

Dead before trial: Nigerians who took

GODFREY GEORGE writes about individuals who entered police custody but never came out alive, the systemic failures that enable these deaths, and the long fight for accountability in a country where detention too often becomes a death sentence

Olshile Oduga, a 33-year-old car dealer, newlywed, and expectant father, took his last breath in a way no one should—within the cold, unforgiving walls of police detention.

What should have been a routine dispute between neighbours spiralled into a harrowing tragedy, leaving behind a grieving family and an outraged public.

Allegations of torture have surfaced, and once again, the Nigerian police stands accused of being the grim reaper of its own citizens.

Oduga's ordeal began with a disagreement with his neighbour, Stasia Nora, in the Chevron area of Ajah. What exactly transpired between them remains unclear, but what is certain is that the matter escalated after Nora reported him to the Ikota Police Station.

Officers promptly arrested Oduga, hauling him away in a manner that would later prove fatal.

From that moment, Oduga became a ghost, his existence seemingly erased.

Family members searching for him were met with denial, silence, and, ultimately, a dreadful revelation. His sisters visited the station, demanding to see him, only to be told that no such person had been detained. The estate manager, who had witnessed his arrest, was also denied entry.

Their desperation grew, leading them to the State Criminal Investigation and Intelligence Department in Panti, Yaba, Lagos. And there, the truth was delivered with cruel abruptness, Olshile Oduga was dead.

But how? And why?

The police claimed he had been transferred to SCID and had died in their custody. His family, however, insists that he never left the Ikota Police Post alive.

Oduga's elder sister, Abisola Bakare, recounted her distressing encounter with the police.

"It was my brother's pregnant wife who called me on Wednesday afternoon, saying her husband's line had been unreachable since Tuesday afternoon," she said, her voice thick with grief.

"So, I called the estate manager where he lived and asked him to check on him to find out why his phone wasn't going through," she told *Sunday Punch*.

Her inquiries led her down a winding road of deception. The police post where Oduga had last been seen denied ever detaining him. It was only after much insistence that an officer admitted his case had been transferred to Ajah Police Station.

Even then, the truth was masked in ambiguity. When Bakare arrived at Ajah, she found senior officers huddled in discussion. Their words to her? "Madam, sorry. Take it easy." But sorry for what?

Then, in an act that defied all professional conduct, the Investigating Police Officer of the case, Modinat Alaka, reportedly broke down in tears. It was not a confession, but it was close enough. Her superior snapped at her, demanding that she speak. And so she did, Oduga was dead.

The brutality of silence

The police attempted to explain his death away. They claimed that upon his arrival at Ajah Police Station, he appeared weak, prompting them to rush him to Epe General Hospital. But there were no medical records, no eyewitnesses, and no photographs, Bakare said. When she demanded proof, she was met with silence. The puzzle pieces refused to fit together.

Determined to uncover the truth, Bakare took her pain and fury to the Force Criminal Investigation Department in Alagbon, making an official complaint. The following morning, she received a call summoning her to Ajah Police Station again. More apologies, more begging, yet no explanations.

It was only when officers from Panti arrived that the case took a serious turn. They arrested the complainant, Stasia Nora, as well as two officers involved in Oduga's detention.

At Panti, Chief Superintendent of Police Abdullahi Lateef took over the questioning. The answers given by the arrested officers were feeble at best. They claimed they had detained Oduga because he had injured Nora's hand during their fight. When asked if there had been any bloodstains or serious wounds, they admitted there were none.

"Then why did you detain him?" Lateef asked.

No response.

Evidence speaks

The defining moment came when Bakare was taken to the mortuary in Epe to see her brother's body. What she saw confirmed her worst fears.

"His body was covered in bloodstains and showed multiple marks of physical abuse. I even saw deep handcuff marks on his wrists, indicating that he had been severely restrained."

She took photographs and videos as evidence of what she already knew: her brother had been tortured to death.

Upon seeing the evidence, CSP Lateef could no longer feign neutrality. "Your brother was tortured to death," she claimed he admitted. And yet, all he could offer was an apology.

Justice denied?

Justice. The word is whispered in hushed tones by grieving families, thrown into the wind by activists, and disregarded by the very institutions meant to uphold it. The Oduga family is now left with the heavy burden of



Jimoh's family seeking justice over his death in police custody

seeking accountability.

