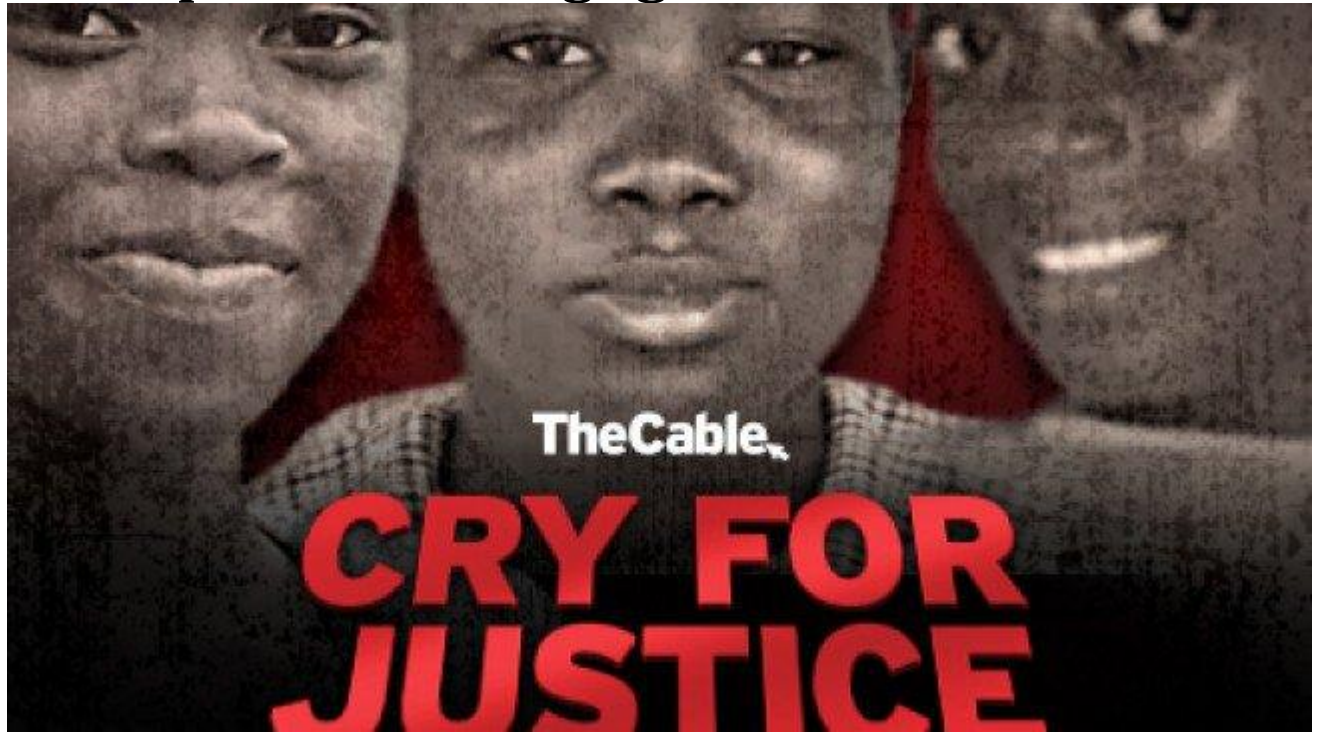


INVESTIGATION: How Queen's College students died tragically from years of corruption and negligence



June 19, 2017

In this special investigation into the deaths of three students of Queen's College, Lagos — Vivian Osuinyi, Bithia Itulua and Praise Sodipo — between February and March 2017, O'FEMI KOLAWOLE unearths the history of rot, negligence, corruption and regulatory failure that prepared the way for the tragedy. TheCable spoke with more than a dozen people in the aftermath of the gastroenteritis epidemic that broke the heart of a nation and for which nobody has been brought to book. The investigation took him to three states — Lagos, Ogun and Edo — as well as the federal capital territory, Abuja. Here is what we found.

Story Highlights

- School management ignored concerned parents' alarm and old students' warnings on contaminated water sources and looming epidemic
- Students' deaths could have been prevented had then school principal, Lami Amodu, acted on time
- A former principal got a parting gift of N3m from QC PTA

- Officials of federal ministry of education refused to act despite being aware of rot in the college
 - Amodu, education ministry fail to respond to allegations
 - Why all those found wanting in the unfortunate saga must be brought to justice
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On April 7, 2017, when Praise Sodipo, a senior secondary school year one student of Queen's College, was buried at Atan Cemetery, Yaba, Lagos, it was a gathering filled with pains and heartaches.

Her family members struggled to hold back tears and parishioners of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), where Praise was a member of the teenage choir, wore mournful looks; others, especially her schoolmates and classmates, intermittently shook their heads in sorrow.

The grief of sympathisers was shared; the agony, common. They were all convinced that the girl's death could have been prevented.

PRAISE SODIPO: ORPHANED AT 8, DIED AT 14



Praise... wanted to be a chartered accountant

Praise got admission to Queen's College from Unilag Staff School in 2013 as the only candidate admitted to the 90-year-old institution on merit from Osun, her state of origin. She was an orphan.

In 2009 when Praise was just eight, she lost her father, Olugbenga, a chartered accountant. Two years later, she also lost her mother, Banke, a business woman. Praise was in Primary 3 at the time. It was Lawrence Otun, her uncle and a printer who is in his 40s, who later took her in and became her guardian.

Like her father, Praise wanted to be a chartered accountant. She was an exceptional student and was already on her way to achieving this before her untimely death.

She died after being rushed to the Lagos State University Teaching Hospital (LASUTH), Ikeja, following the epidemic at Queen's College arising from the contamination of the school's water sources.

