

By Emma Amaize,
Regional Editor, South-South

IN virtually every African community, there are traditional rites and practices that govern the burial of deceased sons and daughters. Though, there may be one or two modifications from one community to the other depending on what were passed to them by their ancestors, the traditionalists habitually insist on the observance of such rites, some of them regarded as fetish or outright paganism by some people. In recent times, however, the conflict has developed from mere exchange of hot words to fistcuffs between some die-hard traditionalists and Christians over the tendency of the former to coerce or convince the latter to dogmatically observe these rites. But at Ukala community in Oshimili North Local Government Area of Delta State, the unanticipated happened on Thursday, March 29, 2007, as such incongruity resulted in a grotesque calamity. *Saturday Vanguard* visited the community.

Villagers dumb-founded

DAYS after the stomach-turning affair, the villagers are still tongue-tied. Nobody is willing to comment on the sordid episode. All they kept doing was hissing and muttering that it was an abomination and a sacrilegious act. Out of the seven persons approached in the community for comments, five declined to utter a word, one spoke off-record, while only one person, the Regent to the Iyase, Chief Raymond Onwordi spoke on record. Anybody who visited the community would understand why the people are speechless. What happened in Ukala on March 29 was the first in the history of the community and the people never dreamt of such an occurrence. "It is strange to us in this community", Chief Onwordi asserted.

What happened?

The natural question you would ask as a reader is: What happened? The story is that the Iyase of Ogbe-Iyase village in Ukala, that is to say the prime minister of the community, Chief John Zobiwe Maduka died about three months ago and the burial ceremonies were to commence on March 29 at his family house in the town. That day came but instead of being buried according to custom, his corpse was set ablaze. Two, a notable indigene of the town, Mr. Tony Neziyanya, who reportedly bankrolled part of the ceremonies for his Iyase title was shot dead by a trigger-happy policeman. Three, a Lagos-based pastor and son of the deceased was severely beaten and left for dead by enraged youths. He was rushed to the Akwukwu-Igbo General Hospital, Akwukwu-Igbo, where he was reported dead but the Divisional Police Officer (DPO), in-charge of Oshimili North Local Government Area, Superintendent Mu'azu Mohammed confirmed to *Saturday*

HORRIFYING!

Corpse of royal father razed, son beaten to stupor, another kinsman shot dead over burial rites



●Burnt-out remains of late Chief John Zobiwe Maduka's home in Ukala

Vanguard that the death story was a security deception, invented by the police to bamboozle the very angry Ukala youths, who were strongly believed to have hatched a plan to invade the Akwukwu-Igbo General Hospital and kill the pastor.

Why?

It was reliably gathered that policemen were invited by a member of the family doing the burial to provide security at the venue and due to the manner the cops were allegedly harassing and intimidating the villagers and youths who came for the burial, it was then assumed that the Lagos-based pastor did not want his father to be buried in the time-honoured

way. There was also conspicuous tension, as the security agents frisked the villagers that came for the burial and warned those beating drums to stop.

Tony Neziyanya, based in Lagos, who came purposely for the burial intervened by pleading with the policemen when he observed that the youths of the village were being harassed by the police, educating them that the man being buried was the Iyase of the community, and the tradition of the people demanded that certain rites be observed. One of the children of the deceased allegedly identified him as one of the trouble makers and in a jiffy, the killer-policeman, now at large, fired at him (Tony). He

died on the spot. It was the anger that led the youths to set the house of the late Maduka and his corpse ablaze, pounced on his pastor-son, dealt him several machete cuts, also set his house and vehicles found at the venue of the burial ceremonies ablaze.

A villager's account of the incident

An indigene who gave a revealing insight into what happened to *Saturday Vanguard* said: "The man who died is not Dr. John, Maduka Zobiwe as you said, he's Chief John Zobiwe Maduka, aged 96 years. He was the Iyase of Ogbe-Iyase village of Ukala, that's the eldest man (Diokpa). Traditionally, the children had to consult with the elders of the village to get a date for his burial and that, I know, was done but prior to his death, one of his children tried to convert the man to Christianity, which he refused.

"They took a date for the burial but among the children of the deceased, there was a disagreement, as some said he would be given a Christian burial while others insisted that he should be buried according to the custom and tradition

of the people since he was the Iyase. The position of the village was that their Iyase was not a Christian before his death and the children should allow them bury him in the traditional way. But some of the children refused.

"In the morning of Thursday, March 29, there was a meeting between the family and the village on the modalities for the burial. I want you to know that the man had more than one wife and traditionally, some people had to put on what will call *akwa ocha* (native white cloth), including the children of the deceased and the next person in age to the Iyase in the village, who will succeed him inside his coffin. The man would be buried with those clothes and if the next person to him in the village did not do that, he would not be allowed to become our Iyase. I understand that somebody in the family refused that aspect of the tradition to be carried out even after a meeting was held.

Usually, it is when the corpse is brought home that some elders who are assigned the duty would collect the *akwa ocha* from those that are supposed to put clothes in the coffin to perform the appropriate rituals but the family was permitted to take the clothes

by themselves and put them inside the coffin in the mortuary since they do not want that aspect of the custom to be done in the house. Indeed, a meeting to iron out these differences was held from 5.00 pm till about 6.00 pm that evening.

"An agreement was supposedly reached for a joint burial; that is both Christian and traditional burial by both parties but later in the evening, when the corpse was brought from the hospital, the villagers were shocked that policemen were brought in to provide security. If the policemen stopped at just monitoring the events to ensure that there was no breakdown of law and order, that would have been different but as the day got darker, they started preventing people from having access to the venue, passers-by were being harassed and molested by the police.

