

Why We Choose To Protest Half-Naked – Ebonyi Women

By **SAMSON NWAFOR** - February 8, 2020



*In this report, **SAMSON NWAFOR IN ABAKALIKI**, writes on the growing culture of half-naked protests among Ebonyi women.*

In recent time, Ebonyi State has witnessed more than three different cases where aged women staged protests dressing half-naked. The first of its kind in recent years in the State, emanated from the women of Agubia in Ikwo Local Government Area of Ebonyi State on 16th of December 2019. They hinged their reason on the alleged arrest of their sons by security agents who allegedly acted on the orders of a top government official from the area.

The aged women, who blocked the entrance gate of Government House, Abakaliki, at the early hours of that fateful day, alleged they were facing harassment and intimidation from the security agents that were terrorising their community. According to them, the matter became unbearable after the security agents allegedly invaded a venue of a wedding ceremony in Abakaliki and arrested another two persons from the community. The protesters were between the ages of 60 to 90 years.

They demanded that the incessant arrest of their sons must cease forthwith.

How did it start? A bloody clash had erupted between two rival groups over which one to control a motor park in the community, which claimed the life of one Chinedu Nwali, and many others were injured, while houses, cars and other valuable properties worth millions of naira were damaged. The Agubia Motor Park is the central park where all the vehicles leaving and entering the community stop. The women disclosed that since the clash between the two groups, peace had eluded the community.

Mrs. Mercy Nwali, who spoke on behalf of the women demanded urgent and amicable resolution of the matter as their lives and that of their family members were in danger.

“What we demand is that all of them who are involved in the crisis should come home so that we could make peace. They shouldn’t be in town here and be terrorising us in the village. Any time we schedule to meet to seek solution to the crisis, we don’t see them. We no longer sleep in our homes and we want government to intervene,” she explained.

They further demanded for the immediate release of their children who were arrested and detained. Another aged woman, Mrs. Juliana Nwali who gave the names of her children arrested as Messrs Igwe Nwali, Chikwendu Nwali and Chineme Nwali vowed never to leave Government House gate until they were released to her. She was seen crying profusely, saying she prefers to die than go back without her children.

Addressing the women, the State Commissioner for Internal Security and Border Peace, Hon. Stanley Okoro Emegha Okoro, assured them of the readiness of government to address all their concerns, so that absolute peace would return in the area.

“You know, you are our mothers. Our Governor was not happy to see you in this way and mood. So, whatever is the problem, I assure you it will be resolved not later than today,” the Commissioner said.

As the dust raised by the protest of Agubia Ikwo women was about to settle, another aged women more than 100 in number from Ndiezoke village in Igbeagu community in Izzi local government area of the State on 29th January 2020, who dressed half-nude, protested over alleged forceful takeover of their mineral-rich land by a former traditional ruler of Igbeagu community, John Nwenyi.

The women, who besieged the entrance gate of Government House Abakaliki were accompanied by some men and youths of the village. They also tied palm leaves round their heads and robbed local white chalk (nzu) on all over their bodies and were chanting protest songs to drive their grievances home.

They carried placards with various inscriptions such as ‘John Nwenyi should leave our land, John Nwenyi should be called to order, Our Governor should come to our rescue, Gov Umahi you are our last hope, among other inscriptions.

The State Commissioner for Internal Security, Hon. Stanley Okoro Emegha, was also on hand to hear from them.

Speaking on behalf of the protesters, Dr. Chris Nwogbaga, said the protest was to register their grievances over the illegal encroachment into their land allegedly by John Nwenyi, and to call for the intervention of the State Governor, David Umahi.

He alleged that Nwenyi, who is a member of Ebonyi Elders' Council, had been making frantic efforts to forcefully takeover the land since 2007 following the discovery of mineral deposit in the land.

Nwogbaga said: "We have a solid mineral deposit in our village, which was discovered since 2007 and since then, we have somebody by name, John Nwenyi, former traditional ruler of Igbeagu. We have a common boundary with them. Since we discovered this mineral deposit, he has never allowed us to rest. Since 2016, he wanted to mine the mineral and we told him, no, that we are not yet prepared.

"He forced and forced himself and eventually brought white men with police and forced himself into the land to survey the land. We met him and told him to stay off the land. He neither sought our consent nor that of the Governor. After that, we wrote an SOS, and copied the then, Commissioner of Police and the Commissioner for the Solid Minerals Development, the Governor, the Local Government Chairman, and our Traditional Ruler. They are all aware of this matter.