Tests conducted on her indicated that she had gastrointestinal perforation. Also known as ruptured bowel, this is a hole in the wall of any part of the gastrointestinal tract which includes the oesophagus, stomach, small intestine and large intestine which causes the contents to leak into the abdomen.

Praise's intestines had become perforated as a result of typhoid occasioned mostly by the consumption of contaminated water and foods, according to the doctors who treated her.

To correct this, a surgery was recommended and eventually performed at the teaching hospital. For five weeks after the operation, Praise remained at LASUTH recuperating.

Unfortunately, despite the best efforts of the doctors and nurses to ensure that she fully recovered, she gave up the ghost on March 30, 2017 around 6:30pm. Praise was just 14.

'SORRY, WE LOST HER'



Otun... inconsolable

Lawrence who temporarily left his printing business at Somolu, a popular printing hub in Lagos, to stay with Praise at the hospital, burst into tears when the doctor told him: “Sorry, we lost her.” He knew his niece died a needless death that could have been prevented had the school authorities at Queen’s College been alive to their responsibilities.

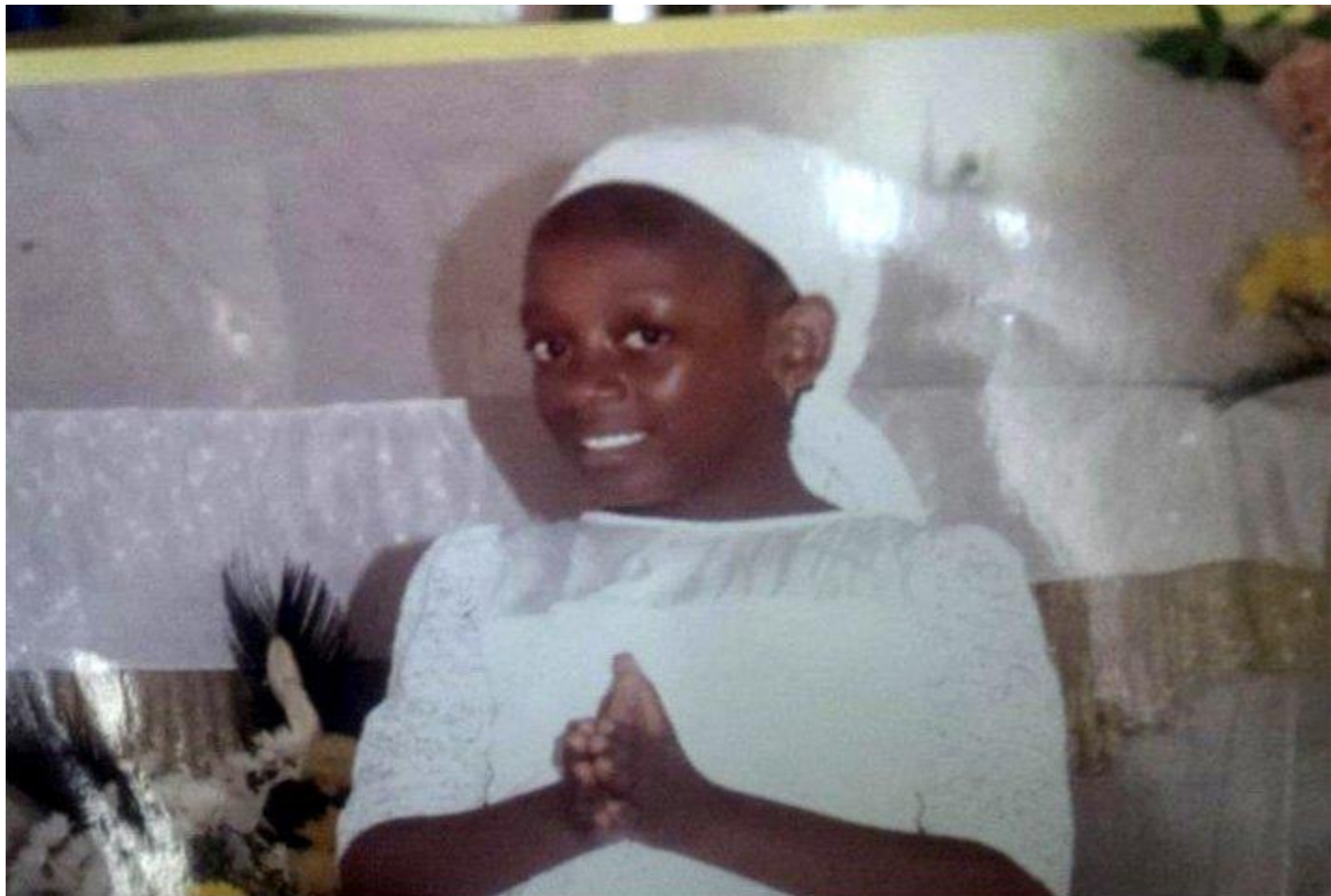
And he was right.

“This was a girl who lost her parents very early in life. She suffered much in the hospital. She fought so hard with all her strength to stay alive. She didn’t want to die. When I remember all she went through before her death, I still cry,” Lawrence told TheCable as he struggled, unsuccessfully, to withhold his tears.

The girl’s body would later be released to her uncle for burial after an autopsy was conducted.

However, Praise wasn’t the first casualty of the gastroenteritis epidemic in the school which saw no less than 1, 200 students presenting themselves for treatment at the school’s clinic between January and February 2017. Hers was the third within two months. Two other students, Vivian Osuinyi and Bithia Itulua, had died a few weeks earlier.

VIVIAN OSUINYI: THEY SAID IT WAS MALARIA



Osuinyi... was treated for the wrong ailment

Vivian, the first girl to die, was a junior secondary school year two student. She died on February 15 at the General Hospital, Randle, Surulere.