"As a family, we are determined to seek justice. We will get a good lawyer for the case. All we seek is justice," Bakare declared.

Oduga's death is a symptom of a deeply flawed policing system. In Nigeria, stories like his are far too common. The absence of accountability emboldens officers to act with impunity, detaining, torturing, and sometimes killing suspects who never get their day in court.

This incident is not isolated. Reports of detainees dying under suspicious circumstances in police custody have been a recurring issue in Nigeria. Human rights organisations have documented numerous cases where detainees allegedly faced torture, ill-treatment, or neglect, leading to severe injuries or death.

These patterns highlight systemic issues within law enforcement agencies, including inadequate training, lack of oversight, and a culture of impunity.

Oduga's wife will never again hear his laughter. His unborn child will grow up with stories in place of a father.

His sisters will carry the weight of their loss, forever haunted by the knowledge that his death was neither natural nor inevitable, but a result of unchecked power and a system that has failed its people time and again.

What happened to Olatunji Jimoh?

Olatunji Jimoh was approached by his colleague, Jelili Kehinde, who persuaded him to step out.

Trusting his co-worker, Olatunji agreed, leaving the comfort of his home. During their outing, they were intercepted by officers from the Special Investigation Bureau.

While Jelili was permitted to leave, Olatunji was apprehended and taken to the police headquarters in Ilorin. The reason for his arrest was an alleged debt of N220,000 owed to one Gabriel Sunday, a staff member of Olam Office.

The specifics of this financial dispute remain unclear, but it set off a chain of events leading to Olatunji's detention.

A family's desperate search

As hours passed without any communication from Olatunji, his family grew increasingly anxious.

Their attempts to locate him were met with vague and unhelpful responses from authorities.

The once peaceful household was now engulfed in fear and uncertainty as they grappled with the sudden disappearance of their loved one.

On December 20, 2024, the family's worst fears were realised when they were informed of Olatunji's death in police custody.

The police claimed that upon his arrival at the station, Olatunji appeared weak and was subsequently taken to Epe General Hospital, where he was pronounced dead.

This account, however, did little to alleviate the family's suspicions, especially after they observed signs of physical trauma on his body.

The deceased's children, Aisha Abdulqadri (nine years) and Amidat Abdulqadri (six years), his mother, Adijat Jimoh (60 years), his father, Jimoh Alabi (65 years), and his elder brother, Ismail Jimoh, along with other members of the Balogun Fulani area in the Ilorin Emirate, organised a press conference to demand justice.

A family representative, Owolabi Olumuyiwa-Tayo, said, "The family is crying out to the public and the Nigeria Police Force to thoroughly investigate the case so that it will not be swept under the carpet."

"We are asking that the officers who unlawfully arrested him be punished. We also ask that the welfare and education of his two children be addressed and that his two aged parents be looked after due to their failing health from the shock they suffered. Additionally, we demand that the Nigeria Police Force pay damages."

No autopsy after one month

A month and four days after the death of the 35-year-old, his family

demanding the immediate release of the autopsy results conducted by police authorities.



The late Olatunji Jimoh

Speaking with journalists in Ilorin on Friday, the convenor of Justice for Olatunji Jimoh, Olumuyiwa-Tayo, also pleaded with the Nigeria Police Force to charge those responsible for the youth's untimely death, stating that justice delayed is justice denied.

"As we speak, the family is mourning, in pain, and traumatised, left to face their fate alone. How long shall we allow innocent citizens to suffer at the hands of unprofessional policemen, who do not care about the people but rather extort, brutalise, and mistreat them?" he queried.

Police, government responses

In response to mounting pressure, the Kwara State Police

Command acknowledged the incident, describing it as an "unfortunate event that led to the tragic loss of one Mr Jimoh Abdulqadri."

The police stated that an investigation had been initiated to ascertain the cause of death, with promises to keep the public informed as developments unfold.

The Police Public Relations Officer, Toun Ejire-Adeyemi, stated, "Discreet investigations into this incident have commenced to ascertain the cause. Further developments on the outcome will be communicated as the process progresses. No stone will be left unturned."

