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A Black Belgian Student Saw a White Fraternity as His Ticket. It Was His Death.

Sanda Dia's death after an initiation ritual was regarded as a tragic accident. Newly released videos and photos have made it a symbol of growing intolerance.



Sanda Dia in a family photo. Joining the almost all-white club, he told his brother, meant that “when you leave school they will trust you a lot faster.”



By Matt Apuzzo and Steven Erlanger

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GHENT, Belgium — Sanda Dia saw a fraternity as a doorway into a different life. The son of an immigrant factory worker, he was an ambitious 20-year-old Black student at one of Belgium's most prestigious universities. The fraternity, Reuzegom, was home to the scions of Antwerp's white elites.

Access to that rarefied world, he decided, was worth enduring the fraternity's notoriously vicious hazing ritual.

He did not survive it.

After being forced alongside two other pledges to drink alcohol excessively, chug fish oil until he vomited, swallow live goldfish and stand outside in an ice-filled trench, Mr. Dia died in December 2018 of multiple organ failure. His death was seen as a tragic accident, an example of hazing gone wrong.

In recent weeks, however, an even uglier story has emerged. Fraternity members had used a racial slur as they ordered Mr. Dia to clean up after a party. A photo surfaced purporting to show a fraternity member wearing Ku Klux Klan robes. A fraternity speech referenced "our good German friend, Hitler." A video showed them singing a racist song.



A photo that Belgian reporters say was published on a fraternity member's Facebook page, and later removed, purporting to show him and other students in Ku Klux Klan robes. Credit...De Morgen

And deleted WhatsApp messages, recovered by the police, show fraternity members — the sons of judges, business leaders and politicians — scrambling to cover their tracks.

"This was not an accident," said Mr. Dia's brother, Seydou De Vel.

The details, [uncovered](#) recently [in a string of local news stories](#), have forced the nation's Dutch-speaking region, Flanders, to confront rising racism and xenophobia, even at such renowned universities as this one, the Catholic University of Leuven, now known as K.U. Leuven.

Belgian universities, like their American counterparts, are generally seen as left-leaning. But campuses and clubs here have also reflected and fueled the conservatism of Flanders, where a nationalist movement is increasingly openly racist and anti-immigrant — and growing in power.

“They thought, ‘He’s just some Black guy,’” said Sanda’s father, Ousmane Dia, speaking French. ““We are powerful and nothing can happen to us.””

Eighteen members of the now-disbanded fraternity are under investigation, with prosecutors recommending charges of involuntary manslaughter, degrading treatment and neglect. Those who have not already graduated remain allowed to take classes online while the investigation continues.

No evidence has emerged that Mr. Dia was killed intentionally. But of the three students undergoing initiation that night, he was the only one who was Black and the only one who died.

Discussions of race in Belgium often focus on its bloody past, rather than its present. Protests this spring, inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement, forced the removal of some statues commemorating King Leopold II, who oversaw the brutal colonization of what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo in the 1880s.

Mr. Dia’s death, however, highlights Belgium’s current problem with racism and far-right, identitarian politics. The country is divided between French speakers in the south and Dutch speakers in the north, each with their own governments, laws and culture. The wealthier Dutch region, known as Flanders, is home to a sizable separatist movement that wants to break away in the name of preserving Flemish culture and wealth. Lately, that campaign has taken a sharply anti-immigrant and anti-Islam tone.

Ousmane Dia, now 51, was unaware of these cultural divisions when he arrived in Belgium from Senegal as an asylum-seeker in 1994. He settled in Antwerp, where he found work at the port and then in a truck factory. He learned Dutch. He and his wife raised a family.



Sanda’s father, Ousmane Dia. Credit...Sebastien Van Malleghem for The New York Times

An ambitious first-generation Belgian, Sanda thrived in school, his father said. His acceptance to K.U. Leuven was a milestone for father and son alike. “It was a dream for me,” Ousmane Dia said.

Sanda was beginning his third year of school when he pledged Reuzegom, an unsanctioned club for young men from Antwerp. “They represent a type of social class,” said Kenny Van Minsel, a former president of the campus student association. “Predominantly white — that’s a given — and predominantly upper-class.”

Mr. Van Minsel frequently interacted with fraternities and tried, unsuccessfully, to persuade Reuzegom to sign a hazing code of conduct. Reuzegom had only one other Black member, who was given the nickname Rafiki, the name of the monkey in the movie “The Lion King,” he said.

But Sanda Dia saw Reuzegom as an opportunity. “It has benefits, being in a club like that,” he had said, his brother recalled. “If you know them, it’s good for your network. And when you leave school, they will trust you a lot faster.”

If it sounds peculiar for a Black student to pledge a nearly all-white fraternity in the name of networking, students say it made sense. “It might seem like something outlandish, but for a lot of Black people it’s very understandable,” said Nozizwe Dube, a K.U. Leuven student who immigrated to Belgium from Zimbabwe as a teenager.