On February 11, four days before she passed on, the medical team at her school's sickbay had called her parents on phone to inform them their daughter was sick.

Specifically, her mum was informed Vivian had "high temperature" and was being treated with antimalarial drugs. They requested her to come over to the college immediately. There was no explanation for the fact that the 13-year-old girl had been stooling and vomiting.

Although Vivian had never been sick at the school prior to that time, her mum felt there was really nothing to fret or worry about.

However, not wanting to take chances, the woman left the family's Orile-Coker residence immediately for Queen's College and got there around 7pm.

The medical personnel at the sickbay would later release Vivian to her to take home for further care after they had explained that the young girl only needed to complete her three-day antimalarial treatment.

Osuinyi didn't know her daughter's case was far more complicated than she imagined or was being told.

Vivian didn't spend up to 24 hours after being placed on admission and receiving treatment at the hospital before she died on February 15. It was the same day that the college was shut down on the advice of Lagos state government through its ministry of health, with day facilities opened only for those writing their examination year.

Evidently, her system had already become severely compromised before her parents were informed of her situation by the school. Like a candle in the wind, the girl's light was blown out abruptly.

"I never saw Vivian's death coming," her mum explained to TheCable.

She described her daughter's death as "the greatest shock of my life".

Osuinyi accused the college authorities of hiding the truth from parents even at PTA meetings.

She also explained that Lami Amodu, the principal of the school at the time the incident happened, never called to condole with the family on the loss of their daughter, although some teachers and members of the school's PTA did.

"Had it been we were alerted on time on her condition and how bad her situation was, perhaps we could have known what to do. We are in shock. We are in pains," Osuinyi told TheCable.

The Osuinyis would later transport the body of their daughter to Ukpo, their hometown in Dunukofia local government area of Anambra state, where Vivian was buried in a short ceremony on February 16, a day after her death.

But if Vivian's sudden death was not bad enough, another student of the college, Bithia Itulua, would die on February 22, exactly a week later.

BITHIA ITULUA: 'SORRY, NO BED SPACE HERE'



Bithia... never recovered despite surgery

Bithia, a JS 3 student, was the second child in a union that produced three daughters. A brilliant young girl who won scholarships and various prizes in her kindergarten and primary school days, she was rushed to the Lagos University Teaching Hospital (LUTH) on February 20 around 8pm.

This was after her parents, Eric, a business professional and pastor, and Sussana, a teacher, had tried in vain to have her treated at the General Hospital, Gbagada, where they had been informed there was no bed space earlier that day.

And even when a Good Samaritan medical officer who saw the seriousness of her case went out of her way to create one for Bithia, the absence of a paediatric surgeon at the hospital would eventually lead to her transfer to General Hospital Randle, Surulere. The couple were informed the only paediatric surgeon available had closed for the day and would not be able to return to work that night. The time was 7pm. There and then, they decided to move Bithia to LUTH.

Of course, Eric and Sussana were no longer themselves at that moment as they prayed and hoped that nothing tragic would happen to their beloved daughter.

Like Praise, medical tests conducted on Bithia revealed that she also had gastrointestinal perforation. In most cases, gastrointestinal perforation results in severe abdominal pain, vomiting and fever, symptoms which the girls all exhibited.

The pain is often constant in nature while the entry of bacteria usually leads to the formation of abscess and causes multiple organ failure and death. According to doctors, even with maximum treatment, the risk of death can be as high as 50 per cent.

Emergency surgery is often a required intervention for treatment. And this is usually carried out along with intravenous fluids and antibiotics.

Bithia was stabilised and scheduled for surgery by the hospital the next day.

A LOST BATTLE



Candle in the wind: At the burial of Praise

Unfortunately, on February 21, when the surgery was performed and she was wheeled back from the theatre and returned to the ward, Bithia could no longer speak coherently after regaining consciousness. She began hallucinating. One moment, she would tell her mum about her school,

the next moment she would talk about family matters before moving on to another unrelated issue entirely.

Sussana had gone to a medical lab at LUTH on the morning of February 22 and to also buy some drugs when her husband called her to rush down immediately to the ward where their daughter was being treated.

By the time she arrived, Sussana met the doctors trying to resuscitate her. It was a lost battle. Bithia was already gone. She died at 9:10am.

“She was 12 years, five months and two weeks old. She had so many plans, so many dreams, yet they killed all of it,” Bithia’s mum told TheCable in Sagamu, Ogun state, where the family had gone to attend a church retreat, as she struggled to hold back tears.

Bithia’s kid sister, Jemimah, who just secured an admission to the Queen’s College, also informed TheCable that her elder sister wanted to become an astronaut and equally create inventions. She said Bithia had even written a book which she was planning to publish before her death.

Bithia, a brilliant kid with sharp brains, could not live her dreams. She was buried at Atan Cemetery, Yaba, on February 23, 2017.

NEGLIGENCE, REGULATORY FAILURE AND DEATHS

The negligence by the school management to respond to complaints and years of decadence and rot of facilities in the college as well as the failure of officials of the federal ministry of education in Abuja in effectively and efficiently performing their regulatory and oversight functions over unity schools in the country apparently resulted in the tragic deaths of the three girls.

Moreover, Queen’s college management as well as the education ministry virtually outsourced their responsibilities to the college’s Parent Teacher Association (PTA) — an association that was to more or less play a supportive role became one saddled with the responsibility of paying teachers, cooks, and providing money for chemical treatment of water in the college.

A lacuna created as a result of a transition crisis in the PTA itself, which led to the school’s water system not being treated for a period of time, would only further compound the mess.

AN ELITE SCHOOL THAT LOST ITS ALLURE



Founded in 1927, QC used to be a school to envy

Founded on October 10, 1927 during the colonial era, Queen's College, the oldest girls-only public school in the country owned by the federal government, was set up to complement King's College which had been set up eighteen years earlier in 1909 for boys. Its first principal was Miss Faith Wordsworth, a European.

