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How Kogi community was sacked by communal crises

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BY CHARLES KUMOLU

ALONG the plains and tributaries of the River Niger in Ibaji Local Government Area of Kogi State, is Iyano community largely known for its commercial agricultural prowess. This agrarian town that is made up of the villages of Aluaja, Iru and Itale is specifically distinguished by its cultivation of yam in commercial quantities and fishing. Bordering Edo State on the West and Delta State in the South, the three villages had coexisted peacefully for centuries, resulting in intermarriages and other forms of communal relations.



Onu of Alauja Iyano, His Royal Highness,
Benjamin Akoji

However, the continuous bonding of these villages, which are part of the Igala ethnic group in the state, has been dealt a mortal blow leaving fatal damages on the bond of brotherhood among the hitherto peaceful villages. Its commercial flora and fauna were not also left out in the destruction that left it desolate.

Today, Aluaja is a ghost of its former self as the beautiful structures that

had existed in the prosperous village have now been replaced by remains of razed houses, while its sons and daughters are now domiciled across the state as Internally Displaced Persons, IDPs. That this community, which is the ancestral home of eminent Nigerians home and abroad, has been deserted and in ruins since last year, is an issue that troubles both indigenes and others outside the state.

Fishing lake, land chieftaincy matters

Vanguard gathered that controversies over fishing lake, land and chieftaincy matters seem responsible for the series of attack on Aluaja from 2013 to 2015 leading to its eventual destruction in 2015.

Giving insight into the crisis which resulted in the killing of Iyano indigenes

and displacement of the entire Alauja populace, the Onu of Alauja Iyano, His Royal Highness, Benjamin Akoji said: "Iyano community is made up of three villages, namely: Alauja, Iru and Itale. Echule Abujaga is a neighbouring village whose inhabitants came to settle with the Aluaja people on Aluaja land in the late 18 century. "There has been dispute over land and fish ponds between Aluaja the host village and Echule Abujaga settlers since 1958. This dispute was taken to various courts including High Court in Idah where judgment was delivered in favour of Aluaja in 1983."

The agreement reached on the matter, he said was that the three major fish ponds in Oshimili, Itaminyo and Ofe should be jointly used by the Aluaja and Echule Abujaga villages. But there was a caveat attached to the usage to the effect that none of the ponds should be sold even as usage by a third part was prohibited. In spite of this, he noted that the fish ponds were sold by Iru, Itale and Echule Abujaga in contravention of the High Court judgement of 1983. Consequent upon that, the traditional ruler said: 'The case was reported to the Area Commander in Idah who prosecuted the kings of the two villages of Iru and Echule Abujaga at the Magistrate Court Idah. "

Controversy over kingship

Speaking on the kingship aspect of the controversy, he said: "The issue of kingship which had been a major problem between Aluaja and Iru village was finally settled by the then Atta of Igala, the late Dr. Aliu Obaje in 1996 and was subsequently published in the Graphic Newspaper of July 10 and 16 1986." The Atta of Igala, he added, "ordered that the kingship should be rotated among the villages in Iyano. This order by the late Atta was equally pronounced by the present Atta of Igala, His Royal Majesty, Idakwo Michael Ameh Oboni. This settlement angered the Iru village because they feel they

are superior to the two other villages in Iyano community.” This agreement for rotational kingship, he said, was defied by the Iru village through the installation of Mr. Simon Egwuda as the king of Iyano otherwise known as Onu Iyano. Irked by this, he said his people were left with the option of disassociating themselves from the action and consequently appointed their own king to rule over them.

“This group of Iru people felt that the appointment of a king by the Alauja people was a rebellion against their superiority and started organising three other villages to wage war against Alauja people and possibly exterminate them,” he stated.

Attack on Alauja village

The combination of these points of disagreement, VF was told, resulted in the attack on Alauja village by the people of Echule Abujaga.

Allegedly leading the attack, the traditional ruler said, was Mr. Clement Omachonu, whose troops, he added, entered Alauja through Iru.

