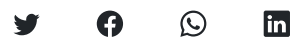


A'Ibom family worries over son's mysterious death after Abuja trip

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By Patrick Odey and Godfrey George

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This is certainly a trying moment for the Obot as their son, Ofonime, said to be the family's breadwinner died in a mysterious circumstance on Friday, July 8, 2022.

Our correspondents gathered that 25-year-old Ofonime; a promising young barber, returned from work at an unusual hour that day and complained of chest pain and vomited blood the previous day.

It was learnt that before he finally gave up the ghost at around 12:15pm that day after falling on the laps of his elder sister, his tongue and mouth turned black, while efforts by his parents to revive him were futile.

Although no medical doctor was able to ascertain the actual cause of his death before he was laid to rest on Saturday, July 16, 2022, family sources said he died allegedly from food poisoning inside his father's rented house located at Atai- Idung Street, Urua Ikpa, in Itu Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State.

However, another version of the story claimed that he died after visiting one of his friends in Abuja and that he was no longer his usual self after his return.

Father of the late barber, Okokon, told *Saturday PUNCH* that July 8 was a sad day for the entire family.

He said, "I was at the palace of a chief in another village over a land dispute when I received a call from home that my son, Ofonime Okokon, was vomiting blood.

"I rushed back home and met my wife at the entrance to my compound and she told me that she got the same call and both of us went into the house together. We met my late son lying on the arms of his elder sister but still vomiting blood. I saw the remaining meal he ate; two eggs and cooked noodles. The meal was prepared for him before his health worsened. I ate the egg and his sister ate one full egg from the prepared meal.

"As he lay in the arms of his sister, they sent someone to get drugs for him from a nearby pharmacy store. But when his sister forced the mouth of the deceased to give him the drugs, we discovered that the tongue, teeth, gum and mouth had turned black, indicating that he was poisoned.

"I called his pet name. I used to call him "Ikpa" and he turned his face, put his two hands into my palm and breathed his last. That was around 12:15 pm on that day. But that morning when he woke up, we greeted and food was prepared as he requested to eat egg and noodles. He ate a little before we went out .He was not sick up to the point of death. I asked the chief that followed me what could be the

cause of the black mouth and he said it could be a result of poisoning. I think my son took the wrong way in his bid to rescue the family from poverty. That is my thinking. Friends could have told him there was a way to get fast luck. He travelled to Abuja to meet his friend and returned on May 11 to Uyo.”

Besides, the late Ofonime’s younger sister, 22-year-old Ruth Okokon, who expressed the same view as her father that her brother’s death was mysterious, told one of our correspondents that the death of her brother was linked to his recent journey to Abuja, to see a friend.

Ruth, who fought hard not to betray emotions while speaking with *Saturday PUNCH*, said before her late brother travelled to Abuja, he promised that he would return with money and things would be okay for the family.

She, however, said that the manner her late brother returned from Abuja was suspicious, adding that he was a changed person from his usual self.

She said, “The way my brother returned from Abuja was not nice. He came back without some of his things, looked worried and emaciated. He was lost in thought; he changed completely. He stopped talking to everybody. He stayed all alone without talking to anyone and when we tried to ask him what was wrong, he didn’t say anything. If we persisted, he got angry and left the place.”

The late Ofonime’s mother, Mrs Comfort Obot, who appeared heartbroken when one of our correspondents visited their home, said the death of her son shattered her peace.

“He was everything to me. The most painful thing is that there was no premonition of his death. There was a revelation from the church that we should pray for the family which we have been doing. But like a thief in the night death came. My son never said any last words before he died,” Comfort said, sobbing.

One of the deceased’s apprentices who identified himself as Elijah said the workers were taken aback by the behaviour of their boss after his return from Abuja, adding everything about him changed.

“Before he travelled to Abuja, he used to crack jokes with us and sometimes we ate together in the shop. But since he came from Abuja, he changed. One thing we noticed with him was that he was always on long calls during work hours and whenever he started receiving such calls, he would not want anybody around him,” Elijah added.

He also said that his late boss was like a father to him, noting that he sometimes bought food for them in the shop. They however couldn’t name or identify the supposed friend.

However, a source in the community said that during the candlelight procession, some young guys numbering about 200 stormed the venue of his wake to pay their last respects to their friend.

But amid the different versions of his death, the deceased’s father stated that anyone directly or indirectly responsible for his death would not go unpunished.

Raining curses on the assumed killers of his son, Obot said that they only succeeded in shattering the peace of the almost 40-year-old union, adding that God would avenge his death.

He stated in tears, “I used to also call him Mbakara (meaning a white person). I called him that name on the morning of the incident before I went out. He assured me that nothing was wrong with him. The God that we served will certainly punish anyone who has done this to me.”

However, the challenge before the family now is how to bear the burden of the loss of their breadwinner, whose death the family said would continue to impact negatively on the family’s fortunes.

