

FEATURE

Mourning with Zaria village where 9 teenaged girls drowned

- Survivors share harrowing ordeal
- 5 victims were engaged to marry in months



■ Some of the victims...

Isa Sa'idu, Zaria

When Fatima Idris, 12, Fa'iza Abdullahi, 11, and 14 of their peers left Maganda village to scavenge for sweet potatoes across a river bank, they did not envisage that death was lurking in a corner. However, in less than three hours, death snatched the lives of nine of them, leaving only seven behind to tell the shocking

tale of how the canoe they were in capsized.

The tradition of the residents of Maganda village demands that young girls work on farms to augment the income of their families. In essence, girls contribute a significant quota in their upkeep. It was in line with this culture that Fatima, Fa'iza and 14 of their friends, in a group, left the village around 12 noon of Friday, July 5, 2019 to scavenge, for sweet potatoes on farm lands across a

river bank. Tradition allows that after harvest women folk, usually the aged and teenagers can follow up to scavenge for leftovers of the produce.

To do this, however, the scavengers have to cross the large river linking the Maganda village with most of the farm lands.

Fatima explains: "Few minutes after we started picking the pieces of the potatoes left behind on the farms, the weather suddenly changed. The clouds became dark.

Obviously, rains were about to start pouring down. We decided to rush back home with the little stash we were able to gather. To get to the farms, we crossed the river on a canoe. On reaching the river bank to cross back home," Fa'iza added, "we met a young paddler, a child. Despite his inexperience, he categorically told us to divide ourselves into two groups of eight, saying that the small canoe may not be able to sail all of us across the river. None of us was ready to be left behind, so we therefore insisted on going together."

The young canoe paddler, according to Fatima, succeeded in maneuvering his way with 16 of them on board the canoe, despite the heavy winds and the light rains.

"Unfortunately," Fatima said, "the environmental condition suddenly changed as we approached the river bank on the side of our village. The winds became heavier and the canoe began to waver. It was clear the child paddler was no longer in control of the canoe.

Residents of Maganda, a village in the ancient city of Zaria, are still being haunted by the deaths of nine teenaged girls who drowned in the river linking their community with neighbouring settlements. *Daily Trust Saturday* visited, and reports.

"He was only trying to save his own life, as water was beginning to gush into the canoe, pressed by our weight down to the water's level, which was fiercer due to the weather," Fatima continued. "One of us jumped into the river, and within a twinkle of an eye, the water swallowed the canoe. Just as the wooden vessel went down, so were we. We all began to struggle with the raging currents."

As Fatima unsuccessfully struggled to control the tears flowing on her cheeks, Fa'iza intervened. She continued: "Seven of us miraculously survived. We were shouting for help, but help couldn't come, as the rains had forced people home. Therefore, Talatu Musa, Salamatu Umaru, Nasiba Sule, Najatu Umaru, Ruma Aliyu, Ummi Adamu, Khadijatu Adamu, Fatima Aminu and Hajaratu Adamu lost their lives. Five out of the nine were even

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PHOTOS: Isa Sa'idu



■ Women, after alighting from a canoe, on their way to Maganda village.

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Mourning with Zaria village where 9 teenaged girls drowned



■ Fa'iza Abdullahi, a survivor



■ Fatima Idris, the second survivor

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engaged - dates for their marriages had been fixed."

The sad countenance of Malam Adamu Yahaya Maganda was infectious. He lost two of his daughters in the canoe accident. In a chat with *Daily Trust Saturday*, he said the accident was the first of its kind in the village. "On that fateful day," he said, "I was also at the farm. Having seen the signs of the rain, I rushed back home to avoid being trapped at the bush where my farm is. On entering my house, I noticed that my two daughters were not home. I asked of their whereabouts, I was told that they were also out for 'roro' (Hausa for 'scavenging')."

"It is normal in this village for girls to go to farms to work and earn some stipends or scavenge for leftovers of produce. Despite this norm, however, my mind wasn't at ease. Something kept on nagging at me, and I felt uncomfortable throughout. The cry for help to save some girls drowning in the river that filtered into our village became thunderous to my hearing and without wasting a second, I jumped out of my house to join the rescue team."

As Malam Maganda was told that his two daughters were among those missing, he fell down unconscious. "After I regained consciousness, it became obvious

that my two daughters, Khadijatu, 13, and Ummi, 11, were among those missing. At the end of the search, it became clear that they had lost their lives. Their lifeless bodies were found. But I take this as a trial from Allah, and it is only He alone that can comfort me.

"Khadijatu, the elder one, had even secured admission into one of the Arabic secondary schools here in Zaria. All arrangements have been concluded for the commencement of her studies. However, Allah has destined this tragedy for our family and there is nothing anybody can do to stop it. My prayer is for the lives of all who died, to rest in peace."

Checks by *Daily Trust Saturday* revealed that for many years, canoes have been used as means of transportation by the residents of Maganda village, without any major accident.

Findings show that, the operators used to take safety measures that include boarding maximum of ten people in a canoe. Therefore, the major cause of the accident that claimed the lives of the teen girls, according to findings, was overloading. This came about on the insistence of the girls to board the canoe together despite the fact that their number was beyond the capacity of the canoe.

District Head of Tudun Iya, where Maganda village belongs,



■ Dangerous waters: Residents of Makanda use their only means of connection to other communities, a canoe.

Alhaji Muhammad Musa, confirmed the foregoing. "This is a tragedy that we cannot forget easily. On the day the accident happened, five corpses were retrieved. Three corpses were retrieved the following day in a neighbouring village. However, it took three days of searching before the last girl's body was found. The waters had swept her far away, more than ten kilometers. Therefore, the last girl was buried in the village where

her corpse was found.

"I want to use this medium to appeal to the relevant authorities to come to our rescue, as the bridge linking the village, which is the alternative route to the water crossing, has collapsed. We are now completely cut off, as people are now skeptical about using the canoes. Nobody can now access our village by car. Motorcycles are now our only means of transportation."

As parents, relatives, friends and other residents continue to mourn the sudden demise of the nine teenagers, the priority now, according to views shared by the inhabitants of Maganda village, is how to avoid a future occurrence. One of the ways, according to findings, is for the government, especially the state, to live up to their responsibility and do the needful, especially reconstructing the collapsed bridge.



■ District Head of Tudun Iya, Muhammad Musa.

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■ Malam Adamu Yahaya lost 2 daughters in the canoe accident