Both schools were established for the instruction of children of the elite. While Queen's College in its nine decades of existence has no doubt helped in national integration and capacity building, it has also arguably produced high-profile and powerful inspiring women and leaders who continue to make impact in various fields within and outside the country.

Unfortunately, the school, over the years, has been losing its allure and shine.

Its facilities have become stretched beyond capacity and the education and health of the girls severely at risk owing mainly to the over-admission of students, overcrowding of hostels, poor quality of water and sanitary conditions in the school.

The founders of Queen's College would not have envisaged that a school which had a capacity at inception for 500 students would become the centre of instruction for thousands of girls in cramped hostels and habitations unfit even for prisoners.

Currently, the school's student population is 3,558, with girls from every state of the country, of whom about 2,800 are boarders.

Private schools, which are more efficiently run and provide better learning environment and educational facilities, even if they lack well-qualified teachers, have since displaced unity schools such as Queen's College which now lives on past glory.

Moreover, the admission process at Queen's College, over the years, has been turned into a racket and a huge bazaar in which the school management and their cronies profited hugely from.

For instance, a process, which was supposed to be merit-based, had become one where the available admission slots were sold to the highest bidders, according to insiders.

Sources at the school told TheCable that admission spaces were sometimes sold for N250,000 or even higher. These were monies which were paid in cash and not receipted. They went mostly into private pockets.

Getting admission for your ward at Queen's College is therefore dependent not on his or her qualification but on who you know as a parent and the money you could afford to give away.

A college whose students once upon a time had the best results in the West African Senior Secondary School Examinations has since lost its torch. In 2014, 2015 and 2016, Queen's College was not among the best performing schools, according to results released by the West African Examinations Council (WAEC).

Of course, the officials at the federal ministry of education ministry in Abuja were also complicit in the declining standards, insiders told TheCable, insisting that they looked the other way at the rot in the school even while they were aware of all that was going on in the college.

For example, an inspections and monitoring team from the federal education quality assurance service in the education ministry had visited Queen's College in 2016 and wrote a report which indicated that the college had critical challenges especially in the areas of sewage treatment, water and the dining hall. The team prepared and submitted its report to the director of that department. The director did not act on the recommendations or pass it on to other necessary departments within the ministry. He simply kept it and it went undiscovered until things got out of hand.

In the opinion of many, the deaths of Vivian, Bithia and Praise are consequences of that regulatory failure and the extremely poor sanitary conditions at Queen's College hostels during the tenure of Amodu. The deaths could have been averted had she acted on time to address the

decaying infrastructure in the school, especially in the hostels where parents were even barred from visiting their daughters.

PARENTS' COMPLAINTS AND THE GENESIS OF CRISIS



The sewage treatment plant installed in 1991. It also ceased functioning since 1997 and was abandoned

The Cable investigations revealed that between January and March 2016, many students of the school fell ill and were admitted to the sickbay of the school. The situation was so bad that the clinic was filled up completely. However, the situation didn't get to the public then because there was no casualty.

However, in January, 2017, some concerned parents had approached the school's management following complaints from their wards.

Many of them explained that their daughters had reported different forms of infections and some among them had even been hospitalised during the period the school was on break in December. They linked these to the conditions in the school and called on Amodu to take urgent actions (Amodu, in the middle of the crisis, would be transferred to Federal Science and Technical College, Uromi, Edo state by the federal ministry of education).

Despite their pleas and appeals, the principal, alongside other members of the school management, did not pay much attention to their apprehensions and complaints.

Barely two weeks later, more students started falling sick. Interestingly, their ailments and symptoms were similar.

The girls were manifesting signs of skin, vaginal and abdominal infections. They were also stooling and vomiting. These were traced to the conditions in the school. But the college's health facility could not cope with the number of students who came for treatment. Its capacity had been overstretched.

By then, it was evident that the water situation in the school was the causative factor.

At that point, the school's leadership could no longer play the ostrich. It announced to students that it was shutting down the water source as it was contaminated.

It also announced that samples of the water in the school had been taken for laboratory testing. As a temporary measure, it promised giving bags of sachet water to the students from the water factory that the PTA had constructed for the school.

A PRINCIPAL'S DUBIOUS COVER-UP



Amodu... too many questions to answer

To calm the rising tension in the school, Amodu decided to call a PTA meeting to engage the parents. On February 5 when the meeting held, it was a large house as many parents and guardians attended in good numbers. The school's five vice principals — academic, administration, special duties, junior school and student affairs — were also there.

However, most of the parents were surprised when Amodu, while addressing them, announced that only a few students visited the sickbay and this was “as a result of the beans they were served the previous day”.

She added that she had informed the school's catering department “not to give beans to the children again” and that “what happened was to be expected in a place with many children”. She still refused to accept the real cause of the problem.

Meanwhile, the number of sick students was far more than few. Despite Amodu's strident efforts to parry the hard questions being thrown at her, the parents insisted the situation could no longer be treated with kid gloves by the management and called on her to act fast.

Sadly, in spite of the apprehensions of those concerned parents, Amodu continued to live in denial. She acted as if she was impervious to reason.

Short of directly saying so, she made it look like the parents were only crying wolf where there was none. She carried on as if all was well and that the situation was under her control and there was no cause for alarm.

Why Amodu, a mother herself, would choose to act this way still confounds parents and students who spoke to TheCable.

QC'S HOSTELS AS PRISON HOUSE



A CCTV camera inside school compound... but who watches the authorities?

Again, while the parents expected to hear what other steps she planned to take towards controlling the epidemic, Amodu announced to the gathering that she had warned students and staff never to call parents when children were sick in the college.

