

Vigilante murdered my husband on way home for dinner — Wife

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The late Itila with his wife

The family of Armstrong Itila has yet to fully come to terms with the reality that he was no more. On July 20, 2022, while returning home from work, Itila's life was cut short by a trigger-happy vigilante identified as George Eboigbe.

It pained the family that the late Itila was unable to realise his ambition to establish a business which he hoped to better the lives of his loved ones and the Uteh Ekoko community, Upper Mission, Benin City, Edo State, where he lived. He was described as a good fellow and known for his lively nature. At over six feet tall, he earned himself a nickname, Tallest.

Eboigbe is being detained at the Edo State Police Command where he is being investigated on the reason for his action.

Speaking to *Saturday PUNCH*, the deceased's wife, Franca Itila, sobbed uncontrollably, wondering why she had to suffer a cruel fate at a time she most needed the support and guidance of her husband. She noted that if it was possible to turn back the hand of time, she would want her loving husband to be alive and accomplish the dreams they had together.

She said: "We got married on December 18, 2011 but we were not blessed with kids. I got to know of the sad news on Thursday, July 21, a day after he was killed by the vigilante. I was taken to my relatives' house where they broke the news to me. I can't describe how I felt when I heard the news. It was like a nightmare; a dream that I needed to wake up from. It is an experience I wouldn't want my enemy to go through. It is really sad. It has been difficult to come to terms with his demise."

Franca described her husband as a pillar and dependable ally whose desire to make himself better was unique.

He added, “My husband was a pillar. He was a good man and a kind person. He loved people and he was loved by many in the community. He was into building houses and popularly known as Tallest or Dogo because he was tall.

“He was a peacemaker. He was focused on his job and profits from it were what he used to train himself at the Benson Idahosa University where he read Accounting Education. He was fun to be with and he once jokingly told me he would release a song for me. He was always willing to help others in need.

“We had a dream of floating a business but we didn’t know that things would end this way. I didn’t know that death would come like this. We hoped and prayed that we would live together into old age. He also talked about opening a bakery before the year ends to complement his earnings from building houses. It was a healthy family and we hoped to have our kids.”

The distraught wife noted that he left the home on the day he was killed, hoping to have dinner together later in the day.

She added, “He was killed while returning home from work some minutes after 9pm. I am a teacher and I left for work before him on that day. On Tuesday, I had told him that I would wear one of his T-shirts and a trouser to work on Wednesday being our sports day. Due to my request, he didn’t wear the clothes on Tuesday. When I put them on, he looked at me. This is to show how close we were. After I wore the clothes, he said it was his clothes that I loved putting on. I laughed, turned to him and asked if the clothes didn’t look nice on me. He said they looked nice and we both laughed. I told him I was going to work and he gave me a transport fare. That was how we parted that day.

“So at about 3pm, he called to find out if I was home and I told him yes. He said he was debited where he went to withdraw money and that he was at the bank to sort out the issue. I wished him well and told him I would go for choir rehearsal later that day. He called some minutes after 7pm and told me to prepare spaghetti for him. After cooking, I waited for him to come. He never came back and that was the last time I heard from him until I heard the sad news of his death.”

Franca noted that the loss had devastated the family who she said found it difficult to cope with the loss. “It has been difficult for us all. He still has a mother. She added, “We are all distraught and it has not been easy. It is painful that I won’t see my husband again. It is unbearable and I don’t know how I can cope without him. His demise has left a huge vacuum in my life. It left a big hole in my heart that can’t be filled.”

However, she is seeking justice to ensure that the killer of her husband faces the full wrath of the law, calling on the police to expedite action on the investigation.

She said,” Initially, the investigating police officer in charge of the case was not handling it well so we went to some television stations in the state to tell the public about my experience. Many people have been calling him (the IPO) and there is an improvement in the way he is handling the case now.

“The suspect said it was an accidental discharge and he didn’t know what came over him. But a commercial tricyclist who witnessed the incident said the vigilante pointed a torchlight at my husband’s face who said the light prevented him from seeing and also introduced himself as Tallest. The vigilante then answered, ‘If you are the one, what can you do?’

The eyewitness said that the vigilante slapped my husband, which made him lean on the tricycle as he was about to fall. He said he later got up and tapped the vigilante on the shoulder, asking him why he slapped him. But the vigilante left the spot, returned with a gun and shot my husband on the neck at close range.

She also said that none of the vigilance members paid the family a visit after the incident to commiserate with them.

“No member of the vigilance group has come to commiserate with our family. After he was shot, they called another vigilante, identified as Robinson, to the scene of the crime and they referred to him as the chief security officer. He is also a member of our church. He was alarmed when he found out that the person shot was my husband. Those at the crime scene argued for some time and some of them tried to cover up the evidence before Robinson arrived at the scene. They used a shovel to pack sand to cover the blood on the road. When the tricyclist saw what happened, he ran away for fear of being killed being the only witness and returned the next day to pick up his tricycle. That was what our church member told me when he got there. My husband’s body was still warm and they tried to revive him by rushing him to a hospital where he was confirmed dead.