Governor AbdulRahman AbdulRazaq of Kwara State also stated that the government was keenly following the probe into the tragic death of Abdulqadri in police custody.

Additionally, former Senate President Dr Bukola Saraki commiserated with the bereaved family, urging the police chief to ensure that the case was not swept under the carpet.

Beyond the public outcry and official statements lies a grieving family grappling with an irreplaceable loss. Olatunji's death has left a void that words cannot fill. His two young children are now fatherless, and his elderly parents, who once relied on his support, are left in profound sorrow.

The emotional and psychological toll on the family is immeasurable, compounded by the lack of closure and the unanswered questions surrounding his death. His mother, Mrs Adijat Moriyike, lamented, "My son left home healthy, only for us to be called to come and identify his corpse. This is unbearable."

Teenager's death on Valentine's Day

In Ife, a town in Ondo State's Ose Local Government Area, a tragedy in mid-February 2025 shattered the community's peace and ignited a fervent call for justice.

The death of 17-year-old Tolu Bobade in police custody not only devastated his family but also triggered widespread outrage, culminating in the torching of the local police station by enraged youths.

A dispute escalates

The chain of events began on Valentine's Day, when a disagreement between two families on Oshomo Street spiralled into a public altercation. Officers from the Ife Police Division, led by an inspector, intervened swiftly, arresting several individuals involved in the fracas.

Among those detained was young Bobade, reportedly brought to the station by a man identified as Mr Lasele.

Eyewitnesses allege that while in detention, Tolu was subjected to severe torture at the hands of the police.

The following day, news of his death spread through the town, igniting fury among residents.

A family's grief

The Bobade family, plunged into unimaginable sorrow, has remained steadfast in their pursuit of justice for Tolu. In a heartfelt petition to the Chief Judge of Ondo State, Justice Olusegun Odusola, the family recounted the harrowing events leading to his demise.

The petition, signed by family representative Dupe Bobade, states that

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their last breath in police custody



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Tolu was arrested on 14th February by officers from the Ifon Police Division under the directive of Divisional Police Officer Isadore Fuminiyi. The family contends that during his detention, Tolu suffered severe torture, which ultimately led to his untimely death on 15th February.

Official response

In the aftermath of the chaos, the Ondo State Police Command issued a statement addressing the incident.

The Command's spokesperson, Funmi Odunlami, confirmed that the initial altercation involved two families and that multiple arrests had been made.

She claimed that Tolu appeared weak upon arrival at the station and was taken to a nearby hospital, where he was pronounced dead during treatment.

Odunlami condemned the arson attack on the police station and emphasised that the Commissioner of Police, Wilfred Afolabi, had ordered a comprehensive investigation into both Tolu's death and the subsequent destruction of the station.

The tragic events in Ifon have reignited national conversations about police conduct and the imperative for comprehensive reforms. Advocates stress the necessity of enhanced training programmes focused on human rights, the establishment of independent oversight bodies to investigate allegations of misconduct, and community engagement initiatives to rebuild trust between law enforcement and the public.

Innocent until proven guilty

Under Nigerian law, every citizen is presumed innocent until proven guilty. Yet, for many Nigerians, an encounter with law enforcement can feel like a death sentence without trial.

The rising number of deaths in police custody has become a pressing human rights issue, raising questions about the integrity of the criminal justice system and the sanctity of human life.

One such case unfolded in December 2024, when the city of Minna, Niger State, was rocked by the death of 18-year-old Fatiha Abdulhakeem while in police custody.

Accused of the murder of retired Permanent Secretary Adamu Jagaba, Abdulhakeem's demise has sparked widespread outrage and demands for transparency regarding the circumstances leading to his death.

A murder, an arrest, and shocking confession

The incident began with the brutal killing of 65-year-old Adamu Jagaba, a respected figure in Niger State's civil service. He was reportedly attacked and fatally stabbed at his block industry near the People's Democratic Party Secretariat in Minna.

As the community reeled from the loss of a man known for his dedication and service, the Niger State Police Command swiftly arrested 18-year-old Abdulhakeem as the prime suspect.

During a press briefing, Commissioner of Police Shawulu Ebenezer Danmamman presented Abdulhakeem to the public. In a startling confession, the teenager alleged that he had been hired by certain individuals, including some of Jagaba's own employees, to carry out the murder.

