

PANORAMA

Snakes, big or small, meant nothing to him for years, but this man lost his life to venom from a small cobra

By Sikiru Abdul-Raheem,
Katsina

MONDAY, 5th June, is a day, residents of Maraber Maska, a sprawling village in Funtua Local Government Area of Katsina State will not forget in a hurry.



the fear of snakes, despite the fact that we have sold out all the snakes he left behind. We are being isolated and we are just victims of circumstances. Please, God send good helpers to us urgently". Rahimatu prayed.

"Every Friday, he used to give the snakes beef meat while he give them water other days", the little Fahid said. *Saturday Vanguard* Late Bello Maimaci, who died at age 35 years old, left behind a wife — Rahimatu (45 years old), two sons and six girls which include Sagiru, Hauwa, Faiza, Usman, Rahimatu started crying again after listing names of her children left behind by the deceased Bello. When *Saturday Vanguard* asked why she was crying again, she said "The children are too young as none of them could inherit the snake business or the farm. Besides, bread winner is gone so soon leaving behind eight children without school without food, and without any hope for survival. Is that not enough for me to shed tears?"

Fahiza, four years old, the only child among the eight children left behind by Bello Maimaci that has the power to harm and play with any snake no matter how big but yet she could not talk over from her father's death of age.

community lost a very brave man, Mallam Bello Maimaciji who built a livelihood around snakes, and eventually died by one of them. That day, Mallam Bello's earthly sojourn was ended by one of the slimy, crawling creatures he kept, an average-sized cobra.

Ironically while alive, Late Bello Maimaciji was said to have saved more than one thousand victims of snake bites from what would have been their untimely deaths because he kept anti-snake bite herbs and potions which he administered on victims of snake bites. His prowess with snakes and treating their bites made him become a household name and a celebrated hero of sorts in the area and beyond. The redoubtable Bello Maimaciji had risen to the occasion many times when dangerous snakes troubled any home or community. He not only caught and disarmed such snakes, but also kept and reared them at home for sometime until he got interested buyers.

Mallama Rahmatu Bello, the bereaved snake-charmer's wife uncontrollably shed tears when *Saturday Vanguard* encountered her in a bid to get her explain in greater detail the circumstances that led to the death of her husband and family bread winner. It took Mallam Murtala Maithoto, an older family friend and a respectable man who was very close to the late Bello, almost 30 minutes of preaching and cajoling to the bereaved Rahmatu before she stopped crying and began to speak. She said that two days to his death, Bello had successfully treated four cases of



●The cobra that ended Bello's life

snake bites and the victims are now normal and free from the dangerous venom. She disclosed that her husband specialized in snake catching, snake bites treatment, buying and selling of snakes and at the same time was a successful farmer.

Rahmatu explained further that on the fateful day, Monday, June 5th, 2006, two people were sent by one Maidanisa based in Puntia to buy snakes as usual from Bello. According to her, the two men bought two snakes, left with one, and promised to come and pick the other one when they paid the balance of the agreed sum. She disclosed that while opening the snakes box for the buyers, one black cobra, rather small, compared with

other big and dangerous snakes in the box reared up and opened its mouth as it attempted to bite her husband. At this, the buyers warned Bello to be wary of that particular snake because they feared that the preventive medicine on Mallam Bello might have expired. They opined that were the medicine still potent, the snake ought not open its mouth at Bello. But Bello calmed their fears and the snake buyers went away. As they left, Bello pulled out the snake in an attempt to put herbs in its mouth, and "while looking for the herbs to apply, the snake bit him twice", the wife who saw it all disclosed.

"It was like a joke when my husband's hand started swelling and he tried to apply

herbs on it. He later asked me to grind another herb for him. All this while, the right hand continued to swell. I immediately gave him the new herbs but by then he had started vomiting profusely. He then told me in between fits of vomiting that only God can save him from this last snake bite. Suddenly, less than ten minutes after this, my husband fell down and I cried out which attracted some neighbours who came in to revive him but the cruel hands of death did not spare him", the bereaved wife, Rahmatu Bello cried out.

Immediately, the news of Bello's passing spread across the area like wildfire, and as Muslims, hundreds of people immediately gathered for the burial of a legendary snake charmer. Bello Maimaciji who lost his life to the venom of a small, but poisonous snake.

Rahmatu, Bello's widow, disclosed further that they later on the fateful day, sold the remaining 30 snakes at an undisclosed amount to the same people that bought two previously.

"The whole house became scared which made the disposal of the remaining snakes inevitable. Only Fathiza, Bello's four-year-old



●Mallam Murtala Maithoto

daughter can hold and play with the snakes like her late father but she is too young to inherit such a business, Rahmatu Bello disclosed.

When asked about the history of snakes in the family, Rahmatu said that her late husband inherited the business of snake bite treatment among others from his elder brother called Na-Hayi who is still alive but lives in Dutsinma LGA, almost 150 kilometers from where late Bello lived and died.

Saturday Vanguard was told that during his lifetime, people were afraid of passing around late Bello's farm simply because of the fear of snakes. This also helped scare away thieves who stole farm produce from Bello's farm, for they feared they might run into dangerous snakes Bello might have kept on his farm to keep watch. He was seen as a man with extraordinary powers because of the way he captured and kept varieties of snakes.

This has already created fresh problems of its own for the family of Bello Maimaciji, as farm labourers are declining to accept work on his farm for fear of snakes. Rahmatu explains:

"Added to our problem is non-acceptance by youths to work for us on the large farm left behind by my husband. Nobody is ready because of

outside the community also expressed their views on the unfortunate snake business. Mallam Murtala Maithoto who took *Saturday Vanguard* round the area said "The death of Mallam Bello Maimaciji will affect many people especially snake bite victims because there is nobody that can cure such again around here. Therefore, his death is a great loss to our community and beyond. We want the state governor, Umaru Musa Yar'Adua to come to the rescue of the innocent wife and the eight children left behind by the deceased".

The vigilante group leader said that they will miss late Bello's moral support and advice. "His death has indeed created a vacuum that will be very difficult to fill. We are appealing to our chairman, Puntia Local Government, Alhaji Muntari Danduse, to come to the rescue of the children left behind by the deceased. May his soul rest in peace", Maska Vigilante Group leaderayed. Comrade Lawal Ahmed of the Katsina NTV Internet Café in his contribution said: "It is common for snake charmers to die by the snakes, especially in this part of the country. That snake is a very tiny one but dangerous because it belongs to a few snakes species that don't run away from people; it chases human beings. If it spit into your eyes, you may remain blind forever. I really pity the children the deceased left behind. Please permit me to request His Excellency, Governor Umaru Musa Yar'Adua to do something for them on humanitarian grounds and for posterity".

Bello calmed their fears and the snake buyers went away. As they left, Bello pulled out the snake in an attempt to put herbs in its mouth, and while looking for the herbs to apply, the snake bit him twice