



• The remains of Bagana after the massacre

FROM EMMANUEL ADEYEMI, LOKOJA

**B**agana, the commercial nerve centre of Igala land in the Eastern senatorial district of Kogi State, was like a ghost town for about a week, beginning from Wednesday, 17th December, 2014. Corpses were abandoned on the streets. Vultures fed on decomposed bodies and dogs cracked bones of villagers that were ordinarily law abiding. It was like reliving the civil war when the town was attacked by Fulani herdsmen who undertook a violent retaliation for the action the people of Agatu had taken. This time, however, there was no civil war. The Fulani herdsmen were on a war path, seemingly bent on wiping out the town from the map of Nigeria or so it seemed.

As the grey streaks of dawn filtered tenuously into Bagana, scores of Fulani herdsmen descended on the town. On that day, over 300 Fulani herdsmen were reported to have invaded the town with heavy artillery and had left the town in ruins with no fewer than 18 people killed and burnt to death while over 100 houses were set ablaze.

The presence of River Niger and Benue that stretched through the area makes Bagana a notable commercial centre for the Europeans in the pre colonial and colonial days where John Holt, an early

European conglomerate had a formidable presence. However, when the Fulani herdsmen struck, occupants of houses close to the river banks were the first set of people to receive the unexpected "visitors" who were said to have entered Bagana in boats. With their arms and ammunition, the herdsmen then trained their guns on anybody in sight while pulling down economic trees. By now, pandemonium had broken out. Several terrified villagers ran into the bush, believing they would be "saved". They were wrong. Apparently, the bullets from the Fulani herdsmen's nozzles of their guns would not discriminate. Bagana fell as the Fulani herdsmen

men menacingly took over the town.

Bagana which is also a border town between Benue and Kogi State and which has proximity with Nasarawa state is a town that can be described as a mini Nigeria where over 16 tribes have settled for hundreds of years doing business together without major rancour

The town has more than four traditional rulers with its major tribes comprising of the Agatus who are originally from Benue state, the Hausas from the North, the Fulanis partly from the North and neighbouring countries, the Kakanda from Lokoja axis, the Nupes from Niger State, the Yorubas

from the south west, the Igbos from the South East and a host of other tribes which domiciled in the area

The town has the largest cattle market in the state with the Hausa/ Fulanis being the major cattle traders while the Agatus/ Igala trade on yams, rice and other farm products while the Nupes/ Kakandas trade mostly on fish and other commodities

These tribes, it was gathered consciously or unconsciously fused up in affinity owing to semblance in culture and religion with the Hausas, Fulanis, Kakandas, Nupes, mostly muslims working and dwelling closely to-

# MASSACRE AT DAWN

• *Fulani herdsmen attack Kogi town, kill 18*

# Agatu people earlier killed 32 cows, 3 herdsman

## FROM PAGE 31

gether and having allegiance to one another while the Agatus, Igalas, igbos and yorubas mostly christians also have strong affinity

Therefore, what happens to a member of any of these two groups is seen to have happened to all members of the group. When, therefore, in 2012 /2013 there was a crisis between the Agatus in Benue state and the Fulanis in Nasarawa state, Bagana was the comfort zone where any of the affected victims could settle down to remobilize for a possible attacks as the Agatus in Bagana will naturally support their kinsmen from Benue while the hausas / Fulanis in Bagana will naturally support the warring fulanis herds men in Nasarawa state

This may account for the presence of militia groups in the area and the free use of weapons and sophisticated guns by them and other residents without any form of reprimand from any quarter. When therefore Middle Belt Today went to Bagana to unearth the causes of this crisis, it was gathered that three issues might have been responsible

One is the issue referred to as "envy" on the part of an ethnic group who sees the other as prospering more than them on their business activity. The other is rivalry over chieftaincy titles within the Agatus and the issue of land ownership

It was gathered that shortly after the Benue/ Nasarawa crises which involved the Agatus and the Fulanis two years ago, the Agatu militias became more ferocious and harsh to the Hausa/ fulanis in Bagana as they often came from Benue state in large numbers during Bagana market days to stimulate commotion and disturb the sale of cattles in Bagana

