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**U**GBORODO, which means "Dry Land in the Sea", is an oil-rich Itsekiri community in Warri South-West Local Government Area of Delta State, situated in the Escravos River estuary on the shore of the Atlantic Ocean.

It plays host to the Chevron Nigeria Limited, CNL, Tank Farm, the multi-billion dollars Escravos -Gas -To- Liquid, EGTL, project and other oil facilities and, by earthly positioning, it is sitting in the midst of plenty.

However, there is high-wire rivalry in the administration of the Ugborodo Community Trust, a body established by the people to liaise with companies and government agencies, and to hold in trust for the benefit of the communities moveable and immovable properties, funds derived therefrom or part thereof and utilize, expend and/or dispose same, among other things.

As at the time of writing this report, peace has taken flight from the community, as relatives were killing relatives. In fact, three youths: Gift Ebo Bazuaye, Stephen Kurata and Andrew Agboguwai, said to have been sent on a fact-finding mission were, on Saturday, November 3, murdered by a militia gang in the consuming power struggle that is rocking the community. Two other persons are reportedly missing and six injured in the bloody attack at Otumara creek.

While this was playing out, there was a report that the Eghare-Aja (traditional head) of Ugborodo and Chairman, Ugborodo Council of Elders, Chief Wellington Ojogor, who was forcefully removed from his ancestral home to Warri by armed men, in the wake of the offensive, was kidnapped on Tuesday, November 13, in Warri.

Ojogor denied his purported kidnap 24 hours later in a phone chat with Sunday Vanguard, but one Bemigho, who claimed to be the wife of the Eghare-Aja, intriguingly, disclaimed his clarification, saying her husband was, indeed, abducted.

Two years ago, one Abiloye Kpergbeyi was allegedly killed by his brother, Richard, both descendants of Olaja-Orori of Ugborodo in the course of an argument in Ode-Ugborodo. His death caused quite some stir until it was settled, but despite the warning by the families that



Ugborodo ...crisis-torn

## 3 dead, 2 missing over oil money, leadership tussle in Ugborodo

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the incident should not be used by any person or group to promote crisis in the community, it is still being used to further personal and group interests, according to Mr. Tseti Kpergbeyi.

Sunday Vanguard discovered that the cause of disagreement in Ugborodo today is the leadership of the Ugborodo Community Trust, headed by Chief Thomas Ereyitomi, who was elected at the Ikpere Hall, Ode-Ugborodo. However, there is a parallel executive of the governing council, led by a former Chairman of Warri South-West Local Government Council, Mr. David Tonwe.

While the Ereyitomi-led council enjoys the support of the people on ground at their ancestral home of Ugborodo, the Tonwe group has the support of some select Ugborodo leaders and indigenes resident in Warri urban, where Tonwe was allegedly installed against the express wish of the Ugborodo community. The major grouse against Ereyitomi, who has fresh three-year tenure (2011-2014), is that he was not validly elected in 2011. His first tenure, which he completed, was from 2008-2011.

However, behind the issue of validly or not validly elected is the real crux of the matter. And it has to do with an alleged misappropriation of money belonging to the Ugborodo community. Pa Ayomike told Sunday Vanguard that about N2.6 billion is involved, while Ereyitomi said the initial charge against his team was that N700 million was misappropriated and was, therefore, surprised to hear that the money is now N2.6 billion. He urged his accusers to prove their case, as the matter was already with security agents.

### Contentious election

In a communique issued by Ugborodo community after a meeting on Monday, September 12, 2011, presided over by Ayomike in his Warri residence, the people said, "In view of the fact that there are two Trust instruments which are being disputed, the Trust instrument presented in court about two years ago (2009) should be used on a temporary basis".

Ereyitomi said the Trust instrument agreed upon is the 1996 constitution as amended, which, the communique stat-

ed, "vests all powers in the Ugborodo Council of Elders, under the chairmanship of the Eghare-Aja and Olaja-Orori as vice chairman".

He stressed that the powers were removed from the registered trustees and the decision was taken because of the complexity of the Ugborodo situation and the need to avoid further crisis and bloodshed.