Speaking further, Okokon said that his late son was sent by God to the family, adding that his death was a terrible one to the family.

He said “Whenever he returned from the barber’s, he would buy food for the family. Even if we were asleep, he would wake us up to eat. The night before he died, he bought food for us in the house and we ate together. His death is a big blow to the entire family.”

On efforts of the police regarding investigation into the matter, he noted, “I have not reported the incident to the police because we don’t have money for a case.

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“I worked with the Akwa Ibom State Secondary School Board but my salary was stopped in 2009 for an offence I didn’t commit. Since then I don’t have confidence in the police. After that incident, I have been at home, growing water leaves.”

Doctors, lawyer react

Some medical practitioners have reacted to the matter, noting that an autopsy should be required to determine the cause of death.

A Rivers State-based medical doctor, Dr Godspower Bariloe-ue, told *Saturday PUNCH* that it would be wise to be sure of the kind of food poisoning being talked about, noting that a meal may get poisoned unintentionally.

“When we talk of food poisoning, there are different types. There are chemical food poisoning and infectious food poisoning. The common one is infectious. If this one is infective, it would take some time before the bacteria in the food gets into the stomach and multiplies before it begins to release the toxins in the blood. This means food can get poisoned unintentionally from food handling.

“Also, there are questions that need to be asked. Did he really eat something? What time? What time did he begin to manifest symptoms from the food he was said to have eaten?

“We need to know when he began to manifest symptoms; what the symptoms were before his death. Also, clinically, without a forensic investigation, it is difficult to establish a case of food poisoning,” he said.

He also advised the Obot family to hire the services of a histopathologist to carry out a test on the intestines of the barber’s remains.

“In a case of food poisoning, they need to involve a histopathologist. They would need to get a sample of his intestines. Of course, there will be a lot of reactionary changes in the intestines. That one is more reliable than just taking symptoms of history.

“No court of law will give a verdict based on a mere history or allegation. Even with the symptoms, there are many things that can be said about the symptoms. Those symptoms of gastrointestinal tracts can be caused by many things.

“Now, that the corpse has been buried, it will be difficult. The investigations have a time stamp. However, when the body is exhumed, it would be in the position of the pathologist to make sure they get the tests done,” he added.

Also reacting, a specialist in Internal Medicine, Dr Ajidahun Olusina, noted that the family must first establish that the deceased indeed ate or drank when he travelled to see his friend.

Olusina said, “When that is established, there are some chemicals that can be put in a person’s food that would make the person pass out in a few minutes and die. I don’t expect any sane person to do that to anybody except they really want to poison the person. The chemicals can damage the liver or the kidney; and once this happens, the victim can die in just a few hours or before 48 hours.

“We can say it was suicide if the young man was in a gathering. The family may not know if he had a silent problem. It may also be that. I have had patients in their 30s who went to parties and slumped without eating or drinking anything.

“It could be hypertension. It could be an injection of a toxic substance. It could be anything. The only way to unravel all this is through autopsy. The family has to approach a pathologist for an autopsy to be taken if they really want to pursue justice for Ofonime.”

The health expert also advised that the corpse should be exhumed if the desired justice and closure.

“They can exhume the corpse. No doctor will want to work based on assumptions. Once an autopsy is done, 80 per cent of their problems would be over because it would establish the exact cause of death,” he added.

On his part, a legal practitioner, Mr Chikaodi Chidozie, said the Obot should get a lawyer, who would give them proper legal advice on how to go about the matter.

He also advised the family to petition the Inspector General of Police for further probe into the alleged poisoning of Ofonime.

“The family would have to approach a good lawyer and hire him/her to pursue the case. It is a sensitive matter and the young man in question cannot just die like that. There are many law firms who can take up this case pro-bono to establish that he was actually poisoned.

“It would be difficult to prove before the court that he was poisoned without a video recording or evidence showing a cook, friend or whoever adding some substance to his meal. The law does not recognise hearsays. We have to be sure, proven beyond every reasonable doubt.

“In the absence of a video, they should approach a pathologist and get an autopsy. Once they petition the Inspector General of Police, the case would be transferred to Abuja and modalities would be worked out on how they can work out the payment. The family should first approach a lawyer for proper advice. It is a sad incident,” he noted.

We’ve no information on incident –Police

The state police spokesperson, Odiko Macdon, said the command had yet to receive such information concerning the late barber, adding that they would only swing into action upon receipt of the information.

He said if the parents of the deceased alleged that he was poisoned to death, they should report the matter to the police and be ready to substantiate it, noting that the police cannot do anything when there was no complainant in a case.

Macdon said, “The matter has not been reported to the police. We do not have any such report in our database. If the family is alleging that the boy was poisoned to death, they should report to the police and be ready to substantiate it. They have not done so, what will the police do in a case where there is no complaint?”