

Politicians, parental failure fuelling deadly Lagos' cult clashes

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For someone who leaves their home at dawn and returns at dusk without hassles, peace is the least thing they bother about. But to residents of communities in Ikorodu, Lagos State, peace is the most precious thing they long for amid cult clashes that have become rampant in the area in recent times.

The lingering hostilities between two rival cult groups—Eiye and Aye confraternities—have claimed many lives with many innocent persons caught up in the mayhem. At least 14 persons, including an easygoing motorcyclist identified simply as Pastor, were reportedly feared killed in a series of clashes that started on Sunday and lasted for three days.

Explaining how the fight started, an eyewitness, Farouk Aderibigbe, said some suspected members of the Aye Confraternity shot dead four persons around Ireshe and Obun-Ale areas of the ancient town on Sunday.

In a reprisal on Monday, Eiye Confraternity members allegedly killed two rival members and a businessman, who resisted the cultists from looting his shop.

When the clash resumed in broad daylight on Tuesday, seven persons said to be innocent cruelly paid for it with their lives as Aye members invaded the Adamo area of Ikorodu.

"Around 2pm, the Aye cultists suddenly stormed the Mojoda-Aro area of Adamo and started shooting at innocent persons," a resident had told *The PUNCH* on condition of anonymity. "They shot more than seven persons dead and I saw their corpses. Some of the victims were businessmen and women, who were protecting their shops from being looted," he added.

While Ikorodu had been notorious for deadly cult clashes over the years, it took a turn for the worse in the aftermath of #EndSARS protest in October 2020, depriving locals of peace and forcing many to relocate.

The resident stated, "A lot of people are mourning and many have deserted their homes. Some cannot open their shops. We called the Onyabo Vigilante Group, but it refused to intervene despite the tension everywhere."

The Police Public Relations Officer in the state, Muyiwa Adejobi, stated that four suspects were apprehended, adding that the police didn't have any record of death "as we have yet to recover any corpse."

Apart from Ikorodu, areas like Ketu, Oworoshoki, Bariga, Somolu, Mushin are infamous for cult violence.

On December 18 around 10am, suspected cult members invaded Jakande Market, Ketu, and reportedly killed two persons. A bus conductor identified as Kamarudeen Jeje was one of the victims. He was hacked to death. The second victim was one Musa Ishola killed in a similar manner on Olusupo Street, Alapere, Ketu. Policemen from the Ketu Division and Area H Command, Ogudu, raided the market and arrested 15 suspects in connection with the killings.

Over time, several arrests of cult suspects have been made by the police in the state to decimate the mounting violent clashes. In 2018, the state's former Commissioner of Police, Edgal Imohimi, together with monarchs and local government authorities in Ikorodu, initiated a peace move that led to about 500 cult members denouncing their membership. Sadly, the initiative only yielded a few months of ceasefire between the rival cult groups.

Why cult clashes persist

Many parts of the Centre of Excellence have had to deal with cult-related fights. From the Lagos Mainland to the Island, down to the highbrow neighbourhoods in Ajah, cultists have left marks of horror. However, their activities are frequent in the Mainland areas such as Ikorodu, Ketu, Oworoshoki, Bariga, Somolu and Mushin.

Community leaders and youths in the affected communities who spoke to *Saturday PUNCH* linked the incessant cult clashes to poor parenting, political activities and unemployment, among others.

The Chairman, Community Development Committee, Ikorodu Local Government Area, Alhaji Lukman Sonibare, said many parents have failed to perform their responsibilities as parents.

He said, "The major cause of cult clashes in Ikorodu is parental care which is lacking. If every parent brings up their children properly, the problem will be solved to an extent. I have boys and all of them are graduates except one who is in the final year. I sit him down and talk to him every day.



•Some suspects

"If the majority of the parents have been educating their children, we won't be where we are today. Those boys initiate one another almost every day without gaining anything from it. In Ikorodu now, there are many single mothers who hardly look after their children."

A youth leader in the ancient community, Rasheed Fatuga, noted that some of the cultists had been emboldened by their connection with politicians whom they work for during election period.

He explained that the clashes often worsen in a situation whereby members of rival cult groups owe allegiance to politicians from different parties.

Fatuga stated, "At a point, there might be some quarrels between their bosses which definitely will concern the boys. When elections were over, both politicians embraced each other but the boys would continue the war. The politicians may buy weapons for them or they acquire the arms by themselves just to impress their bosses."

"Sometimes, leaders in Ikorodu relax because they feel they have done enough to curtail the violence. But it has to be a continuous exercise. Another major problem is that sentiments are settling in. If a well known killer cultist is arrested, maybe by the Onyabo (the local vigilante), and is handed over to the police, it is possible the person will be working freely on the streets the following week."

