



• Governor Oshiomhole



• Chief Okumagba

FROM CHRIS ANUCHA,
PORT HARCOURT

Edo monarch, His Royal Majesty (HRM) Dr George Egabor is at war with his subjects, especially pastors and others involved in spreading the gospel in his domain, Weppa-Wanno Kingdom.

The relationship between the royal father and churches in the kingdom has degenerated to a point that some pastors felt that the traditional ruler may cause crisis in the kingdom and by extension, Edo state.

Consequently, they have written a petition to the governor, Comrade Adams Oshiomhole, alerting him of impending religious crisis being orchestrated by the traditional ruler.

The bone of contention? In November 19, 2013, the palace reportedly issued what he considered to be a very crucial circular to all village Heads, Quarter Heads, Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) Agenebode, All Christians churches and Praying Centres, Weppa Wanno kingdom, and all leaders of Muslims and Mosques in the kingdom.

The circular, which was also made available to Niger Delta Chronicle is all about notice of ban on, night parties and ceremonies, use of horn speakers and loud microphones in churches and praying centres, as a security measure in the kingdom.

The circular, which was jointly signed by the Secretary to Okumagbe-in-Council, High Chief G.K. Omiogbemi said: "I am directed by His Royal Majesty, Dr George O. Egabor JP, OON, Omoaze I, the Okumagbe of Weppa Wanno kingdom, to inform you that the Okumagbe-in-Council of Weppa Wanno kingdom, has passed the following rules: That all night parties and ceremonies like burials, naming ceremonies, marriages, cooking titles, freedom parties in which the celebrants are not able to know or control attendance are banned from operating during the night."

The circular further emphasized that such ceremonies should take place between 8am and 6:30pm, to enable participants go back home on time.

The circular further state: "That all churches in Weppa Wanno kingdom should stop the use of horn speakers and loud speakers that are excessively loud so that people in the community would not be disturbed in their sleep. All such loud speakers should be turned into the church hall, where all church activities are to be performed."

"However, there is no ban on the organization of crusades and all night prayers, as far as they are conducted in peaceful atmosphere that will not disturb the peace and security of other members of the community."

It ended with a warning: "Ensure strict compliance to these decisions as any violation will attract sanction."

Edo monarch, pastors at war over crusade, vigil

But the Christians, especially pastors, described the rules, restricting their religious activities as draconian.

For instance, they argued that crusade, if held inside the churches as stated by the rules, without the use of loud speakers, among others will not achieve the purpose of evangelism, which is, winning souls for Christ.

According to them, crusade is meant to reach out to people for the purpose of among others, getting converts.

Like the Biblical Apostles, however, they insisted that the gospel must be preached without any man-made inhibitions or laws.

Many of them who violated the rules were alleged to have been actually punished by the traditional ruler and his chiefs, through the use of members of a vigilance group.

Some of the erring pastors or their wives were alleged to have been invited to the palace, where they allegedly received corporal punishment.

The pastors alleged how they or their wives were invited to the palace and ordered to kneel down for violating the standing rules on vigil or crusade.

For instance, on June 6 2014, member of the vigilance group, on the order of the Royal father, disrupted a vigil organised by the Church of God Mission. The wife of the pastor (names withheld) was said to have been invited to the palace and questioned.

But the palace Secretary, Chief Thomas Boyo Eneto, who spoke to the reporter on phone denied the allegation that the Christians were being persecuted or punished for organising crusade or vigil.

He, however, admitted that there were rules, regulating the activities of all religious groups in the kingdom.

He explained that Christian were permitted to organise crusades and vigil, but that they should restrict them inside their various churches. "Set your microphones inside the church, not outside to disturb others, everybody can't be Christian" he said. He insisted that the rule were made for security of life and property in the kingdom.

He cited an instance, where an Assistant Commissioner of Police (ACP) was killed in the area as crusade was going on.

Chief Eneto told Niger Delta Chronicle that it was the noise, emanating from the crusade ground that made it impossible to hear gunshots during the operation, arguing that the murder would have been prevented, if not for the noise from the crusade ground.

He insisted that no pastor or his wife was

given corporal punishment for violating the rules as alleged by the pastors.

But on May 14, 2014, a group of Pastors in the kingdom, under the aegis of Weppa Wanno Ministers Network, wrote a petition to Governor Adams Oshiomhole, calling for his intervention in the matter.

The title of the petition reads: "Persecution of Christians and gross violation of fundamental human rights by his Royal Majesty, Dr George O. Egabor, JP, OON, Omoaze I, Okumagbe of Weppa Wanno: an invitation to anarchy."

In the petition, the pastors reminded the governor that the 1999 constitution as amended, guarantees freedom of worship and assembly for all citizens.

They also reminded him that Nigeria is a secular state, adding that nobody, no matter how highly placed, has the power and authority to curtail and trample upon the rights of the peace-loving people of the community.

The petition, which was jointly signed by Rev(Dr) Stanley Eshiemogie and Rev. Tony Inwulale further said: "...Observed that there is threat to peace in Weppa Wanno land with ominous signs of impending and looming crisis, due to persecutions, harassment and intimidation of Christians, by the Okumagbe in the following verifiable cases."

The verifiable cases were listed as: that the royal father imposed ban on churches in the land to stop holding vigils and other outdoor programmes of churches in the kingdom; that on January 11, 2014, one Rev Okoro of Christ Ascension Church, Agenebode, who organized a vigil was invited to the palace by the wife of the Okumagbe, who made the pastor to kneel down for hours. This claim was, however, denied by Chief Thomas Boyo Eneto. Other claims by the pastors was that, the royal father sent some members of a vigilance group to disrupt an early morning church service organized by the church (Gethsemane) Prayer Force Outreach Ministry. This, according to pastors, happened on January 11, 2014.

They also accused the security outfit of pulling down the horn speakers, destroying some property belonging to the church and carrying away same to the palace.

"The Okumagbe consequently, tried the pastor in absentia in his kangaroo court and fined him One Hundred Thousand Naira (N100,000) only and ten cartoons of beer. Thereafter, the pastor had to temporarily relocate to Lagos over threat to his life," the pastors claimed in the petition.

This allegation was also denied by the

Palace Secretary. According to the pastors also, another church which incurred the wrath of the royal father was the Christ Apostolic Church (CAC) at Agenebode, where one Pastor David and Elder Peter Omozuapo were invited to the palace and punished for organizing vigil.

The pastors in the petition appealed to the governor to intervene in the matter and advised the royal father to stop the unprovoked attack and hostility against the church since he has not been able to stop other religious and viewing centres/music vendors from using horn speakers.

"This is against the rule of natural justice, equity and fairness," they said.

Meanwhile, the pastors last Thursday, June 19, 2014 met with the Edo State Commissioner for Chieftaincy Affairs, Chief Lucky James, who promised to look into the matter.

He assured them that Governor Adams Oshiomhole was already doing something about the matter, to ensure that people's rights are not infringed upon by any traditional ruler in the state.

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NIGER DELTA CHRONICLE

is a weekly publication of

The Sun Publishing Ltd., 2

Coscharis Street, Kirikiri Industrial

Layout, Apapa. P.M.B 21776, Ikeja.

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