

# FACE OF A TRAITOR

**Police arrest 26-year-old man who, with seven others, carried out a robbery attack in which his 'sister' was killed barely 24 hours after she returned from the US**

Olusola Fabiyi

After three months in hiding, the reality must have dawned on 26-year-old Kingsley Nwanochiri that he can run, but he cannot hide. He is one of the three members of an eight-man robbery gang arrested by the police last week over the killing of one Mrs Ifeoma Akanume on Saturday, June 2, 2007.

The bandits also fired and wounded one Maureen Philips, who was said to later have her legs amputated as a result of injuries she sustained during the robbery.

Before she returned to her native town of Ihiala, Anambra State, on June 2, Akanume had resided in the United States for 20 years, resisting all entreaties by family members to come home – even if just on a brief visit. She was said to have hinged her fears and intransigence on the high level of insecurity in Nigeria.

Her relations, however, did not give up on persuading her to return home. Their efforts finally yielded fruits on June 2 when Okanume, nee Nwabura, packed her bags and headed for Nigeria with her three children. But less than 24 hours after she returned, her fears were confirmed as a gang of eight armed robbers struck. They robbed her of her jewellery and stole an unspecified amount of money in local and foreign currencies, before they shot her dead.

The manhunt launched against the gang by the police was unsuccessful until the arrest, last week, of Nwanochiri and two others, namely Azuka Ochiai and Aloysius Ejikeme.

Of the three men, however, Nwanochiri would appear the most callous; not only also that the late Okanume was his relation, but because each time he visited Ihiala from his base in Benin Republic, he invited his friends to the family home of the Okanumes to wine and dine. He confessed this much when he spoke to our correspondent at the Force Criminal Department, Area 10, Abuja where he and his colleagues are now telling the police all they know about the killing.

Nwanochiri said the initial plan was to rob the woman of all her belongings, and that the gangsters all agreed that none of them should fire a shot. He said he was surprised when he heard a gunshot from some members of the gang who had entered the house while he kept vigil outside. The suspect added that he was working as a driver in Cotonou, Benin Republic before he was invited for the operation that claimed his sister's life.

He said the plan to kill the woman was actually hatched by one Nonso Nwabuba, a half-brother of the deceased, who he said called him on his mobile phone and demanded that he should organise a robbery operation in which they would dispossess the woman of her foreign currencies and other valuable items. He said he initially refused to yield to Nwabuba's suggestion, but later caved in because he was told that the operation would not be violent.

He said, "The woman that we killed was my sister. I am still saying that it was Nwabuba that killed the woman. This is because he was the one who invited me for the operation. He called me on my mobile telephone and said we should organise robbers to come and rob her. I was not around when he called; I was in Cotonou, where I am a driver.

"I told him that I was not interested, but he would not let me be, so I switched off my telephone. But when I switched on my phone the following morning, a call came in again, and the caller advised me to forget about the driving business because it had not been of any benefit to me. I agreed. So, from Lagos, I took a flight to Enugu, from where I drove to Onitsha.

"But before we went to the house, I told the boys that we should not kill or maim anyone. I was sad to hear later that the woman was killed. I asked them why they killed my sister, but they did not give me any convincing reason."

Looking downcast, Nwanochiri said he refused to collect his share of N25, 000 after the robbery. He said, "I told them that for killing her, I would not collect any money from them. I was mad with them because I used to eat in the house anytime

I travelled to the village."

The suspect said since the woman was killed, he had not known peace. "I have since repented, but her blood is still disturbing me. As you see me now, I have given my life to Jesus."

He recalled that the gang used two Mercedes Benz cars for the robbery. And to show his displeasure over the killing, he said he refused to pick two of the suspects who were involved in an accident while returning from the operation, but he was eventually persuaded by other members of the gang to help them.

Nwanochiri however said he had been involved in a number of evil activities since his younger days. He recalled that he joined a cult while he was in Junior Secondary School 3 at Oduata Primary School, Ihiala.

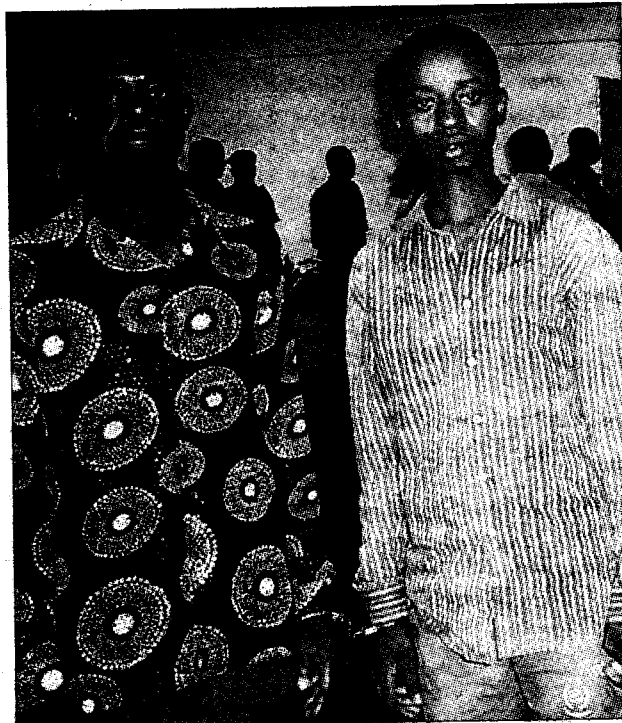
Another suspect, 17-year-old Ochai, said Nwanochiri and himself were stationed outside the house during the robbery operation to keep watch over the compound in order to make sure that there was no disturbance while it lasted.