She threatened that any student caught doing this would be punished, including those using phones to contact their parents and report all that was going on in the school.

Meanwhile, there was a particular weekend the students did not have their lunch until 6pm. This was despite the fact that the lunch was supposed to be served between 2:50 and 3:30pm. The students usually had their breakfast between 7 and 7:30am while dinner was usually 6:30 and 7pm daily. The girls found a way to report the incident to their parents who also took up the matter with the former principal.

Her reaction was to inform parents the school's kitchen was short of cooks as some of those cooking for the children had been sacked by the PTA which was paying their salaries. By the time the incident was over, Amodu had succeeded in forcing the parents to part with more money in employing additional cooks for the school.

Going by all that happened at Queen's College, and which Amodu's management was able to suppress, the boarding facility of the school was run more or less like a prison house.

Sadly, on February 15, exactly ten days after that PTA meeting, Vivian died. It was the same day the school was shut down on the advice of the Lagos state health ministry with day facilities opened only for those in examination year.

The ministry would later reveal to the public that health records from the school's sickbay indicated that no less than 1,200 pupils had come to the school's sickbay between January 15 and February 15 on account of abdominal pain, fever, vomiting and diarrhoea as a result of the gastroenteritis epidemic.

The state commissioner for health, Jide Idris, also told journalists that results of tests carried out on water facilities in the school remained unsatisfactory and the school would remain shut.

For instance, the state-sanctioned tests revealed that pathogens like toxin producing *E. Coli*, *Diarheogenic E. Coli*, *Novo virus*, *E. Coli STEC*, *Salmonella Spp.* and *Campylobacter Spp.* were present in the water students were drinking in the school.

The school's old water treatment plant which was installed in 1982 had ceased to function since 2002. And a sewage treatment plant which was installed in 1991 ceased to function in 1997. It was completely abandoned.

A test conducted by the health ministry on the food handlers in the college also revealed that they there were carriers of amoebiasis, typhoid and tapeworm. To compound an already bad situation, sewage-contaminated water was used for cooking. Disaster was just a ticking bomb waiting to happen.

The joint team of the health ministry, the school's PTA and the old girls were clear that the school's water source was unhygienic, aside the kitchen environment which was discovered to be unsanitary while crockery and serving bowls were not properly stored.

Still, Amodu refused to give parents any hint that such was the college's reality. Were it not for the intervention of the state health ministry, the school management would not have considered such drastic but necessary measure to temporarily close the school. A week later, Bithia's death occurred on February 22. Praise died on March 30.

And so, within two months, three students of the school had died painfully, needlessly.

TWO FORMER PRINCIPALS AND A PTA CHAIRMAN

To be fair, the rot in Queen's College predated Amodu's arrival at the college. It had been on for some time but got really bad during the tenure of Ekwutazia Osime, her predecessor who was principal between 2012 and 2015. It only further got worsened during Amodu's time.

When Amodu took over from Osime, many parents rejoiced. Amodu is a PhD holder, and the parents believed a more cerebral principal was being posted to the school to take over from the retiring principal.

Amodu had been appointed the executive secretary of Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) in April 2007 by former President Olusegun Obasanjo even though she was relieved of that position barely four months later during the early days of the Umaru Musa Yar'Adua presidency. Parents saw her as a woman who had successfully built a reputation of a thoroughbred professional for herself.

Interestingly, it was Amodu who also succeeded Osime at Federal Government Girls College, Gboko, Benue state, from where Osime was posted to Lagos. Both women, directors at the federal ministry of education and principals of unity schools, were close. TheCable learnt that when Osime completed her tenure at Queen's College, it was through her recommendation that Amodu also got posted to Queen's College.

The tenure of Osime was a mess financially.

In conjunction with Beatrice Akhetuamen, the chairman of the school's PTA at the time, Osime was accused of setting up a huge system of milking parents dry.

Through various forms of levies, she forced parents into parting with money all in the name of giving their children quality education.

ILLEGAL FEES AND LEVIES



Holding the torch... parents take a dim view of Amodu's tenure

Some of the illegal fees and levies imposed on students by the school's PTA/school management, as highlighted in a January 7, 2015 petition by a group of concerned parents to the education ministry through their lawyers, Kenneth Aigbe & Co, included: N89,500 building levy imposed on new students admitted during the 2014/2015 academic session, duplication of maintenance and medical bills by the PTA and school management, CISCO levies without the services being provided to students, another special levy of N5,000 per term for each student, a mandatory payment of N2,000 extra lesson fee, and another N5,000 per student for "Skool Media".

This was aside the fact that the school also informed parents that it was building a website for N800,000, a sum which the parents found scandalously high and unacceptable.

The parents stated that while Queen's College, like all unity schools, was established to foster unity by bringing together children from different ethnic and socio-economic background across the country, any decision to impose fees/levies ought to have been done in reasonable contemplation of the different financial backgrounds of the students and that anything contrary to this would be a negation of the principles upon which the unity schools were established by the government in the first instance.

They highlighted the case of a student, Busayo Adesanya, an SS2 student of the school, who could not return to the college because her mother, a widow, could not afford the various arbitrary levies.

“The present situation where students pay close to one hundred thousand naira (N100,000) by way of various levies in a school that is tuition-free is absurd and unimaginable,” they complained.

Curiously, the ministry of education did not respond to the petition until two months and four days later. And rather than making any effort to address the apprehensions of the parents, its then director of basic and secondary education, D. C. Uwaezuoke, said levies charged by the school management had the approval of the ministry.

COMMERCIALISATION OF SCHOOL'S WATER FACTORY

Additionally, there was a water project which the school and the PTA embarked upon during Osime's tenure. The key motive behind the water factory was to generate additional funds for the school and solve the water challenges at Queen's College.