"Later, he came again with a bulldozer to enter the land by force, but we stopped him. He soft-pedalled a bit and started again sometime in 2019. The Governor invited us and said that no person had the right to enter the land without our consent and nobody should mine at the place. We also met with the then Commissioner of police who gave us his phone number and instructed us to call him if any person enters the land without following the due process.

"Since then, nobody entered the land until three days ago, we saw policemen and soldiers loaded in Hilux vans to the land and they are threatening the entire village, that's why we came to notify the Governor through a peaceful protest. We are saying enough is enough."

Responding, the State Commissioner for Internal Security, Mr. Emegha Okoro, commended them for conducting themselves peacefully, and assured that Government would address all their concerns within three days.

All efforts to speak with John Nwenyi failed as his mobile number and that of his son, Pascal Nwenyi who is a Technical Assistant to the Governor could not be reached.

Interestingly, less than one week after the protest of Ndiezoke women, over 500 market women trading in Abakpa main market Abakaliki protested against their proposed relocation by Ebonyi State Government to the new Margaret Umahi International market located along African trans-sahara highway.

The women, most of whom dressed half-nude, marched to Ebonyi State Government House as early as 10am, but was blocked at the Government House roundabout by security agents, who were apparently uncomfortable with situation.

Determined to make their grievances heard, they made u-turn and proceeded to pastoral centre, Mile 50 Abakaliki, the residence of the Catholic Bishop of Abakaliki diocese, Most Rev. Michael Okoro,

where they were received by the bishop's confidential Secretary, Rev. E. Obunna.

Their resolve to reach the Bishop might not be unconnected to the fact that the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), Ebonyi State Chapter led by its Chairman and Senior Special Adviser to the Governor on Welfare and Religion, Very Rev. Fr. Nwali, had been in the forefront of peace media between the traders and the State Government over the proposed relocation order.

They carried placards with various inscriptions such as: Abakpa main market women say no to intimidation; widows in Abakpa are denied their rights, many have died of heart attacks, Government is not sincere in its relocation plans, among other inscriptions.

Narrating their grievances, the leader of the protesters, who gave her name simply as Mrs Nwode, said they came to seek the intervention of the bishop over their plights in the hands of the State government.

She explained that Government had concluded plans to evict them from Abakpa main market, the only source of their livelihood, without making alternative arrangement for them. She noted the new

International market which the State government claimed to have provided for them had been sold out by the same Government to people who were not traders in Abakpa main market, despite collecting money for forms and taxes from them.

Her words: "We are the real market women from Abakpa, not the political market women that you hear on the radio. Governor asked us to buy form for the shops at the International market for N50, 000 and N30, 000 for tax and many of us paid. After the end of his first tenure, he removed the Chairman of Abakpa market, and appointed an acting Chairman.

"He (Governor) changes the leadership of Abakpa market at will and enthrones whoever he wants. Presently, Hon. Peter Oba is the acting Chairman. We didn't object to that. He told Oba to move us to the new International market, but he didn't give us shops there.

"We urged him to reduce the prices of the shops for shops owners at Abakpa as compensations, but he refused. He later asked us to move to the new market for one year, without payment. We applauded the gesture, only for him to renege. He told us that he has given the shops to the market women. But here are the real market women in Abakpa and no single shop was given to us.

"Now, the Governor is insisting we must move out of the market on or before February 10, 2020. Should we carry our wares to our houses? Where does he want us to go?"

Responding, Rev. Fr. E. Obunna, urged them to articulate their grievances in a paper and bring to him, assuring them that the Bishop was going to wade into the matter.

The women thereafter proceeded to Government House where they blocked the entrance gate, and halted both human and vehicular movement, until the Special Assistant (SA) to the Governor on Internal Security and Utilities, Capital city, and member of the shops allocation committee, Hon. Nchekwube Anakor, came and addressed them.

Anakor after listening to the women assured that their concerns would be addressed. He told them to bring the comprehensive list of both those who bought forms but were not given shops as well as those who were yet to pay any money, to enable them resolve the issues.

The acting Chairman of Abakpa Market, Peter Oba while reacting to the protest, said he had assured the women that their concerns would be addressed and wondered why they chose to protest.

Now, the question on the lips of observers is: what is the reason behind the growing habit of half-naked protest in Ebonyi?