

Desire to build houses in South-East and inherent deadly tussles

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SIMON UTEBOR *writes about how some easterners' desire to build houses in their villages is being frustrated by life-threatening squabbles over land matters*

Fifty-year-old Arodiegwu Damian (coined name) born in Arondizuogu in the Ideato Local Government Area of Imo State is the eldest of his parents' four children.

Damian and his siblings were so close when they were growing up to the envy of some persons in the community. If a soothsayer had predicted disunity among them, he would have branded the seer a prophet of doom.

But the bond of oneness among the quartet shattered when their father died about five years ago and left plots of land.

Shortly after his father's death, Damian left Arondizuogu for Lagos in search of greener pasture many years back. His sojourn in Lagos paid off, having acquired a good university education with a well-paid job to match. At 48, he felt it was time to go to their village to put in place a befitting structure on one of the plots of land their father left behind.

Traditionally, Damian, being the diokpa or okpara (the eldest child) of the family, had the right of first refusal. He said the desire to build a house, however, put him at loggerheads with his siblings.

He said, “Jealousy sets in as they felt I wanted to oppress them because I am better off. That was the beginning of a bitter feud among us. The trio teamed up against me and vowed never to allow me build on any of the land.

“They said that since I left the village, they were the ones looking after the property, wondering why I should suddenly arrive to disinherit them.”

Damian said the tussle became so fierce to the extent that his siblings almost killed him, adding that when some labourers he hired to clear a portion of the land went to the site, his brothers did not only prevent them from clearing the place, they chased them away with cutlasses and cudgels.

He noted that when he confronted his brothers to know why they acted rashly to the labourers, they beat him to a pulp, threatening to decapitate him if he failed to let go of the property.

Damian recalled, “I do not know how I wronged my brothers. We were so close before our father passed on to the extent that people in Arondizuogu were always envious of the intimacy in our family. But the whole thing changed when I wanted to build a house and I told them of my desire.”

According to him, he has let go of the land and the relationship between him and his brothers has been badly affected by the development.

Pains over land ownership

Mr Udochukwu Egege from Abia State, who resides in Igbo-Etche in Rivers State, was not as fortunate as Damian. He paid the supreme price as he desired to build a house in the community two years ago. Udochukwu was murdered by suspected land speculators over a plot of land he wanted to build a house.

Egege’s widow, Ursula, said since the murder of her husband, life had become meaningless for her and the children.

The widow stated that her husband was murdered over land that people would leave behind someday, stating that in 2017, she petitioned the ex-IG, Ibrahim Idris, who intervened in the matter and ensured that the suspects were apprehended.

She explained that since the matter was in court, she would prefer not to make further comments but to be hopeful of justice for her slain husband.

For Kingsley Ejiofor, from Umuahia LGA of Abia State, land tussle almost claimed his father's life.

Ejiofor said though his father was now dead, he survived the land dispute between him and a certain family member who was a native doctor in Umuahia.

He claimed that the native doctor buried some charms on his father's land so that when he crossed the marks sprinkled with mystical substances, he would die.

He said, "My father got wind of the charms buried on his land and decided not to go to the farmland until after the traditional authorities had intervened. He suspected the relative and accused him of planting charms on the farm. The native doctor admitted doing that because my father was stubborn for refusing to relinquish the land to him.

"At that point, the community got involved. Since the man didn't want to let go of the land, my father was meant to swear to an oath to prove that the land belonged to him, and he did. He survived the oath. In our place, if one swears to such an oath and one is not the rightful owner of such land, the person would die a few days after taking the oath. But my father survived the oath because his hands were clean. Again, if not because he got wind of the charms planted on the land, he would have died if he stepped on the land.



"The issue of land tussle is serious in the East. In my part of Abia State, we have seen brothers killing brothers over land. It is a terrible thing. My father used to warn us not to be involved in land tussle. He believed that anybody who wished to live long should avoid land tussle by all means.

Instead, he advised us to struggle hard, make money and go elsewhere to buy land instead of fighting over family land.