The revelation added a layer of complexity to the case, hinting at internal conspiracies and betrayal.

Detention, then sudden death

While in police custody on December 19, 2024, Abdulhakeem reportedly complained of severe stomach pains and a persistent cough.

According to Niger State Police Public Relations Officer, SP Wasiu Abiodun, "On 19/12/2024 at about 5:00 p.m., the suspect, Fatiha Abdulhakeem, complained of severe stomach pains and cough. He was taken to the general hospital, Minna, for medical attention, but unfortunately, he later died while receiving treatment."

The exact cause of Abdulhakeem's death remains undisclosed, pending the results of a post-mortem examination. The lack of immediate clarity has fueled speculation and concern among the public and human rights organisations.

His sudden death has sparked a significant public outcry. Many are questioning the conditions of his detention and whether he received adequate medical care.

Human rights advocates have called for a thorough and transparent investigation to determine if police misconduct or negligence played a role in his demise.

A systemic crisis

Abdulhakeem's case is not an isolated incident. His death has reignited

discussions about the treatment of suspects in police custody across Nigeria. Custodial deaths have long been a stain on Nigeria's criminal justice system, with multiple reports highlighting systemic failures and abuses.

Under Nigerian law, suspects are presumed innocent until proven guilty. The Constitution guarantees the right to life and human dignity, explicitly prohibiting torture and inhumane treatment.

Yet, Abdulhakeem's death raises urgent questions about the enforcement of these rights and the responsibility of law enforcement agencies to uphold them.

A disturbing pattern

These reports of individuals dying in police detention are not isolated incidents but part of a broader, systemic problem.

Human rights organisations have documented numerous cases where

detainees have met untimely deaths under suspicious circumstances. These deaths often result from torture, neglect, or extrajudicial executions.

In 2005, Human Rights Watch reported on the pervasive use of torture and the alarming number of deaths in custody within the Nigerian police force.

The report highlighted that detainees were subjected to severe beatings, suspension by the limbs, and other forms of physical abuse to extract confessions or as punishment. Such inhumane treatment frequently led to fatalities, with many cases going unreported or ignored by authorities.

Accurate statistics on deaths in police custody are challenging to obtain due to underreporting and a lack of transparency.

However, available data paints a grim picture. In 2010, Amnesty International reported that hundreds of individuals were police custody, with many cases involving torture executions.

In another research by Human Rights Watch in July 2005, 23 men were said to have died in police custody during that period. Twelve of these cases were from Kano and took place between November 2003 and early 2005.

Three occurred in Lagos in February 2005, while eight were recorded in Enugu between March 2002 and May 2005.

Additionally, reports from local human rights organisations and the press indicate that there are scores of other cases, suggesting a widespread pattern of deaths in custody across the country.

The report emphasised that the majority of these incidents were not investigated, and perpetrators often escaped justice.

A 2018 compilation of global statistics indicated that Nigeria had a rate of 44 deaths per 100,000 people due to law enforcement actions.

This figure places Nigeria among the countries with high incidences of custodial deaths.

Causes of deaths in custody

Several factors contribute to the high number of deaths in police detention in Nigeria, security experts have said.

A renowned security expert, Mr Jackson Lekan-Ojo, identified torture and ill-treatment, poor detention conditions, and extrajudicial executions as some of the reasons detainees may die in police detention before going to court.

He said, "Law enforcement officers often resort to torture to extract confessions or information. Methods include beatings, suspension in painful positions, and denial of food or water. Such practices not only violate human rights but also lead to severe injuries and death."

He also highlighted that overcrowded cells, lack of ventilation, inadequate medical care, and unsanitary conditions exacerbate health issues among detainees. Many individuals succumb to illnesses that could have been treated with proper medical attention.

In some instances, he noted, detainees are deliberately killed by officers. These executions are sometimes justified under the guise of "attempted escape" or "self-defence," making it difficult to hold perpetrators accountable.

He further observed that the demand for bribes is pervasive within the Nigerian police force. Detainees who cannot afford to pay may face prolonged detention, torture, or even death. This practice undermines the rule of law and erodes public trust in law enforcement agencies.

