

THE gruesome murder of a 60-year-old man, Chief Chikezie Okeigwe, in his orchard has thrown the natives of Amankalu Alayi, a sleepy community in Bende Local Government Area, Abia State into confusion and created tension in the area. Life is no longer at ease, and the people are on tenterhooks.

Sunday, September 17, 2017, got etched on the mind of the wife of the deceased as a black day. In the morning as she and the children were preparing to go to church, Okeigwe informed her that he would go into the bush close to his orchard, where he planted plantain, pineapples and other crops, to check on his traps, to see if they caught any game (grasscutters or antelope).

The wife, Mercy Okeigwe, wished him good luck and went to church with the children.

Long after returning from church service, the husband had not yet come back from the orchard. When the sun set, Mercy became more agitated. No longer able to bear the mounting tension, she reported her concerns to the kinsmen. Based on the information she provided, a search party was dispatched to look for her husband, following the regular route she had described.

After an extensive search in the bush, Okeigwe's corpse was found, where he lay, face-down on the ground, with sharp machete cuts on shoulder and back. His throat had also been slashed. It was a grievous sight. The search team quickly regained composure and sent back words to the village that all was not well.

When the news was broken, the high-pitch voice of lamentation rang out in the entire village as women and children wailed. Even some men cried like women. The shock was too much to bear.

Quickly a move was made to preserve the dead body against any eventuality. The young men re-armed themselves with various local weapons and went back to the bush. First, some were asked to comb the area in search of the killer, and make sure there was no serial killer on the prowl.

Soon after, the town crier took to the main roads and adjoining pathways in the community, summoning an immediate gathering of every adult to the Amabo village square, at the instance of Eze Ejere I. Aka, the traditional ruler. The people defied the blanket darkness to respond to the summons. There was complete power outage around Amankalu



•The late Chikezie Okeigwe

that night.

There, at the village square, the murder of Chief Chikezie was formally announced. The meeting ended up in lamentation, as virtually everybody shouted in shock. It was resolved that whoever killed Okeigwe had declared war with the Amankalu community.

But before the people dispersed, they were told that there would be another meeting in the morning at the same venue. Also, a delegation was raised to go to the Divisional Police Station at Uzuakoli to lodge a report on the incident.

Yet the people were deeply disturbed, wondering what would make any person to raise his arms against the deceased who was well seen as a peaceful and quiet man, who always looked for friendship rather than antagonism? The incident provoked too many questions with only few answers.

Right from when he relocated to the village from Delta State with his wife and children, Okeigwe embraced farming

as his major business. He had planted an orchard, including plantains and pineapple. And like every good farmer, he guarded his investment jealously. And curiously, it was in the same farm that he died.

On September 18, 2017, the Bende Local Government chairman, Chief Bernard Okereke, led a team of other members of his administration, including the councilor representing Amankalu Alayi in the council, Hon. Akachukwu Okorie, to commiserate with the bereaved family and the entire village. Also on the same day, the police visited Amabo village and assessed the situation themselves.

The people pronounced the murder of Okeigwe as a taboo and resolved that the land must be cleansed to avoid future occurrence. The people also decided to stage a peaceful protest to the police station to urge them not to spare whosoever was culpable in the killing.

Sunday Sun further learnt that the traditional ruler called up the

an account of her last encounter with her husband. Recounting the last interaction she had with husband before he left to check on his traps and the orchard, she said: "On that morning my husband told me that he would go into the orchard to check his traps. He was hale and hearty and did not have any quarrel with anybody I can remember."

On whether she suspected anybody who could have committed the dastard act, she said she suspected a certain young man from the village as the probable person that killed her husband, because he had on several occasions threatened the husband with death. She said that the said suspect would harvest Okeigwe's farm yields with impunity and whenever her late husband challenged him, the alleged person would always threaten, "I will kill you one day."

Mercy told the gathering at the village that this had gone on for some time. She added: "I did not know he meant to carry out his threat, despite the fact that my husband had helped him solve his problems on many occasions. Now, he has killed him and left the children and I to suffer." The bereaved woman said with a voice laden with grief, and was thereafter escorted back to her house.

Many other people who spoke soon after confirmed it was true that the suspect had threatened Okeigwe. Even people from the adjoining villages said the suspect was indeed a nuisance and had threatened to kill them too whenever he embarked on harvesting their crops. They therefore, urged the village leadership and the traditional ruler, Eze Aka, to step up measures and make sure that the suspect paid the prize for killing his fellow kinsman, which was highly forbidden in Igboland. Given this development, the traditional ruler urged the village leadership to articulate the various views in a formal report, which would be endorsed by concerned parties and forwarded to the various organs of government, including the local government and the police.

In the wake of the revelations, the police arrested the suspect. Sunday Sun learnt that he was nabbed in Umuhu community, which is far from Amankalu Alayi, as he was trying to escape justice.

When contacted, the Abia State Police Public Relations Officer, Ogbonna Geoffrey (DSP), confirmed the incident. He said the case had been transferred to the State Criminal Investigation Division for further appropriate