

SATURDAY *life*

"Everyone who knew him knew him as a man of peace. That is why we don't know the reason for this gruesome murder of our uncle, brother, husband and a father."

Rose Ejembi, *Makurdi*

"OH! My beloved husband, how can you just die like this? You told me you were going to return back to me from the village as you have always done. How can somebody gruesomely murder you in your own house for no just cause? Please, tell me it's a dream that I need to wake up from."

Those were the lamentations of Mrs. Omagbu Uko Onaji whose husband, Mr. Uko Onaji, a retired staff of the Library Department of the Federal University of Agriculture, Makurdi (FUAM) was brutally murdered in his country home in Anyuwogbu-Ibilla, Oju Local Government Area of Benue State recently.

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The deceased, according to family sources, had, in his usual manner of visiting his hometown in Oju from his base in Makurdi, every weekend, traveled with one of his friends. But, unlike in the past, he couldn't return as some yet-to-be identified assailants trailed him to his house and hacked him to death in his bathroom.

When our correspondent visited his Makurdi residence located within the Federal Low Cost Housing Estate in North Bank area of Makurdi, sympathizers were seen trooping in to commiserate with the family even as the deceased's wife remains inconsolable.



Omagbu Onaji

Saying farewell for the last time

“He didn't tell me he would never come back again,” she lamented. “In fact, he bade me goodbye that morning as I was leaving the house to attend the burial of one of our neighbours in another village. I didn't know that was going to be the last time I would see my husband alive.”

Mrs. Onaji who spoke amid torrents of tears said since both of them got married in 1982, her late husband had been in the habit of spending most of his weekends in their village. “Since we got married in 1982, my husband usually goes home every Friday for farming. He doesn’t miss going home every Friday, to return on Sunday.”

She recalled that, on that fateful Friday, before he went home, he had seen her off to where some members of the community were gathering in order to travel for a burial and had bade her farewell. But there was no inkling whatever that would be the last goodbye they would share until she returned from her trip on Saturday. In fact, she was preparing and expecting her husband to join her on Sunday only to receive the shocking news of his murder.

“On Sunday, I was expecting him to come back but they later called to tell me that he had been killed. According to what they told me, they said he was going to bathe when the assailants killed him. His body was found in his bathroom inside the house on Sunday morning. He left here on Friday with his friend, Prof. Igwe. Both of them were always traveling home together every weekend. On that Friday, when they reached home, they sat and ate together in Igwe’s house because our houses are not far from each other.

The search for the man

“Igwe said my husband left his house after the meal that evening with a promise to return for breakfast the next morning but that on Saturday morning, my husband didn’t come back for breakfast in his house. According to what we were told, my husband went that morning to the house of one of his relatives, Sam Uko, to take his breakfast. We were told that the two of them, (my husband and Uko) left together to our own family house. After that, my husband was preparing to go for one meeting and that was the last time anyone saw him alive.

“We were told that on Saturday, nobody went to check him again till on Sunday morning. Prof. Igwe said he started calling his phone line since Saturday morning but it wasn’t going through so he thought maybe he had gone for the meeting he earlier told him about. Igwe said he called him again that evening but the phone was not still ringing. So, he thought that maybe he hadn’t returned from the meeting or that he was out of network coverage. So, on Sunday at about 3pm when he was still not seen, Igwe said he asked his driver to go and check him at home but he couldn’t find him. That was when they said people started looking for my husband. Those who sat with him on Saturday went round our garden within our premises but couldn’t find him. Later, they had to break the door to gain access to the house. It was then that his dead body was found inside the bathroom. He was brutally murdered by his assailants inside his own bathroom,” Mrs. Onaji said.

The visit, premonition, and nature of loss

She revealed further that an old woman who was helping them to break firewood in the compound said a few hours after her husband arrived the village, some boys came and sought to know whether he had come home for the weekend. “And being an old woman who did not suspect anything, she innocently told them he had arrived and they left.”

Asked whether she had any premonition about her husband's death, Mrs. Onaji said for one week before the sad incident, she wasn't feeling fine but that she was just wondering what was wrong with her. "I thought I was having malaria or something. I didn't know that it was my husband's death that my body was reacting to. My husband was a very nice man. He was a very good man. He was a man who could die for people. My husband didn't like making trouble at all. He was a quiet man. He was an honest and humble man.

"My husband was never proud or haughty. Whether you like it or not, my husband is the kind of person who avoided trouble. Since I knew him, he never got himself involved in any trouble at all. That is why we are all surprised that he could be killed in this manner," she said before breaking down in tears.

Although the family has said they are not suspecting anybody to have been involved in the murder of the 62-year-old retired librarian, they however called on the state government and the Inspector General of Police (IGP) to wade into the matter as to unravel the mystery behind the dastard act.

The family mood and call for justice

Mr. Andy Otumala, a nephew to the late Onaji described the mood of the family as that of gloom and confusion stressing that the killers have murdered one of the best in the family. "We are dumbfounded and confused because he was the umbrella of our family," he said. "He was the arrowhead of the family and it is like our light has been extinguished in the middle of the night. We lack words to express our grief and we are crying to government of Benue and the IGP as well as people of Iggede nation to help us unravel the mystery about the killers of our illustrious son.

"As far as we know, late Uko Onaji had no known enemy. He was a man of peace who tried everything in his power to run away from trouble. There was even a time when he had a land deal with somebody to the tune of N500, 000 and the person refused to give him both the land and his money. He left the matter to God and never took it up. Everyone who knew him knew him as a man of peace. That is why we don't know the reason for this gruesome murder of our uncle, brother, husband and a father. This is the first time in the history of Iggede land that an Iggede man would be murdered in his house," Otumala said.

The deceased, a father of seven, retired as a Librarian from the University of Agriculture, Makurdi, about three years ago. When contacted, the state Police Public Relations Officer (PPRO) DSP Moses Yamu who confirmed the report said seven suspects have been arrested and charged to court already while investigation is still continuing on the case.