“Since that incident and the advice of my father, I have decided not to fight over land. All the pieces of land I acquired in my village, I bought them personally. To God be all the glory. Since I built my house, I have known peace. ”

In Ngor-Okpala, Imo State, two brothers were involved in land dispute that resulted in their deaths.

A family source said while one used a machete to hack the other to death, the one who carried out the dastardly act was killed by hanging through a court judgement.

The source, who craved anonymity, said since the incident, children of the two relatives, even though they claimed to have put the incident behind them, still harboured animosity towards one another.

He said, “Land tussle is a serious issue in Imo State. Each farming season, there is a land tussle. This is a place they have been farming on for ages, and every four years, they will fight over the same farm.

“A small issue like demarcation can cause a big problem. The ugly thing about this is that they engage in subsistence farming and at the end of the day, there is nothing to show for the whole tussle. They cannot use the proceeds of the farm to send their children to school, clothe themselves, eat good meal, yet they fight over it. It has become a tradition that every four years, they must fight over land.

“Again, they have even killed in some cases, particularly community against community. Civilisation and religion have played some roles that at times, these matters are settled out of court.”

In Enugu State, a former Commissioner for Transportation, Mr Beloved Anike, was attacked over a land dispute, a development that landed him in hospital.

He was reportedly attacked on October 22, 2016 at Umuchigbo Iji-Nike, a community in the Enugu East LGA.

Anike, said to be a zonal pastor of the Redeemed Christian Church of God, was attacked after he reportedly opposed plans by some members of the community to sell some plots of land including his.

Reasons for building houses at home

For an average Igbo man, irrespective of where he resides outside his country home, the desire to build a house in the village is usually a top priority.

An indigene of Etu-Ozara in Enugu State, who gave his name only as Nathaniel, said rivalry and competition among peers tended to connote that those who built houses in their villages as successful and those who didn't as misfits.

He said though there was no cultural backing to stigmatise people who didn't build houses in their villages, it is peer pressure taken too far.

He said while there was no economic sense in building in rural areas, people preferred to build at higher costs to satisfy their ego.

Nathaniel stated, "Those who build for ego sake lock up the uninhabited houses for lizards, rats and other rodents while the house owners occupy them for less than one week in a year. Does this make any sense, economically or otherwise?"

He also said the aftermath of the civil war vis-à-vis the abandoned property syndrome made Igbo people lose massive investments in real estate outside the region.

He said the late Ikemba Nnewi, Odumegwu Ojukwu, during his lifetime expressed surprise at the quantum of real estate owned by the Igbo outside the East and called on them to always think home.

He said, "Before the civil war broke, some people left their communities for the city and got entangled with the goodies of city life at the expense of their home.

"Like a comedian said, 'some people will die and their corpses will lie-in-state at community hall because they could not build houses in their villages'. Everybody desires to own a home to be a

bona-fide member of their communities. You cannot be a tenant in the city and be a tenant in your village.”

Also, a public affairs analyst, Sunny Onyebuchukwu, said the Igbo culture did not believe in burying people outside.

He noted, “Wherever you are, eventually you will go home and the Igbo in their culture do not believe in burying people outside. Eventually, if a man dies, he will be specially taken home.

“And once you are a full man – you are married and you have a family – when you go home, you do not go to family house and stay, you stay in your own place. In our place, it is a measure of man coming to maturity. Having your own property, having a land and a house is a sign that you are a full man and have come of age. It is an unwritten law that you must have a property in the village.

“Another aspect is that it is a belief that no matter where you are, eventually at the end of the day, you must return home at old age. The question now is, ‘where do you stay when you return?’ You do not go to stay with your father again; you must stay in your own compound.”

An Amasiri, Ebonyi State indigene, Mikky Onyidikachi, linked pride to the quest to build houses in the villages apart from having where to sleep when at home.

Onyedikachi noted that in some villages, wealthy Igbo from the city with good money would not mind building high-rise buildings in such villages.

He said, “In Abriba for instance, there are many beautiful houses but no occupants. Some of the houses have been overtaken by bushes. They only come to the village during the Yuletide.