“On December 23, 2013, the people of Echule Abujaga led by Mr. Clement Omachonu entered Alauja through Iru and started shooting at the villagers. Scores of people were injured because it was a surprised attack. This was promptly reported to the Divisional Police Officer of Ibaji Local Government but no action was taken, ” he noted. Continuing, he said, “On April 17, 2014 the combined forces of Iru, Itale and Echule Abujaga came to attack Alauja village with sophisticated weapons killing one Emmanuel Ameh. This again was reported to the DPO and his men came to Alauja and took the corpse to the General Hospital mortuary in Idah.”

Lives and property

Apart from these, it was learnt that similar incidents which resulted in the destruction of lives and property happened in succession on different dates. "On May 22, 2015, the corpse of the late Mr. Gabriel Ejima who was killed on April 3, 2015 was moved from the mortuary to the village for burial. But before we knew it, the three villages had gathered in their war regalia and started shooting right at the centre of Aluaja," he added.

The crisis, he said however peaked on May 24, 2015 with the attack on Aluaja by the Itale, Iru and Abujaga resulting in the destruction of over 147, 000 houses. The house of a serving Rear Admiral, Vanguard gathered, was among the houses destroyed in the attack that sacked the entire community. It was learnt that efforts by the displaced Aluaja indigenes to return home, have not been successful over alleged statement by the Police that their security could not be guaranteed. Buttressing that, Akoji said they had written the Police three times on their desire to return home, adding that the response of the state Police command was that the Deputy Governor is interested in the matter.

"We wrote the Police the third time informing them that we want to go back to our village but the Commissioner and the SSS replied this morning that we should not go. They said the Deputy Governor is interested in it, Before now, we had written to the former state governor, the commissioner of Police, Inspector General and state Director of DSS but nothing concrete has been done, " he added.

Background issues

However, when Vanguard contacted some indigenes of the communities alleged to have waged the inter-communal war on Aluaja, they dismissed the claims of the displaced community.

Mr. Alex Atah of Itale community said it was not true that other communities conspired against Aluaja, noting that they have all lived peacefully together for over 300 years.

“My concerned is that they used the word conspired. These communities have lived together for over 300 years as brothers. It shows that those making the allegation are not integrated. There are background issues on this matter. They have a problem with Abujaga community. They went to court and the matter is still in court. The background issues are the struggle for the ownership of a particular land, agitation over ownership of fishing lake among others. They resorted to violence and were overpowered by the other community. Efforts have been made to settle the matter but they refused to listen to voice of wisdom” he added. Notwithstanding, Atah noted that they are interested in settling the issue to ensure that peace returns.

“The entire Abaji wants this matter to be settled. Some of us are working on peace efforts so as to resolve the matter. Whatever some of us are doing, the displaced people need rehabilitation, the government has a role to play by bringing people knowledgeable in conflict resolution in order to provide solution,” he added.

High-powered committee

Responding to Vanguard’s questions on why nothing seems to have been done to resolve the crisis, the Chief Press Secretary to the state governor,

Mr. Knagsley Fanwo said a committee would soon be constituted on the matter. "The Governor of Kogi State, Alhaji Yahaya Bello had met with leaders of Ibaji community to sue for peace and harmony among the people. He harped on the need to ensure every Kogite is well secured. As an advocate of peace, Governor Yahaya Bello is committed protecting every inch of Kogi territory and make the people live together without acrimony," he stated. In addition, he said: "The Governor has shown the zeal to resolve the Ibaji crisis. Thankfully enough, the Deputy Governor of the state is an Ibaji elder who is quite familiar with the events that blew up the situation. It is unacceptable to indict the Deputy Governor. The Deputy Governor is not in any way using his position to impede justice in the area. The Kogi State Government will not want to ambush the rule of law since the matter had been tried in the law court. The Governor will soon set up a high-powered committee to throw up measures that will ensure peace returns to the community. We have confidence that the crisis will soon be over."

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