At the send-forth ceremony for Osime which held on March 19, 2016 at Teresa Chukwuma Hall, the main auditorium of the school, Akhetuamen announced to parents that “with the safe water that will be extended to our girls, we are sure that they will not have water-borne diseases”.

Surprisingly, TheCable investigations revealed that when the water project was completed, it was never extended to the students' hostels. While water produced from the factory were sold to the public, the students had no hygienic water to drink, bathe, wash or flush their toilets. They still drank from the school's old taps. It was only when the crisis started that the school decided to give them bags of “pure water” from the factory.

A QUESTIONABLE PARTING GIFT

In essence, while the welfare of the students ought to be the primary priority of the water project, it was instead put as secondary. Making money from the water factory thus became the main concern of those at the helm of affairs in the college.

Although Osime has since retired from public service, her exit from the school was not without some drama and bitter memories.

Akhetuamen, a close ally of the former principal, gave her a controversial parting gift of N3 million on behalf of Queen's College PTA. To most of the parents, this came as a rude shock.

Some parents who were in attendance at the send-forth ceremony and who spoke with TheCable said at no time was a meeting of the PTA held where they unanimously agreed that their hard-earned money, which they had voluntarily contributed to the school for their children's education and welfare, would be given away to a retiring principal who was going to collect her pension anyway, more so when there were more important things to sort out in the school for their kids.

As far as these parents were concerned, the N3 million was simply a thank you gift from Akhetuamen to Osime for the corrupt schemes they both ran in partnership.

THE DIVIDED HOUSE OF PTA



Mann... critical of former PTA chairman

When TheCable interviewed Akheatuamenon the parting gift to Osime, she said it was not inappropriate “as other unity schools in the country also honour their former principals in the same manner”.

Although N3 million was given to former principal Osime as a parting gift and captured in the PTA’s 2016 Statement of Accounts, only a token N100,000 was listed in the same document as having been spent in supplying drugs to the school’s sickbay, a published copy of which TheCable got.

Akhetuamen is currently being probed for the way she handled the association's finances by the current excos of the school's PTA having left just about N1.5 million in the account, although her administration is alleged to have raised about N370 million from parents.



Akhetuamen... accused of mismanagement of PTA funds

Some parents also question the former PTA chairman's sense of judgement. They accuse her of wearing clothes that sometimes expose her "frontal privates" which was unbecoming for someone of her status as the school's PTA chairman, more so when she was expected to be a role model to the girls.

While responding to this and other allegations against her, Akhetuamen told TheCable that she served with integrity during her tenure with the driving force of making a lasting positive impact in the school. She said the allegations were from her detractors.

She further explained that she left only N1,571,000 in the school's PTA account because she had to pay outstanding to contractors who handled a new hostel building completed by her administration as it would not be right to pass the debt on to her successor.

On the issue of her dress sense, Akhetuamen explained that as a fashion designer, she has no apologies for her style as she always ensures she dresses "trendy" to be able to attract clients.

However, the house of Queen's College PTA is divided. A number of parents today disagree with the former PTA chairman on her financial stewardship especially John Ofobike, her successor as PTA chairman, and Julie Mann, her own vice chair who served during her tenure.

Ofobike told TheCable that parents were not satisfied with Akhetuamen's stewardship, particularly the way she spent their funds during her tenure.

“She realised about N370 million during her tenure. Yes, the balance to contractors ought to have been paid by her excos like she said. However, she made the payment from the money parents had contributed to run a fresh school term by our incoming exco. She can’t rob Peter to pay Paul,” Ofobike added.

“She used money that was meant for an incoming administration to pay debts owed by her own administration. It was wrong of her. And to make matters worse, she has so far refused to appear before the investigative panel set up by the PTA despite being invited.”

Mann told TheCable Osime and Amodu “covered up a lot of messy things going on in the school”.

Reacting, Akhetuamen, said the attack from her former deputy was as a result of her failure to achieve her “inordinate ambition” of becoming chairman of the QCPTA.

But Mann disagrees.



A sorry dormitory... out of bound to even the girls' mothers

“Whatever I was doing then and even doing now is for posterity so that the right thing at least can be done for once in Queen’s College and the education ministry becomes more responsible to its obligations,” she said.

Meanwhile, TheCable’s efforts to reach Osime were not successful. She is said to be into education consultancy after her retirement.

However, parents who spoke to TheCable remember Osime as “a very corrupt principal even though she is an expert in dousing tension and calming frayed nerves”. Some others describe her as “a smart but cunning woman”.

They believe Osime's personality is in sharp contrast to that of Moji Ladipo, her own predecessor who was principal of the college between 2011 and 2012, and who was rated a better principal than Osime and Amodu and whose tenure they still remember with nostalgia. Ladipo is now dead.

DASHED EXPECTATIONS



This is called toilet at QC

Therefore, rather than an improvement on her arrival at Queen's College, things only deteriorated under Amodu. She dashed the expectations of the parents who welcomed her to the school with open arms. She met a bad case and made it worse.

For years, the Queen's College Old Girls Association had complained that the state of sanitary condition in the school was terrible. Many of them were getting embarrassed about their alma mater.

Aside the poor eating and living conditions of students, the dining hall structure and furniture were squalid and decrepit. This is aside the severe overpopulation in the dormitories with up to about 86 students congested in a space not more than 24 by 16 feet.

A number of the window panes were broken and mosquito nets torn. Some of the students had their baths on balconies and even defecated in nylon bags which they threw into bucket latrines, aside damp floors and dirty walls in dire need of painting.

In private conversations, some said the school's glory had departed. Anytime they went visiting, they couldn't believe what they saw and called the attention of the college management to the rot and decaying infrastructure. Sadly, not much was done.

