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* Six caskets containing the General's children

Tears, sorrow at burial of six siblings in Anambra

— 12th November 2016



•Elders, youths at daggers drawn over incident

From Obinna Odogwu, Ekwulobia

If tears can flow like a river, one would have flown last Saturday, 5th November in Ekwulumi, a sleepy community in Nnewi South Local Government Area of Anambra State at the burial of six siblings who reportedly died of food poisoning on July 16 this year.

The six siblings namely: Chukwuebuka, 17; Chinemerem, 15; Afomachukwu, 13; Chekwubechukwu, 11; Onyekachukwu, 9 and Chukwuziterem, 6; born to Apostle Chuks and Mrs Rita Oramalu, had returned from school on that fateful day in the noon without any premonition of the danger ahead. With hunger already biting, they proceeded to the kitchen to get steamed flour mill and soup. But shortly after they consumed the delicacy (with some of them, possibly still having some mounds in their palms), they started complaining of severe stomach upset.

Ekwumili community, Saturday Sun gathered, has but a rickety maternity, which serves as health centre; hence the victims were rushed to the hospital in their neighbouring community for medical attention. Apostle Chuks' sister, Mrs Alice Nnadozie told this reporter that the community often had it that way during medical emergencies.

This effort yielded no fruit as the siblings died one after the other, perhaps, as a result of delayed attention due to the absence of hospital in the community. That black Saturday, a dark cloud literally hung on the community in broad daylight even as that nocturnal bird, the owl, hooted at noon.

There were allegations and counter-allegations on the cause of the children's tragic death. The government of Anambra State, through its Ministry of Women Affairs, Children and Social Development and the Homicide Department of the Criminal Investigation Department, Anambra Police Command reportedly waded in immediately.

The duo, working closely, it was gathered, stormed their residence with some medical officers and took samples of the food and other necessary materials that would help them in the course of their investigation. The bodies were equally taken to an undisclosed medical facility for autopsy.

But to ensure that no stone was left unturned in unravelling the mystery, Apostle Chuks' kindred decided, as elders, to search for the coin in the river using only their feet. Notable native doctors were consulted. But while they were yet to come out with results, the burial ceremony was fixed by the family in conjunction with the Brotherhood of the Cross and Star and the Anambra State Government.

"We, the members of the kindred are making concerted efforts to unravel the mystery behind their death in the traditional way. We have gone to some level before this burial was fixed and we paused to allow the burial take place. We have gone to some places but you know that to unravel this kind of thing is usually not easy" said Chief Umennaebue Oramalu, the kindred head, who laced each speech with deep Igbo proverbs.

On the burial day

As early as 7:30am, mourners from far and near had started trooping into Apostle Chukwuma Oramalu's compound. Earlier, at exactly 5am, the Brotherhood of the Cross and Star also known as Olumba Olumba held morning devotion in the compound in line with their tradition. And when rites eventually started around 10am, the compound was full. The service was anchored by the Bishop of the Brotherhood in Anambra, Michael Anaele. The Anambra State Governor, Chief Willie Obiano, was represented by his Commissioner for Women Affairs and Social Development, Dr Victoria Chikwelu. A handful of policemen and the vigilante from their neighbouring community were there to ensure security.

While some attendees were actually there to sympathize with the family, some were observably there to monitor the activities of the Brotherhood of the Cross and Star, even as some others were there to foment trouble.

The latter, actually, was the case as some youths in the village, at every tick of the time, made efforts to surge into the compound to disrupt the

service of the Brotherhood. Allegations were rife that the children's father, who was a member of the religious sect, killed the children in exchange for spiritual powers; an allegation which he has refuted. A combined effort of the police and vigilante could not disperse them. The youths, who were particularly irked that a member of the Brotherhood, during their praise singing, was dancing inside the living room where the corpses of the six children were laid, threatened to attack the Brotherhood members if he failed to leave the living room. They said it was a brazen affront on their painful feelings to have someone dancing inside the room where their late brethren were laid. At every stage of the activities, the irate youths roared. The masquerade was nearly torn when the Brotherhood announced that there would be testimony time. The shouts of no! no! no! rented the atmosphere. It was swiftly cancelled. Saturday Sun gathered that save for God's intervention, there probably might have been another tragedy as the youths never cared a hoot about the presence of the armed policemen and vigilante members. At about 3pm when the bodies were finally lowered into the grave dug very wide to accommodate the six of them, wailings, once again rent the sky.

