

METRO

UNN Furious Over Police Killing Of Senior Staff

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For Titus Chukwu Ezeronwu, former Secretary to Dean, Faculty of Education, University of Nigeria Nsukka, (UNN), his earthly journey ended abruptly and in a gruesome manner in the night of July 31, 2006. He was shot dead by a police team in his Tectonics Road neighbourhood at Nsukka.

Since his killing, the anger of members of his family living in different parts of the country, his neighbours, as well as the university community has not abated. What pains them most is that after he was killed, the police displayed his lifeless body at the Nigeria Police Divisional Headquarters Nsukka and placed a gun on his chest to create the impression he was an armed robber.

In the morning of August 1, 2006, the police deposited Ezeronwu's remains in the morgue of Bishop Shannahan Hospital, Nsukka. One of the residents of Tectonics Road, simply identified as Chikezie, who was in the company of the deceased that night, and shot in the leg by the police, was placed on admission at the Obayi Memorial Hospital, a private hospital located directly opposite the residence of Ezeronwu.

Police detectives, who kept surveillance on the suspect, said to run a liquor inn in the neighbourhood, later moved him from the private hospital to Bishop Shannahan Hospital, following reports that scores of residents of Tectonics Road were besieging the hospital to enquire how he was faring.

According to the accounts of Mrs. Benedette Ezeronwu, a headmistress and mother of seven, her husband, whom she said was the secretary of the landlords association in the neighbourhood, left home that fateful night to rally members of the vigilance group.

Said Benedette: "We heard gunshots. We were afraid for the life of my husband. When the gunshots stopped, he did not return home. He was the secretary of the landlords association. My friend and I went to look for my husband in the morning.

We saw trails of blood on the way. I asked people in our area whether it could be the blood of my husband. We later saw his lifeless body at the Nsukka Police Station with a gun placed on his chest. I began to plead with everyone there to go with me to convince the police that my husband was not an armed robber. He was titled man who must be given a befitting burial".

Benedette said as her husband had to go to work that morning if he was alive, she sent one of her sons to rush to the university to inform Ezeronwu's boss what had happened.

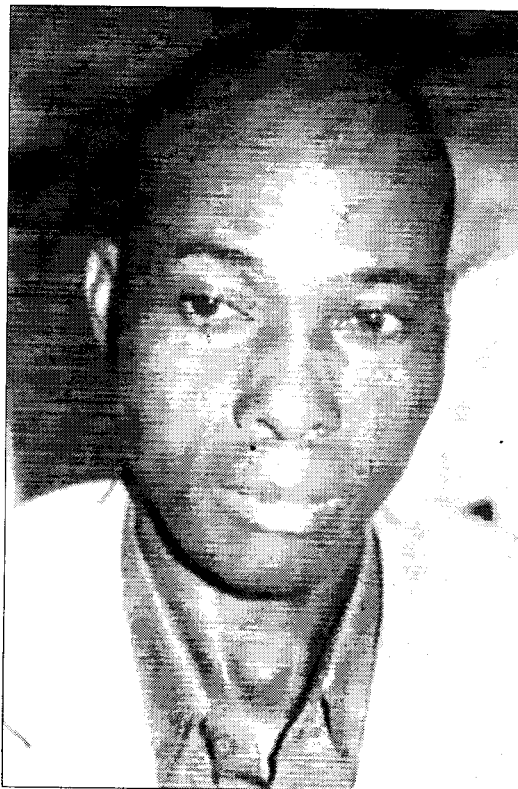
Rev. Fr. Augustine Akubue, then the Dean Faculty of Education in the university and Ezeronwu's immediate boss, told Daily Independent that when the boy broke the sad news to him in his office, he was devastated for two reasons.

He said he was sad that Ezeronwu his secretary had been killed and worried that the tragedy would abort his planned hand over to Prof. Boniface Nworgu as the new Dean Faculty of Education that morning.

The Catholic priest narrated at length how he, Nworgu as well as the Director of the Institute, Prof. David Eze, immediately drove straight to the Nigeria Police Divisional Headquarters, Nsukka, to lodge a strong protest against the gunning down of Ezeronwu.