“When they come, they clear the bushes for a while and go back to the city only to return at the next Yuletide. They are not perturbed by that as long as they have houses in their names and they are satisfied with that.”

He also said the rush to build houses in the village was because people could easily see it as a proof of being wealthy besides owning a car.

He added, “Another reason is the pride of ‘I am the owner of this and that house’. This makes people to do everything, including fighting over land to build their own houses. You know that those in the village may not have the means to build houses. Those in the city have the means but jealousy, strife make those in the village to fight those coming with money to build. That is the irony of the matter.”

Tussling over land

Online sources put the entire surface area of the five eastern states of Imo, Enugu, Anambra, Abia and Ebonyi at 29,385 km², representing about 3.1 per cent of the country’s landmass. Though the South-East is the third largest ethnic group in Nigeria, it has a tiny land surface area for its burgeoning population.

Some people believe that the tiny landmass is part of the reasons land tussle has become a recurring decimal among the easterners.

An indigene of Umuahia, Abia State, John Okezie, linked the tussle over land in the East to land fragmentation.

He added that land was seen as a priceless property in the East, noting that it was not easy to part with it hence some persons resort to killing, maiming and many things to protect their land.

Okezie said gully erosion in some eastern states had further depleted the landmass of the region, adding that in such a situation, people would like to outdo one another to acquire land.

According to another indigene of Arondizuogu, Mr Philemon Uwamaka, land tussle in Igboland with particular reference to Imo State, comes in several dimensions including boundary disputes between neighbours and communities.

He explained that there was also a dispute among offspring over sharing of inherited land, noting that such development had compelled most parents to share their landed assets to children before their demise.

He said the habit, though cultural, was laced with stigma as most people see it as a sign of impending death.

Uwamaka stated, “My father, for instance, had no time to share his land estate among his four male children. Several years after his death, a major squabble that nearly turned bloody erupted among the children.

“Extended family members’ intervention could not calm frayed nerves as three of the four children took up a fight with the first son who was accused of cornering the inherited land for himself.

“Several people have reportedly died mysteriously after engaging in land tussle and the development scares many persons. Some are poisoned, while others were hit by strange ailments by crossing *juju* planted on land.”

Shedding further light on this, Onyedikachi maintained that there was always land tussle in the village especially between those in the village and those living outside the community.

He said the tussle over land had led to all sorts of fetish confrontation which claimed the lives of those coming to the village to build houses.

He said, “Because those on the ground already know the terrain, while those coming are seen as strangers, most of their kinsmen feel some level of oppression that those in the cities have come to oppress them. To stop them from oppressing them, they resort to extraordinary means to fight them.

“Fighting over land is not common in my community, but adjoining villages have such sorry tales of people who come to build houses but in the process, their businesses collapse; they are permanently injured and confined to wheelchairs and some pay the ultimate price. Others are killed while others are assassinated. Also, some are poisoned by foes.”

On his part, a community leader in Ngor-Okpala, who described himself simply as Ebere, argued that shortage of land was not responsible for any noticeable tussle over land in the region.

Ebere said, “I think it is satanic greed that is responsible for tussle over land, not only in the eastern states. I do not believe that this has to do with scarcity of land in the East.

“When there is land tussle as happened in my family, the money that should have been used for the training of children and carry out other developmental projects is used to hire lawyers and settle police.

“They even sold another land and other things to pay lawyers. Because of the tussle, some of the persons denied education ended up being wretched; some of them are palm wine tappers in the community.”

He disclosed that when one of his uncles was dying, he warned them against land tussle, advising them to be content with whatever land they had instead of fighting over land.

He also told us that anyone that had enough money could jettison family land and buy his own to avoid premature death.

‘Land is a veritable property in Igboland’

A former General Manager, Radio Nigeria, Heartland FM, Owerri, Mr Chika Emerenwa, described land in the East as an invaluable resource which people did not joke with.

He said the value of land in monetary terms kept appreciating every day, noting that nowadays people sell land in order to meet their needs and obligations such as educating their children, sending them abroad and erecting structures or whatever they wished to use the money for.