This molestation, it was gathered, was being carried out for several months by the Agatu militias who had the support of the Igalas because they claimed they were giving security coverage to the Igala people against the incursions of the fulanis into igala land such that even the igalas encouraged their youths to enlist in Agatu militias which terrorises anybody at will

Sometimes, it was gathered, that money had to be contributed by market women to appease the often lawless militias before they could leave the market place while the hausa/fulani traders who normally refuse to contribute to the Agatu militias often invite soldiers and mobile police men who they allegedly gave their own contributions for protection

But Middle Belt Today gathered that the whole crisis started on October 2nd 2014, when the Agatu militias ordered that the hausa/ fulani should no longer sell their cattles and went ahead to kill four people and 32 cows

On Dec 6th during another market day, they were alleged to have seized three pick up vans containing 18 cows and three people including the drivers. This was said to have irked the hausa /fulani traders who now invited their kinsmen, the fulani herdsman from Nasarawa State and environs who now sent an emissary to the Agatu militias to meet them on 16th and 17th December, 2014 at Bagana for a battle

Before then, however, the fulani herdsman who were said to have invaded the place through the river and on land were said to have appealed to all the hausas/ fulaniss, the Igala and other tribes to vacate the town as they were poised to only face the Agatu militias. The town was deserted as people hurriedly packed their bags and baggages with their loved ones which accounted for low casualties when the herdsman finally came on the appointed day fully armed

The invading fulani mercenaries who were said to have met little resistance had a field day in the town as they killed no fewer than 15 people and burnt the corpse to cover their identities while over 50 houses mostly belonging to the Agatus were razed down. However, immediately the mercenaries left, it was gathered that the Agatu militias who had fled away from the battlefield, now stormed the town to burn some houses



• More burnt houses



• Nuhu



• Abimeje

belonging to the hausa/ fulanis and those perceived as opponents in a chieftaincy feud

Speaking with Middle Belt Today, the immediate chairman of Omala local government, Labaran Ohigebe said the crisis between the Agatus in Benue state and the Fulanis was age long and that because Bagana was seen as a free place that inhabit all manners of tribe with both warring tribes

having large population, they decided to make the place a battle ground. He explained how he had been able to curtail the crisis while in office and giving political positions to both warring groups to appease them only for the fulani to invade the town six days after leaving office

Also speaking, the former secretary of the local government and Chairman of the peace

committee set up to reconcile the two warring group, Julius Atabo said his committee had recorded huge success before the sudden dissolution of the council by a court order

He said. When they got information about the attack he made several efforts to reach the security agents but they turned deaf ears to him until the attack took place. Specifically, Atabo said he had to plead with the Army to do something urgent about the crisis but a certain captain who led a detachment of soldiers to the place said he was not ready to loose any soldier to that crisis. However, he lamented that it was after the mayhem had taken place that the Navy, Army and Mobile Police sent their men to the area to 'keep peace'

While appealing to the people to forget their differences and come together, member representing Omala constituency in the state House of Assembly, Aliyu Akuh, who visited the place with the co-ordinator of the Kogi State Emergency Management Agency, Mrs Alice Ogedengbe, to assess the level of damage in the place, regretted that the once bubbling town is now a ghost town

Some pockets of victims who sneaked to the town during the assessment tour spoke with Middle Belt Today and complained of serious hunger and abandonment while blaming the state government for not doing anything to help them

Some of them expressed sadness that it was two weeks after the crisis that SEMA visited the place without any relief materials while the governor or his deputy did not even deem it fit to visit the place with the Igala natives showing apathy as they feel that the Igalas in Baganas are not original Igalas. Bala Abimaje, an 80 years old man who lost a son and junior brother to the crisis said his house was razed down, an act which has now displaced 18 members of his families who are now squatting in neighboring towns

Also one of the victims, a 52 year old Ineku James who showed this reporter her burnt house said shops that were not burnt were looted and said a three year old daughter was still missing as a result of the invasion. One Hassanatu Mohammed, 57years old showed this reporter her 16 room apartment which was razed down. She complained of acute hunger and shelter and called on government to do something about their predicament

The chairman of Agatu/ Igala youth association, Hussein Nuhu, alleged that some security personnels took side with the fulanis during the invasion and urged government to set up a committee to fish out the bad eggs saying the Agatus were the target for extermination