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One year after, family still in pain over dumb son's disappearance

•It hurts that some are accusing me of using my son for money rituals, says dad

By Job Osazuwa

It is more than one year after, but the mystery surrounding the disappearance of 16-year-old Ebuka Azudiugwu is yet to be unravelled.

The atmosphere in his parents' home remains chilly. Ebuka's father, Mr. John Lawrence Azudiugwu and other family members have been dejected since the incident. And one year after, they have become even more devastated.

The teenager, who suffers from speech impairment, had left home, as usual, to play with his peers at the neighbourhood on October 5, 2015. But he didn't return to the family when it was night. Until his disappearance, Ebuka lived with his parents and four siblings at 13, Olumogu Street, Amukoko area of Ajegunle, Lagos State.

The missing teenager, who hails from Isieke village in Okija town, Ihiala Local Government Area of Anambra State, was said to be a quiet and easy-going boy loved by family members, friends and even strangers. The fair-complexioned boy can't speak, but he hears.

It was gathered that the illness that led to his speech-impairment struck him when he was a toddler. After what seemed a recovery from the strange sickness, he couldn't speak anymore. But he retained full hearing ability.

More than one year after his son's disappearance, Mr. Azudiugwu recently recalled how he returned from work in the night on that fateful day and was shocked when informed that his eldest child was missing. He told the reporter that he had not stopped wondering for once why anyone could harm his innocent son.

He said: "It appeared as if I was daydreaming. Initially, we all felt that he would return before late in the night and we continued searching our area. When the reality dawned on me that he could have been kidnapped or killed, very early in the following morning, I ran to the Pako Police Station to lodge a complaint. I later went to Ijora and Orile Police Stations to make reports. Though the police assured me that they would do everything possible to search for my son, I haven't heard anything from them till date.

"After reporting at the stations, we went to many hospitals to check if he was knocked down by a hit-and-run vehicle. We also went to the Government House, Ikeja to announce that we were looking for Ebuka. Concerned relatives took us to different churches to seek spiritual help. One of the prophets said my son was abroad, but I wouldn't know how possible that could be. In all the places we visited, we were told said Ebuka was still alive and that he would return home soon."

Since the incident, he told Daily Sun that the entire family members especially his wife, Victoria have been devastated. According to him, his wife has taken ill on many occasions due to the psychological trauma from her son's disappearance. He said hardly does a day pass without the poor woman grieving over the whereabouts of their son, adding that she had wept uncontrollably on many occasions.

Daily Sun learnt that his siblings are equally going through harrowing times since their elder brother went missing. In the last 14 months, the family members had checked all the likely places he could have gone to but all their efforts were in vain.

"They ask almost every day whether their brother is still alive or dead. It is the same question that I also ask myself every time. If he was seen dead, by now we would have known that he is gone forever and consoled ourselves once and for all. But with the way the situation is, we cannot mourn him because I believe that he might still be seen. I know God is watching over him if he still alive. Anywhere I go, I take his picture along, showing everybody in case they came across him.

"It has been tough for us without him. I cannot really describe how it feels. Sincerely, it is an experience that I can't wish for my enemy, let alone my friends. This is the boy everybody was so used to. He made us laugh and he was very obedient child," he said.

Meanwhile, what seems to be amplifying Azudiugwu's ordeal is an accusation by some persons from his neighbourhood that he had secretly used his own son for money ritual. He said he could not believe that people could be dragging his reputation in the mud and compounding his nightmare. He told the reporter that he could not hurt a fly let alone kill a human being for anything.

Said he: "I am accused of what I don't know anything about. If I had used him for ritual, will I still be riding a motorcycle for commercial purposes from last year till now? Some other persons said I didn't show much concern to search for him, but what else could I have done that I didn't do to locate Ebuka? It is unfortunate that people's minds could be that dirty to think of such evil. I am praying that we find him soon so that my enemies will be put to shame.

"I am pleading with anybody with useful information on the whereabouts of my son to help us out so that my wife and the rest of us can become normal again."

Interestingly, the teenager shares the same birthday with Nigeria. He was born on October 1, 2000, 40 years after Nigeria's independence. But he went missing on October 4, 2015, four days after he marked his 15th birthday. Since then, the family has been in distress.

His father said he suspected that Ebuka's kidnappers might have capitalised on the boy's disability to whisk him away since he could not talk. "He is unable to scream, and the kidnap wouldn't have attracted anyone," he noted.

A close family friend to the Azudiugwus, Mr. Christian Okoligwe told the reporter that his heart bled the last time he went to visit the distraught family.

"I thought the family might have gone through the pain, but I was surprised to see that they were still in sorrow. Ebuka mother has become a shadow of herself. I have been taking the father to different places, all in a bid to find some solution to the family's nightmare. All we want is to find Ebuka. We want to know what has happened to him. I can't leave the father alone to face the trouble because Ebuka was such a gentle boy and the family is good to me," Okoligwe said.



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