

Death in Ivory Tower: Blind undergraduate's electrocution sparks 'suicide' controversy in UNN

Tessy Igomu 20 June 2021

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As mystery, controversy and counter accusations continue to trail the death of Emeka Ezeudo, a visually impaired student in UNN, TESSY IGOMU reports that unless steps are taken to provide safe learning environment for undergraduates with disabilities, his death might not be the last to be reported in Nigerian universities

The atmosphere around the University of Nigeria Nsukka was tense and gloomy on Tuesday, June 15, 2015.

As the sun blazed with intensity, the pains of the young men and ladies that protested round the prestigious ivory tower, singing songs of solidarity and displaying placards with inscriptions calling attention to their plight, was palpable.

In a sombre mood, they marched around the campus, before heading for the office of the Vice Chancellor, Prof. Charles Igwe, to register their grievances, and to make demands meant to safeguard their lives as students in the institution.

They are visually impaired students under the aegis of the Association of Students with Special Needs.

Wearing dark sunglasses, some navigated with precision using white canes, while others were guided by well sighted students that marched with them in solidarity.

On this day, their anger was not misplaced. They had just lost one of their own, Emeka Ezeudo, a 300-level student of the Department of Music.

The deceased, who resided in one of the male hostels, Alvan Ikoku Hall, was allegedly electrocuted in the early hours of June 14, while returning to his room after using the toilet.

Sunday PUNCH learnt that he was rushed to the University Medical Centre, where he was confirmed dead.

His remains had since been buried in his home town, Enugu-Agidi, in the Njikoka Local Government Area of Anambra State.

While still mourning Ezeudo, described as a generous, kind and resourceful person, it was gathered that the visually impaired students, became angered by the alleged branding of his death as suicide in a statement released by the Dean of Student Affairs, Prof. Edwin Omeje.

They claimed the statement was a grand attempt to cover up the circumstances surrounding Ezeudo's death, and was also meant to divert attention from the dangerous and unhealthy living conditions, which students, especially the visually impaired, are exposed to daily.

Dean's purported statement alluding to suicide

Sunday PUNCH was able to get a copy of Omeje's statement, which allegedly referred to Ezeudo's death as suicide.

The statement titled, 'Preliminary report on the demise of a 3rd year music student in the early hours of Monday June 14, 2021,' dismissed any possibility of electrocution, but stated that the deceased's roommate made reference to him "showing serious signs of depression and suicidal tendency."

The statement read, "It has become very expedient that I present a summary of the unfortunate incident involving the sudden demise of one of our partially blind students, resident in Alvan Ikoku Hall. This is to properly inform my revered colleagues and arm them with the correct information. I strongly believe that we are together in the pain!

"The deceased student, one Mr. Emeka Ezeudo, a partially blind and third year student of music, left his room 106, early this morning (around 2:30 to 3:00am).

"He walked out of the hostel and moved towards the back of the hostel near the gutter (in the space between Eni-Njoku and Alvan) and moved quite a

distance. At a point, he fell down and shouted and students came out to discover the immobile body, which was certified dead on arrival at the University Medical Centre.

"A careful survey of the place never showed naked wires capable of electrocution that could result in death. The roommate informed me and the other students that the deceased student, prior to his death, had begun to show serious signs of depression and suicidal tendencies.

The statement read further, "He said the student lost an election in which he recently contested the presidency of their association (physically challenged students). The election was held last Tuesday, on June 8.

"He kept complaining that he spent so much money during the campaigns and could not understand why he lost the election. Secondly, his roommate also confirmed that his so-called girlfriend deserted him suddenly within the same period and he felt too bad again.

"His behaviour according to his roommate became elusive and worrisome. He avoided talking to all his roommates. Albeit, they never reported to the authority. The question remains, what was he looking for at that portion of the hostel and by that early hour of the day?

"I am in deep pain about the development. We got in contact with the family and the mother had visited to see his body. The family wants to bury him on Wednesday, June 16 and there will be a requiem mass in his memorial by 8am at St Peters Chaplaincy.

"The family also does not want to conduct an autopsy on his body. This is a summary of what transpired and it will be very erroneous to assert that he died out of electrocution. Indeed, it is quite unfortunate and I bleed in tears. Thanks and please do remember our dear students in your personal prayers. Also, I decide to intentionally counsel students as much as I can. The world is becoming too complicated and we must be solutions and not the other way round. Shalom. Dean of Students Affairs."

We are not buying the suicide case – students

The President, Association of Students with Special Needs, Dozie Obiayom, told our correspondent that its members had yet to get over Emeka's death and still saddened by the circumstances that led to his demise.

He described the statement credited to Omeje as stigmatising and maintained that students with special needs had never been associated with suicide.

He stated, "That was not the case. It was not suicide. Those that witnessed what happened to Emeka said he was electrocuted. I was told that they (students) had to disconnect the electricity supply to the cable from the power house that served the hostel, before he could be taken to the hospital.

"I learnt that he jerked once and died. We were surprised when a statement released by the dean, claimed that he committed suicide because his girlfriend left him, and that he was depressed after losing an election. I insist that suicide is not part of us."