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“This is injustice and I want the killer to be brought to book. I am begging the media, human right activists, traditional leaders and everyone that loves humanity to come to our rescue. The three other vigilantes who were on duty that night sleep peacefully in their houses while my husband is dead. They should have been arrested to help in the investigation but they are walking freely in the street.

“It is only the CSO who they called after my husband had been shot that is talking. Where are the other three who were there when my husband was killed? I saw one of them on Thursday morning in the car of one of the landlords in the area on my way to the television station where we took the matter to. They are enjoying life while my husband is gone. The only thing I can do for him is to ensure I get justice. I cannot say if the vigilance group has the backing of the Edo State Government but the community pays for its services. However, I am begging the government to come to my aid so that we can get justice. I don’t have power to do this on my own.”

Speaking with our correspondent, Robinson said that he was still in shock over the occurrence, noting that he and other members of the vigilance group in Utesi including the Divisional Police Office of Aduwawa Police Station did all they could to save the deceased.

He added,” I got a call on that day of the incident from the head of the vigilance group in that quarter that a gun went off and hit a landlord during an argument with one of our operatives.

“On my way to the scene, I called the DPO of Aduwawa who advised me to hurry to the place. When I got there I found the victim lying on the floor and we quickly rushed him to a nearby hospital where we were joined by the DPO

and the doctor declared him dead on arrival.”

On how the vigilance group was formed, he said,” The group was organised by the landlords at Imansuangbon quarters and they are under the Uteh vigilance group. Those picked were also landlords living in that quarter because they didn’t want to work with people they didn’t know. Having observed them for three months, the landlords brought them to us at the zone and we also took them to the headquarters at the Government Reserved Area. The man who killed itila, like every other vigilante in the state, has his record at the vigilance headquarters and at the Divisional Police headquarter in Aduwawa where Uteh falls under.

“The headquarters of the vigilance group has not established training but I know that lectures and advises us on how to relate with the public whenever we are on duty. The DPO also meet with us and tells us how to act especially at night.”

Robinson further said that members of the vigilance group and people from the late Itila’s church have been paying condolence visits to the bereaved family, adding that it had not been easy to come to terms with the death of a known member of the community.

Contacted, the Spokesperson for the Edo State Command, Chidi Nwabuzor, said that investigation was on, adding that the suspect would be charged to court upon conclusion of investigation. He also debunked the claim that investigation was being delayed, noting it was a systematic process and not rocket science.

He said: “On July 20, 2022 at about 23:30 hour, the Divisional Police Officer of the Aduwawa Police Divisional Police headquarters received a complain that one vigilante, George Eboigbe, shot one Gift Itila and immediately mobilised his men to the scene, where they met the lifeless body of Itila. Eboigbe was arrested and during preliminary investigation, it was discovered that he belongs to a vigilance group in the state. He was on routine patrol with his colleagues along Upper Mission Extension when they had an altercation with the late Itila which led to the shooting of the deceased by Eboigbe.

“The body of Itila was evacuated from the scene and taken to Our Clinic Hospital at Ikpoba Hill for autopsy and preservation of the body. The DPO of Aduwawa Division after preliminary investigation brought the case and suspect to the State Criminal Investigation and Intelligence Department while the homicide department has taken over the investigation. The case is still under investigation and the stage they are now is the autopsy. Already, the suspect is giving useful information.

“The police are not wasting time on the case. Police investigation is not rocket science. It not something one starts and concludes same day most especially when it’s a murder case. It takes time for the police to go through the process as it is statutorily mandated on them. People insinuate about the way cases are handled because they want the police to do their bidding and it can’t happen that way.

“Police investigation is a systematic process especially in a murder case where one needs to do everything well. So the police are not trying to delay the investigative process in this case. I think what they are talking about is autopsy done by a medical doctor to determine the cause of death and it is capital intensive.”

Commenting on the case, a lawyer, Douglas Ogbankwa, said that it was a clear case of homicide, stating that there was nothing to show that the late Itila also had a similar weapon at the time of his death.

He said, ‘First, the vigilance service is not a creation of the law. So the vigilante who committed the offence has personal liabilities more than the state though the state conscripted him into the Edo State Security Network. Since the vigilance service is not recognised by law, the vigilante in question will be liable more than the state, though we can find an equitable way of bringing in the state. You can sue the Edo State Government that it is the one that authorised him to bear arms without the backing of the law. Those are the issues in this case.’”

Ogbankwa stated that what was important at the moment was for autopsy to be done to ascertain the cause of death provided by law.

He added, “It is the cause of death that will now actually give the court the fillip to convict him for the murder which he has committed. If the vigilante wants to find any kind of allocutus there would have been an element of proportionate force. I understand the deceased was not found with any gun. If he was found with one, then we would have to talk of proportionate force as stipulated by law based on the doctrine of reciprocity to prove that the deceased was killed for that reason. Without this, it would be taken that he was killed without provoking his killer.”

He added that what was vital for the police was to carry out an autopsy to ascertain the cause of death and promptly charge the suspect to court after completion of investigation.

Ogbankwa noted, “I am sure the police would have collected the required statement from the suspect and witnesses while the autopsy will confirm the cause of death which will probably be by the bullet from what I heard.”