

Cultists butchered our first sons like animals — Grieving fathers of Bayelsa students

17th May 2025



| By Grace Edema

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Those behind my son's gruesome murder should face justice – 56-year-old father

Fifty-six-year-old, Thomas Synclair shares his grief with GRACE EDEMA about the gruesome murder of his 21-year-old son, Ayakpo, a Computer Science graduate of the Niger Delta University by suspected cultists

Can you tell us the circumstances that led to the murder of your son?

My son had just completed his university programme last week. We were only waiting to finalise some clearance before heading off for the National Youth Service Corps. Everything was in place.

We were planning to organise a small celebration, but no formal plans had been made before this tragic incident occurred. He was with some uncles when they said they wanted to go out to buy something. That was when they were attacked.

Was he staying with his uncle at the time?

Yes, he was staying at his uncle's place in Bamotoro. I lived with him and his mother in Sumbia, but he went to Bonaparte to visit his uncle.



Ayakpo

Are you saying that the environment isn't really a school or campus area?

Well, it's a school community where students reside, but when the incident happened, people were too afraid to come out because of the gunshots. No one came out to rescue them. That's why both boys ended up like that.

What about the vigilantes?

By the time the vigilantes came out, the attackers had already fled. I was surprised the vigilantes managed to catch up with the cultists. I didn't expect them to get to them.

Don't you think your son would have been alive if the vigilantes had intervened earlier while your son and one other person were attacked?

Exactly! That was the community's mistake. They didn't respond quickly enough. If they had acted sooner, perhaps my son wouldn't have died. The other boy was shot dead; he was not attacked with a machete.

Who between your son and the other young man jumped into the creek?

It was my son. He jumped into the water beneath a culvert. But they still dragged him out and butchered him as if he was an animal. Eyewitnesses said so. I wasn't there, but people who were present told me.

They said the driver who brought the cultists to the scene managed to bring my son out of the water, seemingly to help him. But after the attackers finished chasing the other boy, they returned and killed my son.

What about the driver who brought your son out of water?

He has been released. I can't understand why they released that driver. Even if we're related, it is not a close relationship; our connection is through our great-grandfather.

But even at that, if he truly recognised my son, he should have come to inform me. Instead, he did nothing, even when they butchered him. That tells me he was among them. He was with them. That's what happened.

Can you tell us more about your son?

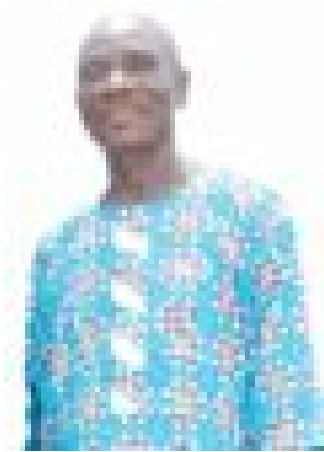
His name is Ayakpo Synclair. He was a good boy.

How did his assailants attack him?

Yes, they hit him with machetes on his head and face. It was horrifying. Even when I went there afterwards, people were still scared.

How old was he?

He was just 21 years old; he was still a young boy.



Thomas

What kind of person was he?

Everyone in the area knew him, even the commercial motorcyclists; he was well known and loved. He was a gentle young man, very friendly, and never looked for trouble. He always kept to himself and walked alone most times.

That explained why I was surprised that day. He went out with a friend, and suddenly, they were attacked. I wasn't there, but from what I heard, the attack on him was brutal. He had always been cheerful and peaceful right from his school days, and was never involved in anything bad.

Do you think he was involved in cultism?

No, never. My son was not a cultist. Even if he ever showed signs of such, I would never allow it. His mother and I were constantly talking to him, especially whenever he came home from school. I always reminded him, 'You are the only one I have who makes me feel like I've achieved something in life'.

He wasn't a cultist. I believe it was because of the person he was walking with. Maybe the attackers were targeting that other young man, and they assumed my son was part of the same group.

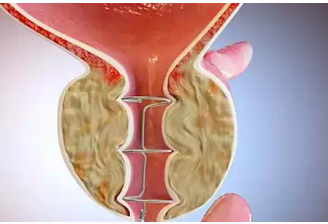
As they were walking along the road together and were seen side by side, the attackers must have assumed my son was also part of the group. That's how he got implicated in something he knew nothing about.

How many children do you have?

I have five children.

What position was he in the family?

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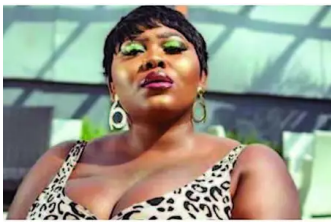
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A plus-size actress and content creator, Monalisa Stephen, is dead.
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He was the third child—and my first son.

What course was he studying at the university?

He initially wanted to study Computer Science, but his scores didn’t qualify him for it. So, they gave him Philosophy instead. After completing his degree in Philosophy, he took a year and a half to study Computer Science separately. In total, he spent about five and a half years in university.

What were the things he often shared with you about his future plans?

He really wanted to become someone great in life. He dreamt of reaching a level where he could make his parents proud and take good care of us. He also wanted to support his younger siblings and help them succeed. That was always his dream.

I believe the vigilante group could have rescued those boys. I still feel they deliberately didn’t come out in time. I wasn’t there, but that’s how it seems.

To the government, I would say they should invest in supporting young people. They need to create a system of responsibility in the community and at the state level, so that incidents like this won’t keep repeating themselves. If they don’t act now, this violence will continue.

Talking about the cultists who murdered your son, what do you want the authorities and the people to do?

I want to urge the government to take this case seriously. Let them take it up and ensure those young men are brought arrested, prosecuted and brought to justice.