Who killed the children?

In Ekwulumili community, allegations were rife on who actually poisoned the six children. Some of the villagers pointed fingers at their father alleging that he sacrificed them to the Brotherhood of the Cross and Star in exchange for spiritual powers. But others wondered why Apostle Chuks' estranged first wife was conspicuously absent from the burial. The once flourishing relationship between the duo, Saturday Sun gathered, went cold following the refusal of the wife to join him in the Brotherhood. As a result, Chuks reportedly married a second wife. Neither Chuks nor the mother of the deceased children spoke with our reporter as they were visibly traumatized. The wife was practically guarded by other women while her husband told our reporter that he could not speak. However, a close relation spoke on their behalf. Chuks' cousin, Mrs Philomina Iloduba (nee Unegbu), told Saturday Sun that Chuks was innocent of the allegations.

"I was shocked to the bone marrow when I received a call and the caller told me that the six children died in a tragic way," she began, "This is because they were like my children; I babysat them."

"Their mother came to this community as the second wife of Chuks when I was younger. Being a good woman, God blessed her with those children. And they suffered to train them."

But for his religious sect, she alleged that his family, out of hatred "made sure that they blocked Chuks' family means of livelihood; seized everything from which he eke a living from. Despite that, God is helping the man to train the children in a big way.

"I learnt that they told the Chairman of Iruze village to go and uncover what killed the children traditionally. In our church, our leader has told them the cause of the children's death. But they said in as much as Ekwulumili does not believe in the Brotherhood of the Cross and Star, the community should find out what actually, killed the children and tell the whole world about it. They shouldn't be attributing it to the church. They shouldn't also be attributing it to the man that he killed his children in exchange for power. It is not true. What they are saying in Ekwulummili is that the Brotherhood of the Cross and Star told Chuks to kill his children so that they would give him spiritual power.

"Ekwulummili people have found out what happened to them but they have refused to expose it. Thank God that the government has stepped into this. But if the government cannot ascertain the cause of their death, let God Himself expose and slam then the culprits one by one." But as the aunt was about to disclose what their church leader told them about the cause of the children's death, a staff of the Ministry of Women's Affairs who came with the commissioner cut her short. The woman who seemed to be monitoring the movements of journalists warned her to be careful with the newsmen. Further efforts to get Mrs Iloduba to divulge the information proved abortive.

However, Chuks' sister, Mrs Alice Nnadozie said that the man's travails might not be far from his fractured relationship with his kindred. She told a story of how some books belonging to the late Ebuka, his first son, was thrown into the toilet by unknown neighbour. "There was a time they had some issues with the kindred," she explained "but it was not really serious." "Later on, we were told that some books belonging to the first son were thrown into the toilet by unknown persons.

"They said they would send a town crier to summon the kindred to a meeting in order to ask who did it and possibly take appropriate action. They waited for their father, Chuks, to be ready so that they could make announcement but I don't think it later held. But I know that their mother is quarrelling with their father's relations."

President-General of the community, Chief Ugo Ewelaku, explained that the community was doing everything within its powers to see to the end of the matter.

"When it happened, we involved the Homicide Department of the Criminal Investigation Department. They came and collected the samples of the food and the flour mill and went on to conduct autopsy.

"The youths wanted to lynch Ewelaku on the basis that he belongs to Olumba Olumba. In law, we don't take that as evidence. Perhaps they would have to show us the relationship between his faith and the lives of his children. I told them: if you say that he was the one that killed his children, how can you substantiate that? The youths wanted to cause crisis but we were able to calm them down.

"We organized prayers on the 2nd of November for them. As a Christian, that's the one I can do but if you say you're looking for cause of their death in the native way, count me out. I don't go to native doctors.

"Even, the Olumba Olumba came to the community to organize prayer but I asked them to leave because they were not safe. The youths could have mobbed them. They came in about eight buses.

"The police have not disclosed the result of the autopsy to us. They only released the corpses to us to enable the community bury them. They said that when they conclude, they would write their formal report and submit it to their boss. They can't release it by half. They said that they won't give us until they submit it to the Commissioner of Police."

