006 Ikeji New Yam Festival. When the usual eight days had elapsed after the Ikeji festival, it became the time for the traditional outing ceremony during which masquerades of all shades manifested at the Eke Mgbowo Daily Market. On that day, the Police reportedly called in but had to do a retreat when they

saw the ferocity of the crowd. No incident took place that day as all was merriment and rejoicing. However, at the Cultural Day, things got out of hand

In fact, after the Police initially seemed to have reached an understanding with the fiesta organizers, according to eye witness reports, unknown to the organizers, the Police team

had asked for reinforcement which included not only armed and fierce looking anti-riot policemen but an armoured personnel carrier. When that reinforcement came, reports say, the festival had got underway with guests and dancing troupes and other people already in place and seated. An eye witness recalled that as the Police

reinforcement landed, the leader of Police Mobile Force who was clad in civil dress had, after taking a call on his GSM handset, ordered his men to move in on the unsuspecting crowd. The armoured car moved in crushing chairs, canopies and limbs in an effort to disperse the crowd.

The mesmerized and enraged crowd allegedly began to pelt stones at the advancing destructive police troop who now opened fire on the crowd. Shouts of *Police, Police, don kill us oh! Leave us alone o*, filled the air as a stampede ensued.

They later retreated from the venue but were said to continue shooting indiscriminately, such that stray bullets killed four persons in places other than the venue in addition to three earlier killed at the venue which included two brothers from the same parents and a male student from Ishiagu town schooling at Mgbowo as well as many wounded now receiving treatment in various hospitals.

As the town took stock of the dead and wounded, the Police left for their Enugu base leaving a distraught community. The youths of the town now regrouped, not for reprisal attack, they contended, but to assuage the spirits of their fallen townspeople in accordance with the custom of the land.

This they said, included razing and laying desolate the homestead of anybody who was remotely or directly connected with the spilling of Mgbowo blood and or with the death of an Mgbowo indigene.

Another twist to the whole debacle is what they

called double omen as according to them, Mgbowo and Ishiagu had an ancient blood pact. In the light of all these, they set about burning and destroying the homes of those who are known to be connected with autonomous community issue on the grounds that they plotted and brought in the Police to shed Mgbowo blood and that the guilt of blood-letting rests squarely on the said persons.

No fewer than 30 houses have been razed across five villages

of Mgbowo including those of the Ikenga Mgbowo, the two Igwes and their cabinet members and associates. These acts of arson started on Saturday, July 8, through Sunday to Monday afternoon when the Enugu State Police boss, Mr. Charles Dawodu visited the town to access the carnage. He was reported to have appealed for calm.

Meanwhile, key players on both sides of the debacle have made statements to the Police and are being detained since Tuesday, July 11. Efforts to get some of them to comment was unsuccessful as they were not allowed to talk to the press. One of the victims who spoke with *Saturday Comet* summed up the tragedy thus: "In all my life, I have never heard such a story told.

My child has been murdered and my in-laws' home razed. It is a double tragedy". However, the Police Command speaking through the Police Public Relations Officer, Mike Abatam, DSP, absolved itself of any wrongdoing contending that they had simply been called in to restore order.