If they deserve to be hanged, then, so be it, because if they are left alone, they’ll keep killing others. It won’t stop. That is my appeal to the government. I also want the authorities to go back and arrest the driver.

How old are you?

I’m 56 years old.

What do you do for a living?

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I'm a shoemaker.

Is your late son the first graduate in your family?

Yes, he's the first graduate. He has an elder sister who is already married, but he's the only one who has graduated so far. His younger sister is still an undergraduate.

Police setting suspects who killed my child free – 55-year-old builder

Fifty-five-year-old Alfred Thomas, father of 24-year-old student of Niger Delta University, Bayelsa, Direala, speaks to GRACE EDEMA about the trauma of losing his first son, and the pain of watching his child's killers walk free

How did you know about your son's death?

He's staying at Barantoro because there's electricity there. There's no light at Mashuma, so he lives in Barantoro. My daughter in Nasarawa State called me to ask if I had heard from him. I said no. She told me someone called her and said he had been shot. I said, 'I don't believe it. It can't be true.' She was crying. My phone even fell from my hand when I received the message and got damaged.

Afterwards, I started receiving other calls from Brass and other places. Someone eventually called me and said they would send me a number. I was told to call that number and meet the person.

So, I called the number and travelled to Barantoro in Udaiwa Local Government Area of Bayelsa State. When I got there, the man took me to see the paramount ruler of the community. From there, the king narrated what happened.



Alfred Thomas

What did the king say?

He said the community was peaceful that evening. The king said he quickly mobilised some people to check what was going on after he heard a strange sound. On their way, the people he mobilised saw a man approaching them. It was dark; initially, they were scared until

they recognised him.

They asked him what happened, because they heard a sound. The man said he was coming from a community called Obuna, and that he had seen the boys responsible for the killings, and that he knew them. They asked him to take them to that community.

As they entered the community, they saw my son and his friend. The cultists shouted, 'That's our friend, that's our friend, stop the bus!' As soon as the bus stopped and the door was opened, they began to attack them, cutting and shooting. My son managed to run into the bush, even though he had been shot and attacked with machetes. The other boy fell somewhere nearby.

While they were chasing my son, the driver went to pick up the young man who had fallen. The driver said, 'I didn't know it was you. I know you; I didn't know it was you.' He picked him up, maybe intending to take him to the hospital. But then they returned and butchered him like an animal right inside the bus. After that, the driver drove off.

Later, the king and his people went to the scene. They found the young man's body in the water and pulled it out. Then they heard another voice shouting 'Help! Help!'—they didn't know it was my son. They found him inside the bus. He had been shot and cut and was bleeding heavily.

They called the driver again and begged him to take the boy to the hospital. He refused. So, they put him in a wheelbarrow and tried to take him to a small health centre. But on the way, he passed away.

On their way, the police stopped the suspects. It was a "stop and search" situation. They refused to stop at first and tried to flee. The police gave them a chase, fired a warning shot, and caught them. All of them were dressed in black, with blood stains on their clothes.

When asked where they were coming from, they gave all sorts of conflicting stories. But the police took them to the station and locked them up.

But the troubling thing is that the police have begun to release the suspects. They say one of them is the son of a judge in the state. All sorts of stories are going around. Even the bus driver who is our key witness has been released.



Direala

Was it the same driver who brought those cult boys?

Yes.

How old was your son, sir?

He was 24 years old.

How old are you?

I'm 55 years old.

What course was your son studying?

He studied Animal Science and was waiting for his NYSC call-up.

Your son and his friend reportedly went out around 11 pm to buy something. How true was that?

That's why I said I was in Yenagoa, and I wasn't present. So, I can't confirm that. It's a student environment. When we saw the picture of the boys who committed the offence, we recognised one of them as my son's friend. We don't know if it was that one who called them out.

People are saying they went out to buy something. But I keep asking why they would go out at 11 pm to buy something. Maybe someone called them out, but we don't know the true story.

Another aspect that worries me is the vigilante group. There's supposed to be a vigilante presence in that community, yet they couldn't even rescue the young men.

What kind of person was your son? Do you think he was involved in cultism or anything like that?

I'm a father. I've never seen him behave in any suspicious way. He always visited me while he was alive. As a father, I gave him all the necessary advice. When you send your child to school, you don't truly know what they're doing, but I always tried my best.

How many children do you have, and where does he fall in the line?

I have six children—three boys and three girls. He was my first son. Right now, four of them have already graduated. One is currently sitting the WAEC exam, and the youngest is preparing for the Common Entrance.

How has his death affected you?

I'm not happy. (Crying) Tears are falling from my eyes. I'm deeply hurt by my son's death. If I had the power to stop it, I would have done everything to prevent it. But I'm powerless. I don't know what to do. It's only God who can fight for me. That's the truth.

What's your perspective on how the government is handling the matter?

Let the law take its course. That's all I want. I'm not asking anybody to give me N200m or N100,000—God forbid. No. Whenever they call the case, I'll go to court. It is not to talk, just to be present, because I don't have the money to pursue a legal case. My son is dead, and no amount of money can bring him back. I leave everything to God. Let God take control.

What about the drivers? Were they arrested?

Yes, the first driver was arrested on Friday, but they released him on Saturday. By Monday, when we got to the office, the driver planned to return and free his boss. I think that same day, he went back to the community. The community reacted strongly. They almost mobbed him. It was only the intervention of the other young man's father that prevented something worse from happening.

Were the suspects who killed your son and the other victim students?

I don't know them personally. I haven't seen them face-to-face. But, from the pictures everywhere, one of them is from the School of Nursing. That's what I heard. The school is in Tombia.

What do you do for a living?

I'm a builder; an engineer by profession.

Do you have any idea why your son was killed?

No, I don't have any information like that.

| Grace Edema