TheCable investigations revealed that the school authorities in fact disallowed parents from accessing the hostels. Parents had to drop their daughters at the hostel gate and go no further. They were also prevented from taking pictures.

A parent that was once caught attempting to take photographs was rough-handled by a member of staff. Students and their parents were watched closely. Even teachers who wanted to speak out feared being sacked.

Additionally, some "concerned parents" who had set up a WhatsApp group as a platform to interact and discuss matters of mutual interests as Queen's College parents were also ordered by the management to close the platform or risk their children being expelled from the school.

For the old girls, Amodu felt they were becoming too meddlesome. She accused them of unjustly hating her and trying to replace her with someone from within their ranks. The relationship between her and the old girls was thus a cat-and-mouse one. As a way out, the former principal immediately started an underground campaign against them aimed at clipping their wings.

A SHOCKING CIRCULAR FROM EDUCATION MINISTRY



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FEDERAL MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

Office of the Director, Human Resource Management
3rd Floor, Federal Secretariat Complex, Phase 3, Shehu Shagari Way, Garki Abuja
E-mail: hrm@education.gov.ng

Circular

Ref. ADF/ABJ/281/II/2

10th October, 2016

To: All Principals of FUCs

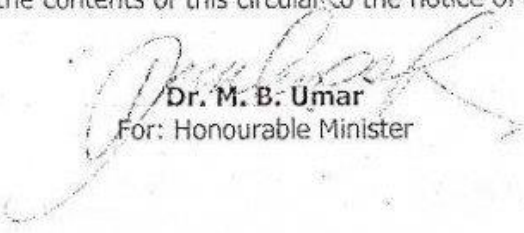
INDISCRIMINATE USE OF MEDIA PLATFORMS TO TARNISH THE IMAGE OF FEDERAL UNITY COLLEGES (FUCs)

It has been observed that some parents/guardians of students' under the guise of "Concerned Parents", are in the habit of using social media platforms through which they spread false and negative information aimed at tarnishing the image of the Federal Unity Colleges and inciting other parents/general public. These unwholesome acts are inimical to the peaceful and harmonious co-existence of the Federal Unity Colleges and will not be tolerated.

2. It should be noted that the only recognised body by government, through which parents collectively address issues relating to their children in the FUCs is the **Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs)**. Any group or body, therefore, other than the PTAs claiming to be acting on behalf of parents of students of Federal Unity Colleges is doing so unlawfully.

3. In view of the foregoing, henceforth, the **child/ward of any parent/guardian** found to be using the social media to spread false and negative information or incite other parents, will be withdrawn from the College. **Parents/Guardians** are, therefore, advised to desist from such unwholesome acts.

4. You are to bring the contents of this circular to the notice of all **parents**.


Dr. M. B. Umar
For: Honourable Minister

CC:
HME
HMSE
PSE
Director, BSE

What resulted was a shocking circular from the federal ministry of education in Abuja dated 10th October, 2016, with reference number ADF/ABJ/281/II/2 to all principals of federal unity schools in which it said no other group except PTAs were allowed in the colleges.

The circular, issued from the office of the director, human resource management in the ministry, was signed by M. B. Umar, on behalf of the education minister, Adamu Adamu. Umar's official position was not stated in the letter.

“It has been observed that some parents/guardians of students’ under the guise of “Concerned Parents”, are in the habit of using social media platforms through which they spread false and negative information aimed at tarnishing the image of the Federal Unity Schools and inciting other parents/general public,” parts of the letter stated.

“These unwholesome acts are inimical to the peaceful and harmonious co-existence of the Federal Unity Colleges and will not be tolerated.”

OLD GIRLS NOT WELCOME HERE

But parents weren't the real targets. The circular banned old students from their alma mater, although indirectly.

“It should be noted that the only recognised body by government, through which parents collectively address these issues relating to their children in the FUCs is the Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs).

“Any group or body, therefore, other than the PTAs claiming to be acting on behalf of parents of students of Federal Unity Colleges is doing so unlawfully.

“In view of the foregoing henceforth, the child/ward of any parent/guardian found to be using the social media to spread false and negative information or incite other parents, will be withdrawn from the College. Parents/Guardians are, therefore, advised to desist from such unwholesome acts.”

The principals were mandated to bring the contents of the letter to the notice of all parents. The circular was just what Amodu was looking for. She wasted no time in excluding the old girls from the activities of the school and sidelining them from the scheme of things.

Interestingly, while old students, the world over, are being encouraged to return to their former schools and render every support they can, Nigeria's federal ministry of education is forbidding them from doing so.

ACCUSED OF SEXUAL MISCONDUCT, TEACHER STAYS ON



Adamu, minister of education... ministry on the spot

In March 2016 when Nigerians were confronted with the news of a sex scandal against the biology teacher of the school, Olaseni Oshifala, by one of the students, Chinenye Okoye, the Amodu-led school management including the controversial former PTA chairperson, Akhetuamen, stoutly defended the teacher while the ministry exonerated and allowed him to stay on.

Anthony Anwukah, the minister of state for education, would later tell journalists Oshifala had been cleared of any wrongdoing by the investigative panel set up by the ministry to investigate the matter mainly because of the failure of the victim or her mother to appear before the committee.

However, officials of the ministry did not conduct a discreet investigation after the public drama had ended to unravel the whole truth of the matter. And this was also despite the fact that during the saga, old girls of the college had set up an investigative panel to establish the truth of the case and which went ahead to indict the teacher.

The fact-finding panel was set up after the association discovered, through its interview with Amodu and other preliminary investigations, that Oshifala had been accused of sexual misconduct five times before then and that the Okoye allegation was the sixth one.