Legal and institutional framework

Nigeria's constitution guarantees the right to life and prohibits torture and inhumane treatment. Additionally, the country is a signatory to various international treaties, including the Convention Against Torture, which obligates it to prevent acts of torture and ensure accountability.

Despite these legal provisions, enforcement remains weak.

The Police Service Commission and the National Human Rights Commission are mandated to oversee police conduct and address human rights violations. However, these bodies often lack the resources, independence, and political will to effectively carry out their functions.

The judiciary's role

The judiciary plays a crucial role in safeguarding the rights of detainees. However, systemic challenges hinder its effectiveness.

A lawyer, Faithful Ayiam, said the judicial system is plagued by delays, leading to prolonged pre-trial detentions. Some detainees spend years awaiting trial, during which they are vulnerable to abuse and neglect.

He also noted that coroner laws exist to investigate unnatural deaths, including those in custody. Yet, according to him, these laws are rarely enforced, and many deaths go uninvestigated.

He added, "Corruption within the judiciary can lead to biased rulings, the dismissal of legitimate cases, and the protection of perpetrators. This undermines public confidence in the justice system."

Detention beyond 48 hours

The issue of unlawful detention and the torture of suspects by the Nigerian police has long been a matter of serious concern. Many detainees languish in cells for weeks, months, or even years without trial, while others suffer inhumane treatment under the guise of interrogation. Despite constitutional provisions and international treaties that prohibit prolonged detention and torture, these practices persist.

What the law says

The Nigerian Constitution explicitly limits the duration for which a suspect can be held without being charged in court.

Section 35(4) of the 1999 Constitution (as amended) states:

"Any person who is arrested or detained in accordance with subsection (1)(c) of this section shall be brought before a court of law within a reasonable time, and if he is not tried within a period of—

(a) Two days where there is a court of competent jurisdiction within a radius of forty kilometres; or

(b) In any other case, within such period as is reasonably necessary to bring him before the court."

The Constitution further defines "a reasonable time" as 48 hours, after which the suspect must either be charged or released on bail. Any continued detention beyond this period without a court order is unlawful and constitutes a breach of fundamental human rights.

Also, Section 35(6) of the Constitution provides that anyone unlawfully detained is entitled to compensation and a public apology from the authorities responsible.

However, despite these clear legal provisions, Nigerian law enforcement agencies frequently detain suspects for extended periods without trial.

Police torture and inhumane treatment of suspects

Torture, cruel, inhumane, and degrading treatment of suspects is expressly prohibited under Nigerian and international laws.

The Anti-Torture Act (2017) criminalises torture and outlines penalties for law enforcement officers found guilty of using torture on suspects.

Section 2 of the Act states: "No person shall be subjected to acts of torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment."

Section 8 prescribes a minimum of 25 years' imprisonment for any law enforcement officer found guilty of torture leading to death.

Additionally, the Administration of Criminal Justice Act (2015) provides further safeguards for suspects.

Section 8(1) states: "A suspect shall be accorded humane treatment, having regard to his right to the dignity of his person, and not be subjected to any form of torture, cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment."

It also mandates that suspects be granted access to legal representation and medical care.

Meanwhile, the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT), which Nigeria ratified in 2001, makes these obligations legally binding.

Article 3(1) of the Convention states: "Each State Party shall take effective legislative, administrative, judicial, or other measures to prevent acts of torture in any territory under its jurisdiction."

Despite these legal frameworks, cases of police torture remain rampant. The now-defunct Special Anti-Robbery Squad was notorious for its use of torture and illegal detentions. Following the 2020 #EndSARS protests, judicial panels of inquiry across states documented hundreds of cases where suspects were detained without trial and subjected to cruel treatment.

Legal precedents

The Nigerian judiciary has, in some cases, ruled against unlawful detention and police brutality.

One of the most notable cases is *Giwa v. The State* (2018), where the Supreme Court of Nigeria ruled that prolonged detention beyond 48 hours without a court order is unconstitutional and a violation of fundamental rights.

In *Okafor v. Lagos State Government* (2014), the court ruled that law enforcement officers who torture suspects can be personally sued for damages, reinforcing the provisions of the Anti-Torture Act.

Similarly, in *Solomon v. IGP* (2021), the court held that police authorities must compensate victims of torture and their families.

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