Akubue told Daily Independent: "The Divisional Police Officer (DPO) granted us audience. In that audience, he claimed that they shot an armed robber. And that he had a gun and had fired in the air before they shot him.

"Three of us, individually and collectively put it to him that we were surprised that at his level, he would jump to conclusion. He wasn't there



•Late Ezeronwu

at the scene of the shooting. We told him he should have allowed investigations to reveal and unfold things rather than jump to conclusion. And in fact, three of us were not happy. At a stage, it was so rowdy. We told him you have not exhausted all the options. We dragged this on and on, and it became clear to him that we did not accept his proposition and that there were other options he had not exhausted.

"He ended up saying investigations were still going on. That was what we wanted to hear. At the time we were discussing, all the neighbours of the late Ezeronwu had gathered in protest. And they entered the room where we were. The DPO ordered them to go back. I told the police officer that nobody comes to defend an armed robber. It is never done. For the fact that so many people came to the police station showed that the man was not an armed robber."

As soon as they emerged from the DPO's Office, Akubue went on, the protesters, led by one medical doctor, crowded into the office. While the protesters were with the DPO, he said, a policeman walked up to where he and other two professors stood outside and "confessed" to them that he saw Ezeronwu that fateful night on Tectonics Road placing a security lamp at its usual place.

"He told us that Ezeronwu could not have been an armed robber because he was a usual figure there. At that point, Prof. Nworgu took him straight to the DPO to give that piece of evidence. I didn't go with them. When Nworgu came out, we left," Akubue said.

While they were with the DPO, he recounted, he told the man that he was delighted that the other suspect shot in the leg was still alive and as such the truth of the matter would be known whenever he made his statement.

And to prove him right, the priest said two brothers of the late Ezeronwu had found out that the surviving suspect had indeed made a statement to the police explaining what happened in the night of July 31, 2006. "The wounded suspect said the late Ezeronwu had no gun. And that there were people who identified the gun placed on Ezeronwu as the same gun placed on the chests of other armed robbery suspects killed by the police in the past.

"The wounded suspect said there was a woman who saw him and Ezeronwu coming back after positioning the security lamps. The woman, the suspect said, had told the police that she saw people from nowhere ordering Ezeronwu and one other man to lie down, lie down. She said the moment the two men lay down, they shot Ezeronwu from behind and that the other was shot in the leg when he began to run away."

The university don told Daily Independent that the police held the woman for two days over her incriminating evidence before leaving her to go home following the intervention of her family. "It is like the police acted in a haste. And has now found out that its action is condem-

nable. The police are now saying they fired in self-defence. They are also claiming that the man had a gun. The statement of the surviving suspect is a rebuttal of the DPO's claim that Ezeronwu was an armed robber. Neighbours say Ezeronwu was the rallying point of security. And that he was doing his work everyday," the priest concluded.

Reacting to the incident, one of his daughters, Mrs. Jane Odoe, said her father had lived in Nsukka for closed to 30 years and consequently was a well-known person in the town.

When Daily Independent met with J.O. Ohanbamu, the DPO at the Police Divisional Headquarters, Nsukka, he initially declined to talk, saying only the Enugu State Commissioner of Police, Charles Dawodu, and the Police Public Relations Officer (PPRO), Mike Abattam, were permitted to speak to the press.

But when prodded, the police officer, after disclosing that he had sent a situation report to Abattam in Enugu, said Ezeronwu was a member of an armed robbery gang that had attacked residents of a house behind Obayi Memorial Hospital on July 31, 2006.

Abattam on his own, insisted that the deceased was an armed robber saying he died in a gun battle with police. When reminded that Ezeronwu was a senior staff of UNN, he said "a senior staff of the university could be a member of an armed robbery gang without anyone knowing about it".

For some colleagues of the deceased, most painful thing was he was slain, when he had just a year or two to go before retiring from the university.

In spite of the controversy that has trailed Ezeronwu's gruesome killing, his family seems to have come to terms with the fact that its beloved one has died and as such no amount of protests would bring him back to life. It has written to the university management to formally inform it of Ezeronwu's killing and its intention to convey his remains to their Imuha Mgbidi, Imo State, country home for interment on August 31, 2006.