

Encounter



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Christmas Day Murder Police 'forced' me to admit killing my abusive husband — 38-yr-old trader

- Married at 14, endured beatings, humiliation
- Exonerated by court after 5yrs in prison

By Onozure Dania

Last week Tuesday, Mrs. Christiana Odo stood transfixed before Justice Yetunde Adesanya of the Lagos High Court not knowing what to expect. It was her judgment day for the alleged killing of her husband on Christmas day six years ago. She had prayed and fasted for days hoping that truth will prevail. The dream she had about her freedom, the previous night gave her hope but the fear of a death sentence made her shiver. She couldn't bear to look straight as the judge began to read the judgment. Within 30 minutes the judgment was over but Mrs. Odo's mind was in another realm. She didn't hear a single word the judge said. It took the loud voice of Justice Adesanya for her to snap back to reality. "You can come down from the dock. You have been discharged and acquitted. You can go home and take care of your children. God has heard your prayers." As these words by the judge reverberated in her ears, tears started dropping in torrents. At last, the five years ordeal to prove her innocence had come to a good ending.

Married at 14

Days after her freedom, *Encounter* traced Mrs. Odo to her Ikorodu, Lagos home where she recounted her journey into the horrendous marriage with her late husband, Romanus Odo as an orphan at the age of 14. "My husband married me in Ebonyi State at the age of 14. I was born in 1983 while he was born in 1956. By the time he married me, I had not even developed breast. I didn't even know anything about menstruation or sex with a man. When my mother died, my late husband's mother took me in to train me. I was really very small then," she said. Mrs. Odo started giving birth almost immediately after marriage as a teenager. Unfortunately for the young mother, her husband was never around as he was far away in Lagos. She recalled that he visited occasionally but would return back to Lagos few days after.

After her mother-in-law died in 2001, Mrs. Odo who had already had three children at the age of 18 decided to join her husband in Lagos. Ordinarily, she felt it was a lifelong opportunity for better life and for her children to bond with their father. Few days after moving to Lagos, she discovered a part of her husband she had never known. According to her: "Few days after I came to Lagos, I saw my husband drinking something from a bottle very early in the morning. He would wake up every morning and drink heavily from the bottle without first eating any food.

Back then, I used to carry my children and follow him to Orile where he was doing a welding job. After sometime, I got tired of his drinking and drunkenness. I begged him for us to return back to the village but he refused. At

matured that I will be having an affair when I didn't do that when I was young and alone in the village? When he is not drunk, he can be a likeable person. Some people wondered how I am able to cope with him and advised me to leave him but I would always tell them that divorce is not allowed in my community," she narrated.



• Mrs. Christiana Odo

some point, I traveled to the village and lied to him that my family had seized me and my children and that until he comes, they will not release us. He never came. I later returned to Lagos into the small room we lived in."

Trouble

On her return to Lagos, Mrs. Odo said things took turn for the worst. According to her, she gradually became the bread winner of the family as her husband could not provide for the family. Instead of appreciating and supporting her, he became jealous and would get drunk and descend on her on any little disagreement. "He stopped paying house rent and I was the one paying the rent. I carried all the responsibility concerning the family. At any slightest argument, he would break anything that I bought in the house. From there, he grew jealous. Anytime I go out, he would call me endlessly to know my whereabouts. Anytime I come back from market late, he would beat me saying I had gone to see a man. Whenever he sees any man around me, it is trouble. Sometimes, I used to ask him 'is it now that I have finished having children and very

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Death

Despite all the troubles, Mrs. Odo said she continued to endure her husband for the sake of her children. At a point, she said she secretly rented an apartment and planned to move in with her children without her husband's knowledge. According to her, things however got to a peak on December 25, 2016 when the unexpected happened. Narrating how the incident happened, she said: "I

can't really explain how it all happened, but what I know is that on that fateful day, December 25, 2016, I went to the market where I hawk pepper-soup, rice and Pap at Jibowu.

When I entered the house, he began to query me about how many people I had sex with that day. After he pestered me for awhile, I also asked him how many women he had slept with that day. He immediately got angry and hit my head on the wall. I brushed him off and entered into the bathroom. While inside the bathroom, a neighbour kept screaming that I should run that my husband was approaching me with a broken bottle. Before I could come out he met me at the door with the broken bottle threatening that he would kill me. I struggled, pushed him away and ran away with the soap on my body. As I was returning back to the house, I saw a big crowd gathered and people shouting that my husband had died. Immediately they saw me, they grabbed me and took me to Baale's palace. I kept telling them that my husband was not dead, that he was only drunk and that if they give him Alabukun, he will wake up.

Forced to admit to killing

From Owode-Onirin Police Station in Ikorodu, Mrs. Odo's case was transferred to Pantti, Yaba where according to her; she was forced to admit that she killed her husband with kitchen knife. Narrating the encounter, she said: "When they took me to Pantti, they read the statement and asked me to sign the statement they wrote and I said I can't sign it because I don't have the knife they wrote down. I told them that if I wanted to kill my husband, I would have poisoned him, and nobody will know that I was the one that killed him because I know everything about him. They took me upstairs and their Oga said they should go and torture me. They started beating and threatening me to sign the statement. I kept crying as one of the officers slapped me. When he wanted to slap me the second time, I held his hand and told him not to slap me again because he doesn't know what happened. When one of the police men at Owode Onirin who arrested me came to Pantti, he changed his earlier statement and denied all the things he had said exonerating me. I was only at Pantti for two weeks before I was taken to court and charged for murder. No autopsy was carried out on my late husband.

Abandoned by family, supported by in-laws

One thing that baffled Mrs.

Odo was that, her late husband's family supported her during her ordeal, while her family members looked the other way. She said: "While I was in prison, my husband's family were calling me and apologizing to me that I shouldn't be angry that they have written to withdraw the case but that they don't know what went wrong. They were sending me money. I always report my late husband to his family about his behavior but they didn't do anything about it. When this incident happened, my family were very angry with me. They said I should face the problem alone since they warned me to leave the marriage and I refused. My children also suffered so much. Sometimes when they visit me, or we speak on phone, I usually encourage them. My prayer to God was also to be able to see and take care of my children.

Peace with spirit of late husband

While I was in prison awaiting trial for the 5 years, I use to cry and call my husband. I use to tell him that why can't he go and tell this people to release me. I use to see him in my dream. He would always say that he has begged me to forgive him, but I have refused. The last time I saw him was before going to the last court sitting. I was holding my last child in my hands when he came and said 'is this mama?', he then said, "Mama has grown o". He wanted to carry her, but she looked at him somehow and I said "Do you see yourself. Your daughter is now running away from you". That day there was crowd, it seems they were signing some peoples papers. He now said "ah! Thank God" that he saw me today, that he always told them but they don't always listen to him. He has come to sign my papers so that they can release me, I said, is it today that he knows that he ought to have signed my papers, he said that if they don't release me, he cannot enter the place where he is that he is suffering there and that they said that if they don't release me they would not allow him to enter. I woke up and told one of my friends in the prison and she said I should pray about it that by God's grace by the next court sitting I might be released and on the last day I attended court sitting which was the judgment and I was discharged and acquitted.

Advice to couples in abusive marriage

"My advice to women is that when they get married, any time beating starts, they should leave the marriage because a lot of women are in prison because of the fight they had with their husbands."

Appeal for support

"The challenges I am facing now that I am free, is how to start a business that will enable me train my children in school because when the incident happened they dropped out of school. Since my family didn't train me in school, I promised my children that I will train them to become graduates even if it is only one or two."