The suspect, who claimed to hail from Abala Ogbodo, Delta State, said he was called upon to come and drive one of the cars used for the robbery and he agreed. He said he was one of the two involved in an accident when they were returning from the operation in which he sustained injuries. He added that he was not given any money after the operation and was kept in the dark with regard to how much was realised, and how much a jeep they had snatched from the house was sold. According to him, "I was in the hospital when the car was sold. I was not told how much the car was sold. They only came to settle my hospital bill, which was N10, 000. It was my first robbery experience, and I will be happy if the police can release me. I followed them on the operation thinking that I would get something substantial."

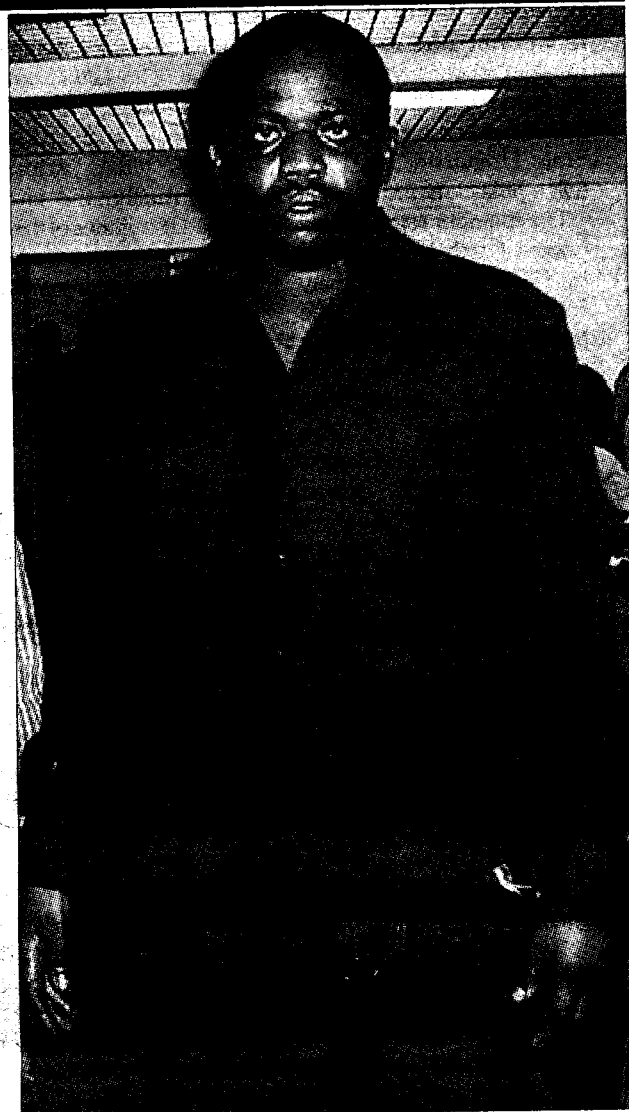
Ochai, who said he had his secondary education at St. Patrick College, Asaba, is the fourth child in a family of nine children, seven of whom are male.

Another suspect, Ejikeme, who allegedly bought the jeep, said he did not know that the car was obtained from a robbery operation. He told *Saturday Punch* that he had been a goldsmith for 20 years and had never been involved in armed robbery.

He said, "I am a goldsmith from Imo State. I was called to come and buy the jeep for N1.5m, but I said no. I told the man that I could only pay N400, 000, but he refused. He later asked me to lend him N400, 000 for a month, and that he would pay back N500, 000. This was how I got involved."



•L-R: Ejikeme and Ochiai



•Kingsley

Shedding more light on the incident, the acting Inspector-General of Police, Mr. Mike Okiro, said there were convincing proofs that the three men were involved in the robbery. He also said that the suspects took part in other robbery operations before they were apprehended by the police.

He said, "On June 3, 2007, the deceased lady, one Ifeoma Okanume, who had been resident in Maryland, the United States of America, returned home with her three children after 20 years.

"Barely 24 hours later, a gang of eight armed robbers struck at her Ihiala country home, killed her and made away with her white Toyota 4-runner jeep. The robbers also stole jewellery and an undisclosed amount of money in local and foreign currencies. The hoodlums also shot at one Maureen Philips, who had one of her legs amputated as a result of the injuries she received.

"In the course of police investigation, these principal suspects were arrested. One of them, Ochie, a.k.a. Small 'M', was arrested on July 20, 2007 in another robbery operation at Ozubulu. In the course of interrogation, he confessed to the Ifeoma Okanume crime.

"The other suspect, Nwanochiri, alias Mojo, was arrested in Enugu on September 4, 2007. He also confessed to the crime. He was the one who drove the 4-runner jeep away from the robbery scene. He named other members of the gang and confessed that it was Nonso Nwabuba, a half-brother to the deceased, who informed the gang about the sister's arrival from the United States of America and coordinated the robbery. He was the one who took the team to the receiver of the jeep.

"The last suspect, Ejikeme, is well over 50 years of age. He hails from Amiri, Imo State. He is a criminal receiver who bought the Toyota 4-runner jeep snatched from the deceased for N400, 000. He had also confessed to receiving jewellery from the same gang."

Okiro named other suspects in the crime, who were still at large, to include Nonso Nwabuba, said to have fled to Abidjan; Hausa Awomama, a native of Awo-Omama in Imo State; and Chibuzo, a.k.a. Awkuzu, described as the gang's armourer.

He said the duo of Madu Ochie and one DJ had been killed in a shoot-out with the police during another robbery operation. The IG also said the Force had deployed the services of Interpol to arrest the fleeing suspects. He advised Nigerians to be discreet about releasing information concerning their movement.