

Okpokwu Peace Rally, Magnificent Finale to a Local Conflict With a Global Context?

Okpokwu Local Government Area is just one out of the many spaces of violence across recent Nigeria but a sociologically and locationally intriguing one too. There are sociological and locational questions when a hitherto typically peaceful, rural, poverty stricken Nigerian local government is seized by a violent turn largely internal to it but about which no one could do anything for four long years. Was it crisis of policing; cultism and criminality; unemployment induced aggression; a mini 'clash of civilisation'; leadership/local elite failure; badly behaving politicians or a plain sign of state failure? Or, could some of these flashes of violence in least expected spots have a global context, be it in structural, hegemonic spatialising politics or whatever? After all, one of the United States National Intelligence Council, (NIC) scenario analyses had it that Africa will be up in flames of violence at this point in the 21st century.



Waiting for the Dep-Gov: Was the Okpokwu LGA violence failure of the elite from the area?



Or, was it policing that failed?

It will take time before anyone can make a scientifically backed statement. Whatever it was, the great story now is the overcoming of the violence and the turn to peace. As peace practitioners would say, yesterday is too far gone but tomorrow can be planned. This is particularly so when power mounts the saddle of peace making. That is power in the sense of moral authority that can ask for and get conflict parties or stakeholders to get into a conversation and produce peace.

That is what Engineer Benson Abounu, the Benue State Deputy-Governor, has done in this case. Whatever stung him into that course of action at this point in time, there is some consensus

that he has done it well, from the initial multi-stakeholder conversation in his office in Makurdi to the grand finale on September 14th, 2019 that gave practical effect to the whole process.

The practical effect under reference refers to the venue or one of the venues for the grand finale being Olanyega, the Edumoga District Headquarters. Edumoga is one of the three districts that make up Okpoku LGA of Benue State, the other two being Okpoga and Ichama.



Praying for a new beginning



The symbolic cleansing of the land from its desecration with bloodshed, something that Nigeria itself needs to do

Before this day, Olanyega has been a ghost town from a devastating conflict with Iwewe, the village opposite it on the other side of the old Otukpo-Enugu Federal High Way. The conflict has a colonial origin. The primary school the government built in the area bears Olanyega but is located on a slope on the other side of the Federal Highway which Iwewe claims. The case has been there but the captured nature of the Nigerian State down to the local level is such that government has not been able to resolve it. The atmosphere of lawlessness that pervades contemporary Nigeria provided the push to escalation. In one of the days of rage, the historical primary school is now a matter of history – razed completely. Whatever is there now is reconstruction.

To give people the confidence that there is now peace, it was decided to hold the post – violence peace rally there instead of at Okpoga which is the LGA Headquarters, a very significant move. Intervention was told it was the decision of local security chiefs, especially the police that holding it at Olanyega would be a good way of reading the Riot Act to the bad guys said to be concentrated around Olanyega, Ollo and Iwewe. Prayers were held as well as the

cleansing of the land for violating it with bloodshed. Traditional dancers from both districts were not left out.



Star actors now in embrace of peace



Traditional and community rulers at the rally

And that is to say that the clash between two local warlords but which was rapidly assuming a mini 'clash of civilisation' between Edumoga and Okpoga is now over. The peace process must, in that sense, have been a big blow to shadow parties, conflict entrepreneurs and purveyors of conflict inducing local identity narratives who entered the fray. In truth, it was never strictly between Edumoga and Okpoga. It was more or less a clash between two key figures who have remained constant in the violent turn: Mathew Ella and Lawrence Omale aka Chesco. Chesco argues fighting Ella for carrying warlordism into his territory of Okpoga District where he, (Chesco) is the commander of community approved vigilantism.

What the Deputy-Governor has obviously done is choosing not to fight violence with violence and instead call the two warlords to be part of the conversation. It is understood that both Ella and Chesco made beautiful commitments to peace at the meetings. They are now to lead the disarming process and to be the guarantors of peace in the area, thereby bringing to an end the days of horrors since 2016: from house – house robbery, banditry, kidnapping, raping and gang warfare and associated bloodshed. Only a few areas in the LGA were spared. Ugbokolo, Okpoga and lower Edumoga were most affected. At a point, there was an organised incursion into a remote village called Omusu in lower Edumoga. Added to herdsmen violence, the LGA became a hotbed of generalised insecurity.

As it takes a few to trigger violence so also does it take a few noble and cultured individuals to calm a community. Some concerned elite from the area working behind the scene contributed to de-escalation efforts all through the years. Otherwise, it could have been a different story before the Deputy-Governor's intervention culminating in the August 23rd Peace Agreement between the two districts and which has now been consummated in the September 14th, 2019 Peace Rally which featured Commissioner of Police, State Director, DSS, Commander of *Operation White Stroke*, GOC, elected and appointed political office holders, traditional and community leaders, members of the elite, the Church and the civil society.

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