

How N5,000 Debt Cost The Life Of Umuahia Yam Seller

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When Ude Echa left his wife Juliet at 150 Owerri Road by Orlu Street, Umuahia that Tuesday, little did he know he would never return or meet his 24-year-old, two-month-old pregnant wife alive. Unlike other days when this yam seller would return from his normal business activities and head straight to bed after having his dinner, this day which saw to the end of his life on earth, turned out to be a different, as he rushed out immediately after coming from his business area to a nearby destination.

Echa, it was stated, came back from the store where he had loaded his goods (yams) preparatory for the next day's business and as his wife was welcoming him into their one room apartment, he was reportedly, eager to go out to buy some oranges. The rush by which he did so ironically turned out to be his last rush on earth because he did not come back to tell the story and state whether he actually bought the oranges or not.

All that his wife could see the following morning was a lifeless body of her 32-year-old husband dumped at the railway line slightly opposite the house where the deceased and his wife are tenants. It was a story that evokes emotion and passion as the deceased was said to have earlier had a brush, which degenerated to physical combat with one of his town's man, Okorie Echem, also a yam seller in Umuahia. Both are from Afikpo in Ebonyi State.

Relations and friends of the late Echa are bemoaning his death as he had just married December last year. His killing is believed not to be unconnected with a debt of N5,000, which he allegedly owed to the suspect (Echem). It was stated that the deceased owed the suspected assailant the amount as the latter had reportedly threatened to terminate his life if he did not pay him immediately.

Their quarrel over the delay in paying this amount came to fore when on

Monday October 30, 2006, the Amaoha Yam Dealers Multi-Purpose Cooperative Society Limited held its monthly meeting and asked their members to pay their monthly contributions. But rather than pay, the suspect allegedly told the deceased to pay from the money he (the deceased) owed him. This, according to the chairman of the cooperative society, Chief Elenna Ikechukwu Emmanuel, also an indigene of Afikpo, did not go down well with the deceased who, thereafter told Echem off and reminded him that his immediate elder brother was owing him a whopping sum of N30,000.

This reply, it was stated, did not go down well with the suspect as he was reported to have held the deceased on the collar of his shift and both of them fought at the venue of the meeting. After the affray, the union rebuked Echem sharply and told him to give the deceased some respite until he was able to pay since, according to them, he, himself, owed a lot of people and that it was almost a tradition among the yam traders to borrow and pay at a convenient time especially when the debtors goods have been sold off.

"I reminded him that he was even owing me N38,000, which I gave him when his goods arrived and that up till that moment, he hadn't paid," the chairman of the cooperative society told the Daily Independent in an exclusive interview. Said he further: "As we had settled this matter between them, we thought it was all over, but we didn't know that Echem had other plans as we later learnt that he went to the deceased house demanding to know from his wife when he would be indoors that day."

Indeed, the shocked and devastated wife, Juliet in-between sobs narrated how her husband came inside their room at about 7:30pm while she was preparing dinner and told her to keep her food well secured as he was dashing out to buy some oranges. "Actually, whenever he came back, he wouldn't go out again; I don't know why he decided to go out that night to



•Echa

buy some oranges instead of sending me or any of the children in our yard. But I took it that he wanted to do it faster and allow me to concentrate on the food I was cooking," she lamented.

After preparing the food, Mrs. Echa waited in vain for her husband of 10 months to come back but her waiting enveloped in apprehension and fear could not yield any result as she was later advised by her co-tenants to go to bed at about 11pm preparatory to report the incident to their relations in Umuahia, the next day if her husband did not come back that night. "In fact those that advised me to go and sleep were banking on the fact that he (my husband) may have gone to pass the night in one of his relation's house, as he often did whenever they off-loaded their goods (yams) late.

"But on such days and periods, he usually alerted me, and besides I was aware that he was not expecting any consignment of yams from anywhere. So, I became more apprehensive and couldn't sleep that night. In the morning I made up my mind to go and reaccompany me to the police stations, hospitals and mortuaries in the town in

search of him. It was while I was trying to step out of our yard that I noticed people gathering just in front of the yard, at the railway line hissing and cursing.

"I then moved in to see what was amiss and behold, I saw the lifeless body of my husband with oranges stuffed his mouth and dumped on the rail. I, therefore, raised alarm which now attracted some sympathisers that alerted my husband's relations who on arrival sent a delegation to fetch Echem," Juliet cried.

It was stated that, when the party got to Echem's one-room apartment at Ugwuchara section of Umuahia, he reportedly told them off asking them that, "if he didn't die, am I the person that would die?" However, following persuasions and threats by some yam dealers, their colleagues as well as some of their indigenes, the suspect reportedly followed them to see the corpse of the deceased. According to Juliet, "when he came to where my late husband was dumped and saw his corpse, he started denying, saying that he didn't know anything concerning his death. He did so for some time, until one of our rela-

tions suggested that my husband's body should be bathed with water and the bathe water should be given him (Echem) to drink to justify his innocence or otherwise as it is done in the traditional way in our village. He knew that if he had accepted this option, he would have died instantly because he's guilty; but rather than accept it, he pleaded that mob should allow him to confess". The confession, according to Juliet, was Echem's admittance that he hired some unknown persons to assassinate Echa.

Angered by this confession, a mob that had gathered there descended on him and was about lynching him when Emmanuel arrived. He (Emmanuel) told our Correspondent that he was in far away Ndoro market, in Ikwuano Local Government Area on a business trip when his phone rang and somebody from his house told him that they had found Echa dead almost opposite their house. "I abandoned everything I was doing and raced down to Umuahia and luckily for us the mob was about killing the suspect. His wife and I ordered that they should not kill him in order to make him other accomplices in the murder incident. I, therefore, without delay sent somebody to invite the police," he said. According to him, this incident was the first of its kind amongst their members.

Meanwhile, the body of Echa has been deposited at a popular mortuary in Umuahia while the police are said to have been making more investigations in murder case and are presently awaiting the quick recuperation of the suspect who, according to reports, was inflicted several machete cuts on his body, to charge the case to court.

Contacted, the police image-maker in Abia State, Mr. Godwin Chukwuji confirmed the story and stated that the suspect has been arrested while others who may have conspired with him to allegedly assassinate the deceased are on the run. "We're making strenuous efforts to pick them up wherever they may be," Chukwuji told our Correspondent.