One of the mantras of Flanders is that anyone can succeed by learning the language, working hard and getting a degree, she said. In reality, [research has shown](#) that Belgians of African descent are far more likely to be unemployed or work in low-skilled jobs, despite having high levels of education. Fraternities, she said, can seem like an avenue toward a better career.

Reuzegom was notorious for its hazing rituals, known as “baptisms.” In October 2018, Reuzegom held a boozy party in a student association building. The fraternity trashed the venue, causing thousands of dollars’ worth of damage, Mr. Van Minsel said. Fraternity members ordered Mr. Dia to clean up, calling him a racial slur, said Mr. Van Minsel, whose student association colleague was present and reported the incident to him.

“Their argument was that Black people should work for white people,” Mr. Van Minsel said. “They treated him like an object.” Two months later, Mr. Dia was dead.

Not one of the 18 Reuzegom members under investigation has been named publicly, and their lawyers either did not return phone calls or declined to comment, citing the ongoing investigation. Nearly all information about the membership of the club — it is not an official fraternity, and belongs to no national umbrella body — was scrubbed from the internet after Mr. Dia’s death.



Sanda's stepbrother Samuel Labenne, in white, and stepsister Sarah, in the foreground, being comforted by friends after a protest in Leuven, Belgium. Credit...Sebastien Van Malleghem for The New York Times

To most outsiders Reuzegom was not brazenly white supremacist, students say. But its members lived in an environment where racial slurs were somewhat accepted, if not routine. At parties or bars, it is not uncommon for drunken revelers to burst into song about how the Belgian colonizers severed the hands of millions of Congolese: "Cut off their hands, Congo is ours!"

Even professors, when discussing colonialism, sometimes said things like, "There are many wonderful things that Belgium did in the Congo," Ms. Dube said. "No one around you looks up in shock. It's the norm."

"A typical Flemish sentence begins, 'I'm not racist, but. ...,' " Mr. Van Minsel said. "I grew up with those sentences."

For most of Belgium's history Flanders was the poorer region, neglected by the French-speaking elite. This gave rise to the Flemish movement, which fought to have its language and identity recognized. The past half-century has seen Flanders become the nation's economic powerhouse, but preserving Flemish culture remains a bedrock of politics.

Flanders is not a political monolith, with parties on the right and left holding seats in the local parliament. But in recent years identity politics have taken a particularly anti-immigrant turn, with the revival of the far-right party Vlaams Belang and its slogan "Our People First." The party recently held a huge protest in Brussels, where [Nazi symbols were spotted on some cars](#).

The details of the Reuzegom "baptism" are shocking, even in a culture of cruelty.

On the evening of Dec. 4, 2018, the hazing began with Mr. Dia and two other pledges forced to drink until they passed out. Investigators would later discover a video showing fraternity brothers urinating on them, according to media reports that have been confirmed by The New York Times.

The following morning, it was off to a cabin in the woodsy town of Vorselaar, outside Antwerp. The pledges were forced to dig a ditch and stand in it as it was filled with ice and water. They were made to bite the heads off live mice, swallow whole goldfish and chug fish oil.

One by one, they were let out of the pit, but Mr. Dia was kept in the ice the longest that December night. After the other pledges dragged him out, photos show him lying in the fetal position on the grass, according to local press accounts confirmed by The Times.

Almost immediately after Mr. Dia's death, Reuzegom members began deleting text messages, removing Facebook and Instagram profiles and hurriedly cleaning the cabin and Mr. Dia's room on campus. "Everything clean," an investigator wrote when he arrived at the cabin, according to notes viewed by [the newspaper Het Nieuwsblad](#).

As part of the investigation, the police recovered WhatsApp messages, videos and photos. Among them: a video of Reuzegom members singing "Congo is ours" to a homeless Black man soon after Mr. Dia's death.

Mr. Dia's father and brother absorbed such details very differently, a sign of how attitudes have changed in recent years.

"It didn't shock me," said Mr. De Vel, the brother.

"It shocked *me*," his father interjected.

"We're another generation. I grew up in all of this," said Mr. De Vel, 31. He described learning to laugh off racist comments. "You let them say it, because deep down, you really hope that they're not like that."



Sanda's brother, Seydou De Vel. Credit...Sebastien Van Malleghem for The New York Times

The school never suspended the Reuzegom members, ordering them instead to write a paper on the history of hazing and do 30 hours of community work.

Ousmane Dia is particularly bitter about the actions of the school's rector, Luc Sels, whose only contact with the family was when he offered brief condolences at Sanda's funeral.

Mr. Sels has said he would have responded differently if he had known all the facts, and that he feared prejudging the investigation. A university spokeswoman, Sigrid Somers, said the school had only recently won access to the investigative file, and that it had banned the students from campus buildings.

Ousmane Dia has heard the explanations — that the fraternity was independent, that the school did not have all the information, that investigations take time. But after nearly two years, he said, he does not know the answer to one question: “What would have happened if Sanda were white?”

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/04/world/europe/belgium-racism-sanda-dia.html>

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