

## NIGER DELTA REPORT

### FEATURE

# Tears as gunmen invade Rivers community

About a year after Obite community in Etche Local Government Area of Rivers State was engulfed in violence over an alleged oracle indictment of a community chief for the murder of his niece, Akpoku, another community in the area, was recently invaded by gunmen after another oracle allegedly indicted a member of the community for killing an APC leader in the area, reports PRECIOUS DIKEWOHA

**E**VEN in this modern era with mushrooming of churches everywhere, the Etche people in Rivers State still believe in the pronouncement of the oracle. The use of oracle has become a means of ascertaining 'truth' when there is controversy, debate or crisis in their communities.

Nevertheless, the use of the oracle to resolve dispute and unearth mysteries have almost always ended in more crisis and violence leading to shooting, killing and looting. Only last year the oracle was invited by the people of Obite to find out who killed one of their sisters. The chief priest consulted the gods, performed the ritual and indicted one of the highest ranking traditional chiefs the community. The accuse is an uncle of the late victim's.

The oracle's pronouncement turned Obite upside down as irate youths threatened to behead the suspect and to burn down his property. Though, it was learnt that the suspect was later banished from the community and he is expected to stay in exile more than eight years, in line with tradition. Obite boil for months with residents living in anxiety throughout the period. The crisis was heightened because not everybody in the community supported the oracle's pronouncement. It took the intervention of the police and political leaders in the area to restore sanity.

Fresh crisis resumed in the troubled land recently following the gruesome murder of a chieftain of the All Progressive Congress (APC), Mr Christopher Njoku in Akpoku. The latest crisis was even more disastrous as houses were burnt down, properties looted, scores injured the entire community went into hiding for more than one week after the hood-

lums invaded their community.

A Niger Delta Report reporter who visited the troubled Akpoku community recently was guided round the trouble scene by some youths of the area who now reside in a neighbouring community. It was observed that the residents were yet to return to the community. Only few people were seen cautiously walking out from their hideouts when they sighted the reporter taking photograph of burnt buildings. Akpoku is made up of five villages: Okomoko, Umuode, Umudim, Umuaghara and Umuoria.

Speaking on the incident that led to the destruction, residents of the community said they were in their houses one afternoon when they heard frightening voice ordering the entire community to run. They said this happened few days after the oracle indicted one Mr. Mac Harry of killing the late Njoku, one of the APC leaders in the area. They said the hoodlums came into the community with more than twenty motorcycles popularly called Okada and sophisticated weapons.

One of the chiefs in the community, Chief Christopher Oluoh said as a Christian he doesn't believe in oracle but the community insisted that they must consult the oracle to tell them the truth rather than inviting the police to arrest anybody. "After the death of the APC leader, two suspects were arrested they later confessed that it was Mac Harry that sent them to do what they did. Base on their confession the community contemplated on how to arrest the accused but some elders of the community suggested that it would be better to consult the oracle and invite Mac Harry.

"Before bringing the Oracle to the community the juju priest was forced us to sign undertaking that whatever



•Mac Harry's house on fire

he was going to do in the community would not cause any trouble. The oracle came and the community gathered. Mac Harry was indicted by the oracle. In fact in his presence the oracle told him how he paid the gunmen to kill the victim. I was surprised when some hoodlums entered the community and started shooting, looting and burning houses. I have reported the matter to the police and they have assured us of their cooperation. You can see the residents have deserted the community, few people are just returning to the community. But by God's grace and with the effort of some political leaders in the area, I know peace will return to the community," he said.

The youth leader of the community, LoveDay Iwuze, said the community was living in peace until the APC chieftain was murdered. "The murder of the APC chieftain in the area and the subsequent arrest of two suspects by the police led to the crisis. The suspects made confessional statements. When the oracle came to the community it exposed the killer before the people. And the youths of the community who witnessed the whole thing got angry and went to the suspect's house and demolished it. Few days later gunmen entered the community and destroyed people properties."

One of the victims, Caroline Amadi, a nurse who spoke to Niger Delta Report said she was beaten by the gunmen after they looted her chemist shop. "I saw the gunmen with

my two eyes they were not masked. They looted everything inside my shop and collected N150,000 cash and my bike. When they left my shop I ran away with my family, so I didn't know what happen next until the day I returned from my hideout."

Mr. Oli Chibuzor whose brothers were still in the hospital recuperating from bullets injuries said his two brothers were shot in the front of their houses. "The incident happened on Sunday, when they came I was not around but they met my wife and ordered her to ransacked my house under gun point. With fear, she did as they instructed. She went to where I kept money in the house and brought out N219,000 which she gave them. They shot two of my brothers who are presently taking treatment in one of the private hospitals in the area. As I am talking to you now we have spent N150,000 treating my two brothers and they are yet to get better."

Another victim Chinedu Nweke, said his father's house and shop loaded with drinks and other goods were destroyed and looted by the gunmen. "They didn't leave anything with us, the shop was loaded with all kinds of goods, and they took few of the items and destroyed the rest. They also collected N300,000 cash we kept at the shop."

Mr. Akagbuo Amadi, an elderly man in the community whose house and that of his son were badly destroyed said, "I have nowhere to sleep, I want the government to come to my rescue, the gunmen came to



•One of the vehicles burnt during the raid

the community with sophisticated weapons. When we heard the sound of the gun, we have no option than to run away. You can see for yourself how my house and that of my son was burnt down; we didn't pick out a pin from the house. God will not forgive any one that made me to be in this condition."

But Mac Harry whom the community allegedly accused of bringing hoodlums to the community to destroy their houses, profess his innocent in a telephone chat with our reporter. He said he was a victim of an alleged gang up against him by some members of the community.

He said, "They set my building ablaze, if the police arrested the two suspects that confessed that I am the one that sent the hoodlums to my community as they claimed so why then would I not be arrested by the police. I am a politician I move freely in my community and anywhere I go. I didn't do it and I can never do it."

Attempts to reach the Rivers State Police Public Relations Officer, Ahmad Mohammad, were futile. Calls placed



•One of the victims, Elder Amadi briefing the journalist

to his mobile phone rang out and he did not respond to a text message detailing the reason for the call.