"In fact, it was a strange development because policemen have never been brought to harass people while burial is going on in the community. Two persons were reportedly beaten up and some people opted to return to their homes if that was the way the family wanted to bury their father.

"While the molestation was going on, the traditional masquerades, which usually grace the burial of an important personality, came out but the policemen, acting on the instruction of one of the family members fired gunshots into the air. It is an abomination to fire gunshots at the masquerade, known as *Egwugwu*, and the people were not happy at all.

"With things seemingly going out of hand, Mr. Tony Neziyanya who just came in from Lagos for the burial, with a bottle of water in his hand, approached the police to inform them that the masquerades and the drums were all part of the peoples' tradition and that it was sacrilegious to shoot a gun when the masquerades were performing their function. It was on that mission that a member of the family allegedly fingered him as one of the trouble makers, and one of the policemen first fired into the air before aiming at his forehead and pulled the trigger twice", he said.

According to our source: "Tony who was standing close to the policeman did not make any loud noise. He simply fell on the policeman opposite him, and when the policemen in the team saw that he was dead, they took to their heels and the youth mobilized."

Police report

Divisional Police Officer for Oshimili North Local Government Area, Superintendent Mohammed who did all he could to prevent the situation from escalating told *Saturday Vanguard* that reports reaching him indicated that some of the youths attempted to snatch a rifle from the policeman, who shot into the air to scare them away. He said that it was not clear how the bullet hit late Neziyanya.

On the allegation that the policemen who went to Ukala from the Divisional Police Headquarters,

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The bungalow building of the Madukas in Ogbe-Iyase was completely burnt when *Saturday Vanguard* visited on March 29 and the charred, unrecognizable corpse of Chief Maduka was lying on the floor of the sitting room. Nothing was left as everything in the house was burnt to ashes

father buys it and I love the paper; a reward for loyalty as one might say.

How many entries did you play?

Just one. Only one.

So you are not a gambler?

Never gambled in my life. Never believed in it.

Why Vanguard, and not another newspaper?

Well, the urge just came upon me to play and like I told you before it was the only one coupon I played.

So you bought the paper or you cut it out from someone else's copy?

It was my brother-in-law who bought the one I cut and sent. But like I said every member of my family knows Vanguard because my father is a regular reader of the paper.

The first day the result got published...

I didn't even know I won the car. It was somebody who called me from Abraka that I had won the competition. This person also told me to buy the paper which I now saw and almost hit the rooftop. Actually I had gone out on an assignment with my boss when the call came. I am very, very happy and indeed

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Akwukwu-Igbo were on an illegal mission, he said it was not true as the family of the deceased applied for police security at the burial and it was on that basis that policemen were sent.

Riotous situation

This reporter also learnt that the entire Ukala community became rowdy soon after Neziyanya, a very popular man in the town was shot dead. The incensed youths set ablaze everything within their reach, which they suspected belonged to the family of the late prime minister, as well as vehicles of people who came from outside the community to join the family in the burial. In fact, the Maduka family and all their friends/sympathizers who came with them were regarded as enemies. An eyewitness revealed that the pastor-son first ran into a bus parked at the venue of the burial ceremonies but when the youths went on

rampage but as the youths started setting vehicles ablaze, he ran out.

"That was when they pounced on him. In fact, they wanted to kill him with the way they were cutting him with machetes but some elders pleaded that his life should be spared. Women and children were shouting and crying as the fire raged in the community. It was like Armageddon had come."

Pathetic sight

The bungalow building of the Madukas in Ogbe-Iyase was completely burnt when *Saturday Vanguard* visited on March 29 and the charred, unrecognizable corpse of Chief Maduka was lying on the floor of the sitting room. Nothing was left as everything in the house was burnt to ashes. As one inspected the burnt house, no villager came out to talk to him or ask what a stranger was doing there. They took what happened as a taboo and did not want

to come near the house.

In the words of Chief Onwordi: "A strange thing happened in Ukala, we've not seen this kind of thing before. We are expecting the police to bring the culprits to book."

Tension everywhere

In groups, the people stood in their houses discussing the ugly incident but when approached by this reporter, they vehemently declined to speak. At a house, a little distance away from the burnt residence of the late Iyase, a man who was identified as a relation of the deceased denied that he was not related to him when his views were sought on the incident. Two women, who came to sympathize with them on what happened, quickly bade the family goodbye and left when *Saturday Vanguard* introduced his mission.

Most of the youths in the village have fled the town

but the DPO was said to have visited the community on several occasions since the incident to calm frayed nerves and assure the people that the police would not leave any stone unturned in getting to the root of the matter.

Reinforcement at Divisional Police Headquarters

It was gathered that security was beefed up at the Divisional Police Station in Akwukwu-Igbo a day after the incident following suspicion that the youths who were demanding that the policeman who shot dead Tony Neziyanya should be produced, were also planning to invade the place. But the DPO said on Monday evening that peace had returned to Ukala.

He declined to volunteer comments on the policeman that shot Neziyanya dead but we gathered that the cop, who hails from the Igbo-

speaking part of the state fled since the day of the incident and has not reported for duty. Already, a directive has been given for his arrest and according to reliable information, he is to face an in-house trial, and may be dismissed if found guilty before being charged to the court.

Death deception

Last Saturday morning, the news in Akwukwu-Igbo was that the pastor-son of the late Iyase had given up the ghost. Two staff of the hospital told this paper that the man was dead. However, the DPO stated authoritatively on Monday that he sold a dummy and took the man to an undisclosed hospital to save his life following a report that some youths wanted to invade the hospital and kill him. Some Ukala residents commended the DPO for his swift reaction but they want the police to produce the cop who shot their kinsman dead.

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