

Mystery death of a casual worker

- Family suspects foul play
- Firm: He defied security by swimming in pond

Obioma Nwagwu, a factory hand at Phoenix Steel Mills, Shagamu, Ogun State, was found dead inside the factory pond. His family and employer disagree over the circumstances of Obioma's death. **TOBA AGBO-OLA reports**

OBIOMA Nwagwu, 26, a casual worker at Phoenix Steel Mills Limited, Shagamu, Ogun State, left home on the night of March 14 for his duty.

He was last seen by his colleagues around 4am, the second day. This was the period they (casual workers) went on break.

His body was later discovered inside a small pond belonging to the company a few hours after he went on break.

His family suspects foul play. But the company thinks otherwise.

Speaking with *The Nation* on the incident, his cousin, Dr. Nwogwugwu Ndubuisi, a doctor. He suspected that something went wrong.

"They need to tell us how the boy died and how the body got into the pond. Nobody was able to give us that explanation," Nwogwugwu said.

He alleged that after examining the body, he discovered that the death had occurred before the body was thrown into the pond.

His words: "I got to the company around 7am on March 15, when the late Obioma's colleagues came to call me.

"By the time I got there, they were already carrying him in an ambulance, trying to take him to the mortuary, without even consulting with us. I stopped them. So, I went to examine the body. Mere looking at the remains, I knew there was something wrong, because all over the body, the boy was painted with lead product.

"I was told that the body had just been extracted from the pond. I decided to see the pond, what I noticed was that no normal human being will go there. The

place is well caged and from what I was told, three security men usually guide the place.

"Then I examined the body. Under normal circumstance, if a person is drowning, there is tendency that he or she will swallow water, the tummy and some parts of the body will be bloated by the time you bring him out, but he wasn't. The teeth were clenched and there was nothing like water in the body. What occurred to me immediately was that somebody killed the boy and dropped him there.

"During the course of my investigation, I was told that three securitymen were supposed to guard the place," he explained.

He alleged that no security personnel was there when the incident occurred and that it was some hours later that the management called the securitymen that somebody was inside the well," he noted.

There was speculation that some Indian native doctors performed some rituals in the premises, three days before the incident. It was also alleged that a worker must die anytime such a ritual takes place.

Dr. Nwogwugwu said that the family tried to see the Personnel Manager, Mr. Francis Igoche.

"I tried to see the Personnel Manager. In the first instance, he didn't want to see us. He sent somebody. We tried to get an explanation from the person, but till today we have not got any real explanation," he said.

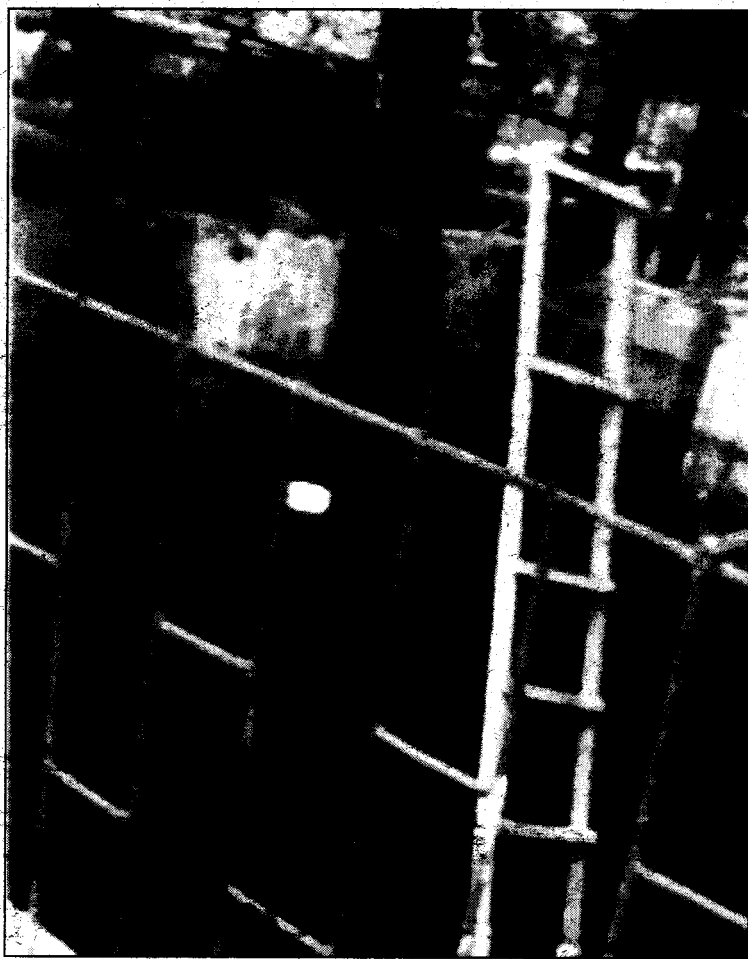
Nwogwugwu said that he was later invited to the Shagamu Police Station where he made a statement.

"During our discussion at the police station, we were told that the police had gone ahead to do a post-mortem without our consent and they didn't allow anybody to see the body at the mortuary. It was like there is a cover-up," Nwogwugwu said.

The Nation also learnt that on March 16, there was a protest by the workers. The company was said to have invited armed soldiers.

According to a member of the staff, the management invited the soldiers for the fear of possible reprisal attacks by some irate workers who were protesting the death of Obioma.

The step-mother of the de-



• The pond where Obioma's body was allegedly found

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• The late Obioma

ceased, Mrs Blessing Nwakwu, said the late Obioma left home Wednesday night for work. She said that was the last time she saw him, only for his colleagues to call her the second day.

She said the late Obioma started the job just two months ago and was being paid N600 per day.

She said the deceased was an easy-going person, well-behaved, who ordinarily would not go near an open water tank, much less jump into one.

The Managing Director and Chief Executive of the company, Sunil Goel, alleged that Obioma swam in the pond, against the company's rules.

"On March 15, one boy decided to swim in the pond and we have a very strict instruction for everybody not to swim in the pond. We've created bathrooms. On that

day, the boy just took off his clothes and jumped into the pond," Goel said.

Goel said a securityman at the scene tried to restrain Obioma, but he freed himself and jumped into the pond.

"We had a securityman there, who tried to save the boy, but he freed himself and jumped into the pond. The family was contacted immediately, so also were the police," Goel said.

Mr Igoche said the company had met with Obioma's family with a view to paying compensation to them.

Phoenix Steel Mills Limited is into aluminium production. It has about 500 workers.

When our reporter visited the scene, the place was fenced around with iron-wrought. The tank which is actually being used as a coolant looks so deep and dirty that no sane man would want to bath with the water