Fatuga, who is the coordinator of Ikorodu Youth Ambassador, also fingered traditional rulers popularly known as baale in the rising cult clashes, alleging that they aided the release of arrested cultists working for them as land grabbers.

He added, "In 2018, some peace talks were embarked on by royal fathers in Ikorodu Division and the then Commissioner of Police for the cultists in Imota, Ijede and Igboho Bayeku LCDAs. The cultists submitted their weapons and ammunition."

"Former Governor Akinwunmi Ambode said openly that after the exercise, some of the cultists who renounced their membership would be employed by the state government and anyone seen with guns afterwards would be arrested and prosecuted. But two or three months after the peace talks, the clashes resumed in Ikorodu Division and continue till date."

A community leader in Somolu, Mr Tunji Awokoya, blamed the cult wars on the conduct of politicians and the failure of the government to act decisively.

He stated that politicians armed youths, used them as tools for political interests during elections and were unable to retrieve the weapons with them after dumping them. "What do you expect them to do with the arms?" He queried. "Government is the cause of these cult activities."

He equally identified bad parenting as part of the factors fuelling cultism, advising parents not abandon their responsibilities.

Awokoya noted, "What do you expect a child to do when his father cannot feed him? As a parent, if your child goes out and returns with an item they cannot afford, you have to query them. But what do you do when as a father you cannot provide food for them? Some parents are even happy when their children give them money and wouldn't care about the source."

A landlord in Bariga, who identified himself only as Oladipo, affirmed Awokoya's claim, maintaining that politicians contribute to cult clashes in the area.

He stated, "When police arrest them (cult members), they would start making calls to politicians to secure their release. At the end of the day, they would be freed. They have guns and work for politicians during elections. If politicians can stop working with them and securing their bail when arrested, they would not have the effrontery to disturb public peace."

A Community Development Chairman in Itire, a border neighbourhood to Mushin, Mr Rasheed Bakare, said instances where children live with either their father or mother as a result of separation are fuelling initiation of teenagers into cultism.

Bakare added, "There are also cases where both parents are together but they don't care about the proper upbringing of their children. They don't care about the welfare of their children. A child that is not well fed at home and makes up for it outside among his peers can easily be influenced and initiated into cultism."

In an earlier interview with *Saturday PUNCH*, the Chairman, Imota Local Council Development Area, Mr Wasiu Agoro identified parents as the major factor fuelling cultism, noting that whenever their children were arrested, they would sell their lands to raise funds to bail them.

He said, "I advised them during a forum that instead of using the money to bail them, why not use it to train the children. The parents are the ones giving them information that police are coming after them. The children won't go to school or learn any trade; what do you expect them to become? You will see young boys of 14 with pierced ears moving around and the parents will not bother."

Tackling the menace

Sonibare said the committee is planning to organise seminars and workshops this year to sensitise families to good parenting.

He urged the local government and well-meaning Ikorodu indigenes to support Onyabo in complementing the police fight against insecurity,

adding that the disbanded anti-cultism unit of the police should be refined and restored.

He said, "We are meeting with the chairman of the parents' forum and collaborating to have a joint programme. The local government is not doing anything to solve this problem. Ikorodu has a local security outfit called Onyabo but the support to make them work maximally is not there. Also, well-meaning people in Ikorodu are not ready to support the vigilantes financially."

"The local government should do more empowerment programmes. They should empower youths that are artisans who do not have money to establish themselves after completing apprenticeship. However, the Chairman, Ikorodu Local Government, Wasiu Adeshina, while reacting to the claim that the council was not providing financial support to the local security group, said "every month, there is a cheque we give the Onyabo Vigilante Group to assist the outfit."

Awokoya said that there was a need for the government to meaningfully engage arrested cult members instead of allowing them to return to communities more brutal and hardened.

He said, "I think the initiative the government should take is to arrest those boys and keep them somewhere. They can be engaged in farming and other meaningful jobs. What emboldens some of them is that they have connections with politicians who facilitate their release from police custody."

"In my area, you would see gatherings of young men during the day, doing nothing. They are jobless. In the process, evil thoughts would come to their minds. But if they have work to do and meet only in the evening, they would not think of crime. Government should empower them."

The police spokesperson in the state, Adejobi, said that cultism was on the increase in the state because youths were being used by politicians and traditional rulers for untoward activities.

He said, "Cult clashes are mainly fuelled by baales and chiefs seeking relevance in their areas. Some baales or Obas (monarchs) used them to oppress people in order to assert authorities. Most of them are also used by land grabbers to foment troubles in the affected areas. There are also idleness, unemployment, lack of moral values in our society and no respect for human lives."

Adejobi said the government should sanction traditional rulers in areas where cult clashes occur and review firearms law, adding that there should also be stringent punishment for cultism and use of arms. He added, "Unlawful possession of arms should not be a bailable offence and traditional institutions should be made responsible for the war against cultism."