Tension builds

More than three months after the tragic incident, concerned stakeholders, especially the Police in Anambra State and the Ministry of Women's Affairs were yet to furnish the public with the result of the autopsy they conducted, at least, to douse the rapidly brewing tension in Ekwulumili over who or what was responsible for the children's death.

The villagers complained bitterly that neither the police nor government was talking to them. Chuks' kindred particularly accused the police and government of toying with their emotions. They said that knowing what killed their children would help to handle the matter without further apportioning of blames to anyone. That, perhaps, explains the action of the youths during the burial.

"The question now is: where is the result? We don't understand what they said was the cause of the death of our children. They took all the cooking materials, the cooked one, and the uncooked one too. Yet, they were not open to us with their answers. They conducted autopsy and said that their intestines were cut in pieces but their livers were in good condition", the visibly angry kindred head, Chief Umennaebue Oramalu, queried.

When our reporter visited the Ministry of Women's Affairs on two separate occasions, its Commissioner, Dr (Mrs) Victoria Chikwelu, was not on seat. But relevant officers in the ministry declined to speak with our reporter; avoiding him like a plague. They said that they don't want 'trouble.'

However, when our reporter reached the Commissioner on the telephone to ask about the result of the autopsy and other matters surrounding the mysterious death, she declined comments. The commissioner simply told our reporter that she was not an indigene of Ekwulummili community and hung up the call and switched off her phone.

However, a top official in the ministry narrated to Saturday Sun that "The man was suspecting his first wife of being responsible for the death of the children. But from the information we got, the villagers before then, had a fractured relationship with Chuks because of his faith. He belongs to the Brotherhood of the Cross and Star also known as Olumba Olumba.

"It was said that the major suspect here is the first wife. She neither sympathized with the man nor attended the burial. From what we heard, the first wife refused to be a member of Olumba Olumba. That was the cause of their strained relationship before Chuks married the second one who agreed to be a member. We don't know much about the autopsy because the result is in police custody. We don't know why they're

hoarding it."

The former Police Public Relations Officer in Anambra State, DSP Ali Alphonsus Okechukwu, who was handling the matter before he left office, told our reporter on telephone that the police made spirited efforts to unravel the mystery behind the death. He said he could not get to the end of it before he left office and referred our reporter to the current PPRO, ASP Nkeiruka Nwode. However, all efforts to get information from her proved abortive.

Youths spoil for war

The incident undoubtedly got the youths agitated. They lamented that the leadership of the community was blocking their path.

A youth leader, Mr Ugochukwu Oramalu (aka Akisi) alleged that "In this community, they don't tell us the truth. We the youths have been suffering. Even, we contributed money to enable us to go and unravel the mysterious deaths traditionally but in the end, the elders said that they would find out by themselves. The only answer they could give us was to bring these children for burial.

"Before, we used to be better than our neighbouring communities but now, we're drifting into thick darkness by the day. This is not the first time they're killing people in this community. They would kill and cover it up. Nobody would talk. Once you protest against their nocturnal activities, they would begin to target you. These children are my younger ones."

Corroborating him, Godwin Tochukwu, alleged "Our leaders are exploiting us. For more than three months these children died, they were treating the matter with kid gloves. At a point, Ekwulummili as a community said that it would undertake the funeral. At another point, they announced that they were handing off the matter. Is it we the youths that should take over? Another sad thing is that we suffer incessant police arrests."

Sopoluchukwu Umeibe, another angry youth alleged that their sisters were no longer having suitors due to "the bad name the community has got.

"Because of this incident, our indigenes living abroad deny being indigenes of this community, especially our women. It affects our single ladies because suitors rarely come here because of this ugly development."

But the President-General of the community, Ugo Ewelaku, dismissed the allegations.

"Whoever that wants to be useful would be useful. As early as 7 am, some of them are already drinking strong drinks. They don't want to go to school or work. I didn't give them that breathing space to constitute themselves to public nuisance.

"An indigene of this community, Chief Chukwuemeka Chukwuebuka, bought 20 Keke NAPEP and 20 motorcycles and gave them out as empowerment scheme. But do you know that some of them sold the motorcycles and went away with the money contrary to the conditions placed on them. They didn't comply with the rules" he added.

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