

Death visited as he was buying *chinchin*

Gospel Okwepia, 24, was looking forward to his graduation in a few months when unknown gunmen hacked him to death. **SHOLA O'NEIL** reports

FOR parents and relatives of 24-year-old Gospel Okwepia, the next seven months hold many promises. Okwepia, 400 level Political Science student of the University of Benin, Benin City, Edo State is expected to graduate and everybody was looking forward to such a day.

But all that changed on March 28 when the Isoko-born student, popularly called 'Afo' (Friend), was shot dead by yet-unknown armed youths at the Isiohor, Benin City.

Rather than be invited to celebrate the graduation of their son, the parents of the victim, who hailed from Uzere in Isoko South Local Government Area of Delta State, were called to mourn him. They wept uncontrollably as his remains were interred on Tuesday.

His uncle, Deacon Isaac Ubeku, an elder of the United Believers Church, Warri was said to still be in shock. "The late boy lived with him like a son for several years," a family source said.

But as the freshly dug grave covered his remains on that bleak Tuesday morning, the question on everybody's lip was who killed him and why?

Sources close to Okwepia, who was a resident of No. 2 Ariosto Street, said he had left the house to buy *chinchin*, a local snack made

from flour, from a nearby kiosk when death visited in the form of two youths dressed in black jeans trousers and matching T-shirt.

"As he was discussing with the seller, the two armed youths came from behind him and drew out an axe and struck him on the neck. As he fell from the impact of the deadly blow, another one brought out a pistol and fired at him twice," a source who claimed he witnessed the attack, told *The Nation*.

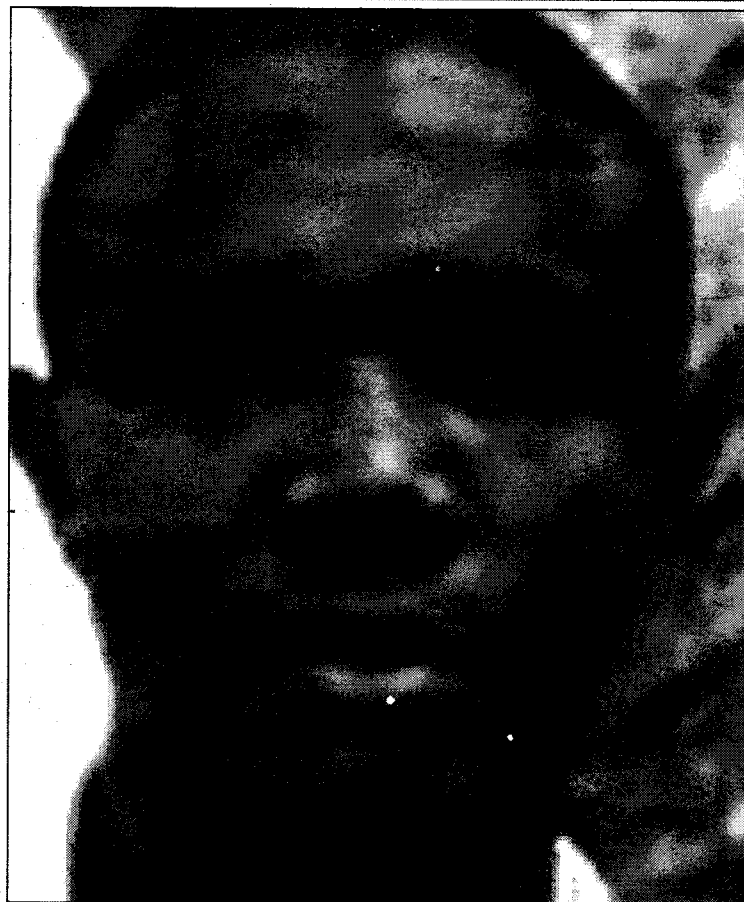
Investigations by our correspondent revealed that Okwepia's death was the second of such killings within 24-hours at the university during last weekend.

It was gathered that another unnamed student was earlier gunned down around the Ekosodin area, which within the past 10 years has become a hotbed for cultism and cult-related violence.

The death of the first student was traced to a supremacy battle between the Vikings and Black Axe Confraternities, two rival cults in the institution. Source claimed that the death of Okwepia could be retaliation by the Vikings.

But one of the friends of Okwepia swore that he was not a cult member.

"Afo is the last person that would belong to a secret cult. We (his friends) are all ju-men (students



•Okwepia

who do not belong to any of the numerous cult groups in the school) and I can swear that whoever killed him did it for other reasons other than cultism," the source said.

Some of the deceased's neighbours told our correspondent that his killers might have killed the wrong person.

"No fewer than five innocent persons have died in the clashes between various cult groups in this school since I came here in 2005 - some were caught in the exchange while others were killed wrongly by hit men," the source added.

The Commissioner of Police, Edo State Command, Mr. Chris Dega, said in a telephone interview that he was yet to be briefed on the killing and advised our correspondent to visit the station where

the incident was reported for further details.

A source at the Edo State Development and Property Authority (EDPA) Police Division, confirmed that the incident was reported on Friday by a member of staff of UNIBEN.

Further investigation at the Central Hospital, Sapele Road, Benin City revealed that the victim was rushed there shortly after he was shot.

The source said he was confirmed DOA (death on arrival), tracing the cause of death to gun shot wounds.

"If you go to the morgue (at Central Hospital) the record will also show you that the corpse of the young man was deposited there before it was taken away by family members who duly signed for it," the source said.