

3rd September, 2013

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## Driver's death in LASTMA custody stirs controversy

SEPTEMBER 3, 2013 BY ENIOLA AKINKUOTU 7 COMMENTS

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**Okechukwu Osaka**

Detectives at the State Criminal Investigation Department, Yaba, Lagos State, are investigating the cause of the death of a commercial bus driver, Okechukwu Osaka.

Osaka was said to have died in the custody of the Lagos State Traffic Management Authority on March 15, 2013.

*PUNCH Metro* learnt that on the day, Osaka had parked his vehicle by the side of the road and had gone to a nearby canteen to eat. It was said that while he was eating, some people told him that a team of six

LASTMA officials were towing his vehicle.

It was learnt that in a bid to stop them, he had an altercation with the LASTMA officials.

Eyewitnesses said despite Osaka's efforts, the vehicle was towed. The deceased was said to have jumped into the vehicle, which was taken to Iponri operational base of the agency.

Colleagues of the deceased at the Ojuelegba Motor Park told our correspondent that it was the last time they saw Osaka alive.

But the spokesperson for LASTMA, Bola Ajao, had said Osaka died suddenly, shortly after arriving at the LASTMA office. She insisted that there was no foul play.

Ajao in a statement, said, "A commercial bus with number plates, XS 318 LND, was abandoned at Ojuelegba with no occupant inside as of the time of the arrival of LASTMA officials at the scene. The vehicle was eventually towed by the officials to the LASTMA zonal yard, Iponri, Surulere.

"The young man (Osaka) later made an appearance and was asked to provide evidence of ownership, and thus went to his parked vehicle. He was later discovered to be vomiting, shaking and foaming whitish substance from the mouth. He fell down and convulsed. The officials quickly made an emergency call to LASTMA control room.

"The medical team of the Lagos State Ambulance Services pronounced him dead on arrival. The case was immediately reported at Iponri Police Division, where his remains and the vehicle were taken to for further investigation."

It was learnt that the Iponri Police Division tagged the matter as a case of "Sudden and Unnatural Death," while the Investigating Police Officer, Inspector Adelakun Ewunmi, transferred the corpse to Ikorodu General Hospital mortuary.

However, the deceased's colleagues were insisting that the LASTMA officials killed Osaka.

The Igbo community in the state has taken over the case and was also alleging foul play.

President General, Igbo Speaking Community in Lagos, Chief Ebere Ubani, said it was the strong belief of the


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group that the deceased was murdered by LASTMA officials.

Ubani, in a letter addressed to the Inspector General of Police, Mohammed Abubakar, urged the police authorities to ensure that justice was done; saying that investigation by the Iponri Police Division was summarily conducted.

Ubani argued that the division should have transferred the case to the SCID since divisions had no power to investigate such cases.

In response, the IG, in a letter dated July 25, 2013, and signed by his Principal Staff Officer, DCP Murtala Mani, ordered that the case be transferred to the SCID for further investigation.

Investigations at the SCID, however, hit a brick wall when it was discovered that nearly six months after the alleged murder, no autopsy had been conducted.

It was also gathered that the corpse had decomposed considerably.

Osaka's boss, John Nwachukwu, said he was surprised that the police at the Iponri station did not take the corpse for an autopsy despite the fact that he had paid for it three days after Osaka's demise.

He said, "Three days after his (Osaka's) death, the IPO, Adelakun Ewunmi, collected N30, 000 from me for an autopsy. It was not until August 15, 2013, after the matter had been transferred to the SCID, that he hurriedly demanded that an autopsy be carried out.

"The corpse was not well preserved at the general hospital and due to its decomposed state, we were told that the test was inconclusive.

"I strongly believe that the IPO had an ulterior motive because he did not go to nearby government hospitals to conduct the autopsy. He did not go to Lagos University Teaching Hospital, or Gbagada General Hospital which are not too far from Iponri. He chose to go to Ikorodu and dumped the corpse there, thereby undermining investigations."

Nwachukwu said the deceased was not sick prior to his death and alleged that LASTMA officials assaulted Osaka in the presence of his colleagues before his death.

He said he suspected that Osaka was beaten up in LASTMA custody shortly before his demise.

When our correspondent visited the SCID last week, it was observed that the team of LASTMA officials had been arrested.

It was, however, learnt that they had been released on bail following intervention of the state government.

*PUNCH Metro* gathered that the corpse would be transferred to the Lagos State University Teaching Hospital, Ikeja, for a second autopsy.

When contacted on the telephone, the spokesperson for the state police command, Ngozi Braide, said she would call back.

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