Emerenwa said for most people, it was through sales of land they could generate resources to achieve their dreams and aspirations.

He added, “In the rural areas, people crave land for agriculture purposes. In fact, it is a valuable resource that one cannot do without. Even when government tampers with land, people expect compensation, and for some people, land use or no land use decree, you either compensate them for their acquired land or they foment trouble.

“And because of the appreciating nature of land, which is constant, people now expect to make their living out of their land either through farming or other uses.

“Since the advent of Governor Rochas Okorocha in Imo, the value of land has skyrocketed. If you own one, it is gold to you. Because of land, people kill. In fact, communities fight and many lives are lost.”

Cost of building houses in villages

According to Onyebuchukwu, building houses in the village is cheaper than building in the urban areas.

He said there was a practice in their village in Umuahia whereby family members would help any kinsman who desired to build a house through communal efforts.

He stated, “In that kind of situation, all you need do is to cook for them. But such communal effort is not as it used to be. Agreed that the cost of building materials may be the same everywhere, still there are materials one can source cheaply in the village. Relatively, building houses in the village is cheaper. A bungalow which can gulp N10m in the city can be built with N6m in the village.”

Also, a media practitioner from Isuofa in Anambra State, Casmir Igbokwe, said the cost of building houses in the village, especially in his area, was relatively cheaper than building in the cities.

Igbokwe said, “This is because the land in my area is dry. You don’t need to do casting. Besides, cost of sand is cheaper than in the cities. Most times, people don’t buy the land in the village. It is inherited.

“But those who want to buy land, a tipper of sand goes for between N10, 000 and N12, 000 as against N29,000 or more in the cities.”

Settlement of land disputes

Igbokwe, who is a chief and community leader in Isuofa, said there were three layers of settling people involved in land dispute in his community.

He said the three levels of settling land related disputes were through the Umunna (family members), the village and town authorities.

Igbokwe said, “If people have land dispute, they first report to the Umunna, i.e. members of the family. If they are able to resolve the matter, it ends there. But when the family members are not able to settle the matter, they refer it to the village authority.

“If the village authority is not able to resolve the matter, it is referred to the Igwe-in-council or the town authority. It is expected that the matter would be resolved at that level.

“But there were cases when some aggrieved members were not satisfied with any of the level and opted for the court as the final arbiter.”

But Okezie said in Umuahia and other communities in the state, they relied on ‘Okonko’ (traditional arbitration authority that resolves land disputes).

He said his people rely on the Okonko to the extent that once the body had pronounced any judgment, it was the final.

Okezie added, “Police do not resolve land matters in my place. We take land matters to okonko. Okonko is a traditional arbitration body that resolves land disputes. If two persons are contesting a piece of land, they will summon them.

“At times, they are made to swear to an oath and the oath is highly effective. If one takes the oath and one is guilty, one would be struck dead. In my area, we do not joke with it and through that, inhabitants have some respite.”

The Police Public Relations Officer of the Anambra State Police Command, Mr Haruna Mohammed, says the command is using existing laws in the state to prosecute shady land deals.

Mohammed said though land matter was a civil matter, there were laws in the state to criminalise and prohibit all illegal sales of land in the state.

“The command uses the laws to prosecute such cases. Also, you know that because of the problem of land, there have been cases of loss of lives and destruction of property,” said the police spokesman.

“There is a situation where somebody will fence his land and another will destroy the fence and constitute an offence called malicious damage. There are also issues of conduct likely to cause a breach of peace.”

Also, his counterpart in Enugu State, Mr Amarizu Ebere, explained that the state command settled land disputes through Alternative Dispute Resolution mechanisms instead of resorting to court.

He said through the ARD, the police would invite the parties and relevant stakeholders to settle the matter.

“At the command, we use the ARD to settle people involved in land tussle. We call the parties involved and other stakeholders to a meeting where they will talk about their grievances. After that, we ensure that the matter is amicably resolved and peace restored,” the spokesman said.

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