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Mystery river where non-natives drown

BY BY CHRISTIAN AGADIBE ON MARCH 30, 2014 ·

COVER

Uke River in Karu Local Government Area of Nasarawa state looks like any other river. Calm, serene, it provides water for plants and animals around its path.

But beyond all these, the river harbours a deep mystery which is yet to be resolved. Natives of Uke, a community in Karu from where the river took its name say, at least, three persons drown in the river yearly. And most worrisome, according to villagers, is that the natives are never the victims. The latest victims are three pupils from Enugu State who drowned last month.

One of the recent victims was Ifeanyi Onah, a 14-year-old boy who drowned in mysterious circumstance in the river. Since the drowning of Ifeanyi, the family of Mr Emeka Onah has not been the same again.

To Mr Onah, it was unimaginable that his son could drown in the dreaded river because of the mysterious things happening around it.

"I am aware that more than one person dies in that river every year. I have also instructed my children and other people around me not to go there. That is why I don't live near the river," he said.

The last moment of the late Ifeanyi, it was gathered, was also mysterious. It was said that he returned from school as usual, collected the key to their house from his mother's shop, got home and ate and after, began to watch television. It was when a power outage occurred that he returned the keys to his mother and told her that he would be back shortly. It was then that he headed for the river.

According to the father, "It was amazing that he chose to go to the river because there is pipe-born water in our compound. He was not used to going to the river. We are not also living close to the river. Somebody said that he saw him on his way to the river. But Ifeanyi simply told him that he was just going somewhere. He had persuaded him to go back but that he still followed another route to the river."

The father narrated how he heard about the incident. **"On 31 January 2014, I** was already in my working

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place and my wife had also gone to her own working place, my late boy went to school. I was called around 3pm and told that something was wrong. They told me that Ifeanyi went to Uke River. I asked them what happened and they simply requested me to return home. I eventually got home and saw many people in my house, praying. He was lying almost unconscious and sweating profusely. I courageously took him to the Federal Medical Centre, Keffi. It was there that he was confirmed dead. I brought him home and kept him till daybreak, being February 1. Then we buried him. He was my last son."

Like the fairy tale of reincarnation, Mr Onah said his late son had been begging him in his dreams to allow him to return to his family.

In his words, "after his burial, I went to my village to report to them about his death. At home, I was lying down on my bed. He came to me in a trance and said that he wanted to come back. I began to pursue him, asking him why he decided to punish me by dying. He came about two times. My wife has been dreaming the same thing. I loved him too much. He was my carbon copy. He was loved the most by my own mother. I recall how he hugged my mother the last time we travelled home and told her that he would invite her to Abuja to teach her how to speak English, then afterwards he would return to the village to learn our tongue from my mother. My mother did shed tears of joy. That was their last encounter. He was loved by many people even in this Uke. He was very popular although quite young."

Mr Onah said the mystery of the river should be investigated. He recalled that, "the very day that my son died, that was on Friday, the next day being Saturday, when he was buried, an elderly man from Ogoja died at the same spot my son died. I returned from my journey and was informed again that a civil defence officer living at Masaka went to the river to take his bath after visiting his friend at Uke and drowned at the same spot. Three persons died at the river within three weeks. And it happens every year. Currently the river has dried up. You can only see a lake-like structure of it. Ironically the river does not kill anybody during rainy seasons. It only kills non-natives. I advise non-natives living at Uke to shun the river. The natives know what is going on because the river does not kill them."

Facts on Uke River

Uke River is also called Kogi River. It is the major source of water for the inhabitants of Uke, a community in Karu Local Government Area of Nasarawa State. The river passes through the ancient town and divides the community into two equal halves, the upper and lower Uke. The river is muddy with a wide rocky course that is filled to the brim at the pick of rainy seasons.

The numerous deaths by drowning in Kogi River are alarming. They are always very mysterious. Even when it is too shallow or almost dry, people still get drowned in the river. Most of the deceased's remains were never recovered.

It was gathered that it is ritualistic. The tradition of the inhabitants shows that there is a traditional priest who is mandated to perform some rituals before a corpse that got missing in the river could be recovered. It is said that he uses to commune with the water goddesses to seek permission. He is titled 'sarki ruwa'. The ritual involves killing of a white fowl. Once it is performed, the priest dives into the water and brings the corpse out in a matter of seconds.

younger brother – James Baba – drowned in an unbelievable circumstance. He had finished washing his clothes and then got set to take his bath. He wanted to wash off dirt from his slippers, but fell off and landed on the shallow side of the river. Those who witnessed it thought he was going to get up, but he slipped further and disappeared in the river. That was the last the family saw of him. After several futile attempts to recover even his corpse, we consulted the chief priest of the river. He demanded a white fowl for sacrifice and consultation with gods as a pre-condition. My father, being a devout Christian, made it clear that he would never sacrifice to the idols and till today, nobody saw his corpse."

In his own account, Mr. Terungwa Gusha stated, "The death toll in this river is high. At least in every two years, somebody must die. I heard that the main victims are non-natives. But when the river could not



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catch a non-native, a native could be the alternative. It is obvious that there are evil spirits behind this calamity. The most disturbing aspect is that rumours would go round at the beginning of the season of the number of people to be claimed by the river and it happens. The sorry sight of a woman with a baby strapped to her back flowing down with people helplessly watching sometime ago elicited tears."

According to Chikwem Chibueze, a resident of Uke living near the river, "The river is very important for the community. It is the source of drinking water, not minding that hygienically, it's not safe for human consumption. It is also the source of water for domestic use."

There is an ancient colonial bridge constructed by the colonial masters over 60 years ago, which has not had any major rehabilitation or repair. It now vibrates and visibly shakes as cars ply across it. It is a narrow bridge of about seven feet wide without any provision for pedestrians. Due to the narrow nature of the bridge, two cars from opposite directions do not meet on it. One must wait for the other to pass.

It is also alleged that mermaids appear at a spot in the river called Kukuruku.

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