The three contestants for the chairmanship: Ereyitomi, Tonwe and Mr. Emmanuel Meke, were informed about the decision of the leaders at the meeting and they agreed to abide by it, while election was fixed for September 18, 2011.

The election was held as planned at the Ikpere Town Hall in Ode-Ugborodo and Ereyitomiwon, emerged as chair in accordance with the Trust constitution, but, prior to this date, a corresponding governing council, headed by Tonwe, was allegedly constituted in violation of the constitution. Tonwe vehemently denied in an interview with Sunday Vanguard that his executive was illegally constituted.

Ayomike, who was accused by the Akulagba of Warri kingdom, Chief Ayiri Emami, Ig-bajor/spokesman for the community, Prince Perry Atete and others, of hurriedly constituting an illegal Trust in his private residence on September 15, 2011, three days to the September 18, 2011 election, denied constituting any executive.

The Itsekiri leader contended that Ereyitomi did not handover to the registered trust-

ees at the end of his first tenure in 2011, adding that he (Ereyitomi), therefore, could not have been elected in an illegitimate election thereafter.

However, Ereyitomi insisted that he prepared an annual report and handed over to the Council of Elders at Ode-Ugborodo, adding that the fact that Ayomike, who has not been to the community for over two decades or so, was not there would not vitiate the process.

Quoting the said Annual Financial Report of Ugborodo community (2008-2011), the Ugborodo Integrity Group, led by one Mr. Femi Uwawah, said the crux of the matter and fundamental causal factor of the present crisis in Ugborodo was that N38 million was spent in the handling (sundry and police) of burial of the late Abiloye Kpergbeyi.

Ereyitomi's response to Sunday Vanguard inquiry on Uwawah's charge was that the onus is on the person who imputes an offence against somebody to prove his allegation, adding, "I told you that they reported a case of misappropriation to the police and other security agents, they should prove their case." We have been invited and our statements obtained. They have deliberately refused to go and substantiate their allegations before the police till date."

### Uduaghan, Olu of Warri intervention

While the combatants engaged one another, Governor Emmanuel Uduaghan tried to let his Itsekiri relatives see reason and allow peace to thrive. His Special Adviser on Security, Rear Admiral John Kpokpogri (rtd), led a government delegation to observe the September 2011 election in which Ereyitomi emerged victorious. Nevertheless, Ayomike rejected the intervention.

It was gathered that Uduaghan visited Ayomike in his Warri residence to calm frayed nerves, but the old man stuck to his gun, saying the matter was in court and should be determined by the court.

The Olu of Warri, Ogiame Atutwase II, stepped into the matter in October, this year, and was reasonably believed to have resolved the matter when he supposedly ruled that Ereyitomi be allowed to complete his tenure. However, both Ayomike and Tonwe said, as a lawyer, the monarch knew that he was not in the position to resolve a matter that

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# Trouble in Ugborodo over oil money

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was already pending in a court of competent jurisdiction. Prince Atete told reporters in Warri that the rival faction openly disagreed with Uduaghan, adding, "Those of us who are Itsekiri aborigines give maximum respect to our Royal Majesty, we equally respect his views and opinion on matters in dispute in Warri kingdom". He accused the rival faction of "bluntly refusing to accept the verdict of our monarch."

**Deepening cold war**

The bad blood between the two factions continued to deepen after the botched peace efforts of Uduaghan and the Olu of Warri, as both leaderships battled to gain control. Ereyitomi leadership has advantage of grassroots support and alleged struggle over who should legitimately negotiate with Shell Petroleum Development Company, SPDC on the upcoming gas project at Otumara which led to the November 3 tragedy in which three youths were killed. Tonwe practically swore in an interview with Sunday Vanguard that he knew nothing about the affair, even though Prince Atete and others pointed fingers at him.

\*Next week: The stories of some actors in the Ugborodo crisis, viz: Chief Thomas Ereyitomi, Pa J.O.S. Ayomike, Mr David Tonwe and Chief Emami.