Body had burnt marks

A student who spoke on condition of anonymity told *Sunday PUNCH* that when Ezeudo's body was found, a cable that was still emitting sparks was found close to him.

He also revealed that his face, neck, back and knees, had burnt marks, and insisted that they were indications that he was electrocuted.

According to the student, he heard a scream in the early hours of the morning from the back of the hostel, and when he got there with some other students, they found the deceased lying motionless.

He recounted, "We had to wait for them to disconnect the power supply to the hostel. It was after that we discovered it was Ezeudo, a visually impaired student that was lying lifeless. He was conveyed to the hospital with one of the postgraduate buses. Later in the evening, we learnt that he was dead."

On why his death was being linked to suicide, the student told our correspondent that Ezeudo felt betrayed by his roommate, whom he accused of not voting for him during their associations election (Association of Physically Challenged Students).

"They have not been on talking terms. Ezeudo is partially sighted, while his roommate is blind. He is the one helping his roommate, who is a 100 level student. The deceased felt he was entitled to his roommate's vote, and became disappointed to learn that he did not vote for him. He was annoyed and for days, they were not on speaking terms. That was how the depression angle came in.

"A day before his death, he was with us and never showed any sign of depression. The Ezeudo that we knew can not commit suicide because of mere election.

"His previous roommate revealed that he had challenges with his digestive system and that each time he needed to urinate or defecate and did not do it in good time, he would end up messing himself up.

"I believe he was pressed that night and in a bid to hurriedly step out and get a relief, he walked into the electrical cable. He is not here now to defend himself or say what actually happened, but suicide is totally out of the picture.

Harbinger of death everywhere

Sunday PUNCH learnt that aside from the visually impaired Ezeudo being allegedly electrocuted by a loosely hanging electrical cable, several students have had a close shave after unknowingly coming in contact with electrical cables dangling dangerously in various corners of the campus.

Our correspondent reliably gathered that in 2018, a 400-level student in Eni-Njoku Hall, almost lost his life, when a naked wire dropped on him as he watched a football match.

According to a visually impaired creative writer and broadcaster that graduated from the Mass Communication Department in 2018, Demola Adeleke, the preliminary statement credited to Omeje was "misleading, deceptive and a desperate attempt to exonerate the institution from its negligence and the consequent backlash" from the mourning students.

He told our correspondent that news of electrical mishaps were no longer news in UNN, as it had become recurrent, especially in the two male hostels.

He said, "There have been cases of students coming in contact with the haphazardly connected wires, spider-webbing and hanging loosely on the hostel railings, ceilings and window panes.

"As an alumnus of UNN and a former resident that lived in one of the male hostels for four years, I have great knowledge of the environment where Ezeudo's body was found. Recent enquiries about the state of the male hostels have not revealed much in terms of improvement on the part of students' living condition.

"In 2018, room 123 in Eni-Njoku hostel was engulfed in flames due to electrical sparks. Thankfully, none of the occupants were around, or they might have suffered the same fate as the late Ezeudo. Based on accounts, the young man's death was caused by electrocution."

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Continuing, he said, "He might have been disappointed that he lost an election, after which his girlfriend left him, but it would be ridiculous to suggest that these two reasons were triggers for his alleged suicide.

"Ezeudo, whom I knew on personal grounds had a positive attitude to life and would not have considered suicide as an option for any reason. Missing in the dean's report was the possibility that due to Ezeudo's bad sight, he might have touched a naked cable, which is common in the male hostels, and one of which was reportedly found close to his lifeless body.

"Even without an autopsy, it will be safe to infer, from the wire found close to his body and the burnt marks reportedly found on his neck, back and knees,

that he was electrocuted, and did not kill himself by grabbing an active wire as implied by the university.

"It was quite disturbing that the dean, in a bid to keep the university in a good light, will imply that a student whose only dream was to study and graduate in peace from the university, committed suicide, even when all the facts point otherwise."

A student who spoke on condition of anonymity alleged that the two male hostels in UNN have been in deplorable forms for years.

Corroborating Adeleke's claims, the student alleged that the department of works does not show any interest in tracing or fixing any electrical faults.

He stated, "Students carry out electrical repairs and connections themselves. When you get to the hostels, you will see different wires, even the ones that are not naked are not high enough. They are always within reach and hang on window panes. Such things are dangerous for visually impaired students and sadly, they share the same hostel with us."

An institution plagued by suicide

With Omeje, attributing Ezeudo's death to suicide and not to alleged negligible attitude to students' safety by UNN, many have wondered why a citadel of learning should be plagued by many suicide cases.

Of a truth, over the years, several suicide cases have been documented in the institution, and tales surrounding such happenings, leaves nothing to be desired in the hearts of many.

On March 14, 2021, a 300 level student of Biochemistry Department, Daniel Mba, plunged to his death from a storey building.

Sunday PUNCH learnt that the deceased, who is from the Aninri Local Government Area of Enugu State, was caught cheating with his phone by a lecturer a few minutes to the end of an examination, and his scripts were torn. It was learnt that the lecturer also seized his phone and handed him new scripts to start afresh.