Laila St. Matthew Daniel, a rights activist, was the chairperson of that fact-finding body. Her panel spoke in camera with victims and recorded their testimonies. Some of the students who appeared before the panel were already out of school. Others had even married.

And there was the concerned mother of a former Queen's College student who travelled all the way from Canada to meet the panel and report some of the teacher's alleged atrocities.

Years back, her daughter, just about 13 and going to 14 years at the time, brought home a St. Valentine's card which she said Oshifala had given her. In it, he allegedly requested "let's get closer".

The woman was alarmed. She informed the panel that she decided to fly all the way from Canada, incurring travel expenses, just so Oshifala could be brought to justice and no longer pose a threat to other girls in the school.

Unfortunately, almost all the victims who appeared before the panel told the members they wouldn't be able to appear before the investigative panel set up by the federal government. Their reason? They were afraid of being victimised.

Some feared they might even be labelled as liars. And others didn't want their children to be targets of persecution by Oshifala's sympathisers or the school management. Members of the panel included all these in their report.

The fact-finding panel eventually indicted Oshifala in its final report, copies of which it forwarded to the federal ministry of education. They expected the ministry to take up the matter and pursue it to logical conclusion. To their shock, Abuja did nothing.

Perhaps the officials at the federal ministry of education had more important matters to attend to than bother themselves with "a mere allegation". And so, what the old girls expected would be a Pandora's Box which would open so many other cans of worms was killed and buried by the system to the disappointment of the students, the victims, their parents, families and the old girls.

Because they couldn't fathom the fact of Oshifala's exoneration by the government panel on the technical grounds that his accusers failed to come to the public to prove their case, they concluded that the matter was a clear case of cover up by the school management and the ministry, a view widely shared by students and parents we spoke to.

'SHOULD WE TAKE THE LAW INTO OUR HANDS?'

Speaking in an interview with TheCable, St. Matthew Daniel, accused the Nigerian media of also being part of the cover-up by not digging deeper on the issue when the ministry exonerated the teacher. She lambasted the media for failing in its responsibility to the country and the students.

"In other countries, when the government and politicians are failing, it is the media that make things happen. Unfortunately, the Nigerian media kept quiet over the matter," she said.

"Even if the panel cleared Mr. Oshifala in the absence of any evidence of wrongdoing due to the fact that Chinenye Okoye didn't appear, but does that foreclose any possible incident? Whether there was a Chinenye Okoye or not, there were other findings beyond her which were in the petition.

“Anybody that has any sense about the way things work here would know that, definitely, the sex scandal involving Oshifala was swept under the carpet to the detriment of the student because there was too much of a mess that involved the ministry itself.

“We gave those reports to the federal and state governments and they chose not to do anything about it. What do you want us to do? And you know the kind of country we are in. Should we go on the streets and take the law into our hands?”

“Over and beyond Oshifala, we wrote a detailed report about what we observed in the college. We also warned that the health and wellbeing of those students were in danger. Unfortunately, they said they didn’t send us such errand. Sadly, one year later, children have died.”

On Amodu’s handling of the rot in the school, Matthew-Daniel believes the former principal cannot escape blame as she allowed so many wrongs to take place under her watch which have now come back to haunt her.

“However, Amodu shouldn’t be the only culprit,” she told TheCable. “Officials in the ministry of education, even those in the ministry of environment, all of them are culpable for the deaths of the children. They were all involved in the deaths of those innocents.”

OFFICIAL RESPONSE: MUM



Federal Science and Technical College, Uromi... Amodu's new station

TheCable made several efforts to speak with Amodu, including taking two trips to her new station, Federal Science and Technical College, Uromi, Edo state. She was not around, officials said on each occasion.

She did not answer several calls we made to her MTN and Glo telephone lines.

When she eventually picked the call, she said she was in a meeting.

SMS and WhatsApp messages were sent to her, explaining that there were a few questions to ask her concerning the deaths at Queen's College.

She responded: "Thanks for taking time to ask. I deeply appreciate but as a civil servant I'm not allowed to talk to journalists. It's against our ethics. God bless you richly."

For six weeks, TheCable made several efforts to speak with the officials of the federal ministry of education in Abuja, and despite complying with all the bureaucratic demands, the newspaper was still unable to get an official response.

However, the director of press, Chinenye Ihuoma, has promised to arrange an interview.

CRY FOR JUSTICE

Obviously, there are more blames to be apportioned over the deaths at Queen's College beyond the role of the school management led by Amodu or civil servants who don't want to reveal important information to the public.

Many parents evidently succumbed to intimidation by the former school principal. Perhaps being jittery that their wards might be "deboarded", they didn't persist in voicing out their concerns strongly enough or even taking the bold step of talking to the media until the deaths started occurring.

Had the parents done this, perhaps more drastic measures would have been taken to avert the losses. Instead, they became lily-livered and chickened out, bowing to "constituted authority" when they were supposed to maintain their stand.

However, the biggest culprit might be the ministry of education and its officials, a number of whom might have compromised. Allegations of corruption continue to dog the conduct of its officials as the schools under their watch deteriorate.

Parents, old girls and activists have called on President Muhammadu Buhari's administration to use the Queen's College tragedy as an opportunity to prove its anti-corruption credential by making scapegoats of the officials who failed in their duties.

Above all, although Vivian, Bithia and Praise will never be able to fulfil their dreams again in life, and their painful deaths will remain a dent on the image of Queen's College and the regulatory oversight of the federal ministry of education in Abuja, there is no doubt that the current situation provides a great opportunity to clean up the mess in Nigeria's unity schools in particular and the country's education system in general.

From their graves, the blood of the late girls continues to cry for justice.

***Editor's Note:** In the second part of the CRY FOR JUSTICE series, TheCable unveils Lami Amodu, PhD, the principal of QC at the time of the epidemic.*

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