Unhappy with the development, Mba was said to have stormed out of the examination hall for his hostel, where he injected some poisonous substances into his body in an attempt to commit suicide. However, when the poison failed to act fast, he jumped from the balcony of the building and died on the spot.

In May, A young final year student of English and Literary Studies, Chukwuemeka Akachi, committed suicide after dropping suicidal notes on Facebook.

It was gathered that Akachi consumed two bottles of a poisonous substance and that it was the second time he attempted suicide.

Based on reports, Akachi had battled with mental health illness for a while, and made references to it in his posts on social media prior to his death.

Taking to his Facebook to pen his suicide ideations, Akachi who was a budding poet and potential first class student, wrote, "Forgive me. In case you are the one who found the body, I am really sorry. It had to be someone, you know." "I have chosen Jo Nketaih's poem as my suicide note: "They said you came looking for me. I didn't drown; I was the water." Where do atheists go to when they die? lol. Amen."

In another post, he stated, "My mental health has been on life support for a while now. Thanks to those who call. Text. Visit. Speak to me. May we always remember.

"May we never forget. You may have added a few hours, months or days to my time here. But you know life support is expensive, right? Thanks for trying. Amen."

Samuel Elias, a 25-year-old, final year student of the Department of Religion and Culture, committed suicide by drinking sniper on June 17, 2019, in his parent's house at Justina Eze Street in Nsukka.

It was gathered that his mother, a UNN worker, Kate, returned from work on that day to find him staggering as he went to take a bottle of coke from the fridge

She stated, "I followed him immediately to his room and started talking to him, but he could not respond and when I looked closely, I discovered that his teeth had tightened up. As I looked around, I saw an empty sniper bottle. At this point, I raised the alarm and my other children rushed into the room and we tried to give him red oil, but his tightened teeth did not allow the oil to enter his mouth."

Sadly, Elias died in the hospital despite medical interventions to save his life.

Plights of visually impaired students in Nigeria

With their world revolving around total or partial darkness, visually impaired individuals depend on a heightened sense of smell, sound and touch for survival and mobility.

Daily faced with seemingly daunting challenges which tend to make survival a bit difficult for them, these individuals, many believe, deserve an enabling environment to bloom like their counterparts who are fully sighted in tertiary institutions.

According to a report published in the International Journal of Education and Research, titled, 'Barriers to Special Needs Education in Nigeria' by Rufus Adebisi, barriers to special needs education can take a variety of forms that include physical, technological, systemic, financial, or attitudinal; or they can arise from a governments' failure to make available the needed accommodations and infrastructural provisions.

The report stated, "Lack of facilities and materials has been one of the barriers to special needs education in Nigeria. The lack of support services poses a barrier to enrolment and education of persons with special needs.

"The lack of facilities and support services for effective inclusion imply that many academically qualified students with special needs, especially students with visually and hearing impaired may be unable to attend regular neighbourhood schools or Nigerian colleges and universities.

"Data shows that the provision of support services in public special and inclusive schools are lacking. At the tertiary level, many students enrolled into the colleges and universities in Nigeria were frustrated out of their programmes or performed poorly because of the nonexistence of support services."

Deputy Vice Chancellor keeps mum

When contacted on the phone, the varsity's Deputy Vice Chancellor of Administration, Prof. Okpoko Pat, refused to comment on the matter.

The DVC said he was attending a community meeting and referred our correspondent to the university's spokesperson.

UNN still investigating – Spokesperson

The UNN spokesperson, Okwum Omeaku told *Sunday PUNCH* that the school management was still investigating the circumstances that led to Ezeudo's death. He claimed that no naked electrical cables could be found lying around UNN campus.

He stated, "Areas like that are usually cordoned off if they are spotted, and if the affected department had not taken care of them. You know that these things can happen anywhere. If it is an accident, it is treated as an accident. It was quite an unfortunate situation. I will not say he was electrocuted because I was not there."

Omeaku said that the school management had yet to make a statement regarding Ezeudo's death, adding, "The Vice Chancellor is not around, and if there is a statement, I am the one to issue it. The VC would direct me to do that.

"We are still on the matter. Just as it had happened, the matter would come up and the management would check to know what really happened. Nobody was there to know if there was a naked cable, and to know if he really tripped and fell on it.

"When incidents like this occur, we have to take a closer look at what led to it, how it can be avoided and what can be done in the circumstances.

On claims that unattended naked cables littered the campus, he said, "You can see the ambiguity in that. There is no way such complaints can be true. Even when issues of collapsed structures occur, it is usually addressed instantly. Students are our primary care. We put so much effort on the ground to ensure their safety. We always do our best to protect the lives and property of students. There is no way we will have such complaints over the years and will not have them addressed."

I didn't allude to his death as suicide – Dean

In his reaction, Omeje denied linking Ezeudo's death to suicide. He, however, said since a live wire was seen where he was found, he might have been electrocuted.

He stated, "When he was found, he was already dead and his body was moved to the hospital. The question is what was he doing where he was found? Several students said he went to the toilet, but there was no single toilet in that place. There were wounds on his hand and face. I did not see signs of electrocution, but it is possible that he fell on that wire and there was light at the time."

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