

# Mysterious death at construction site

- Council boss, traditional ruler fingered in death of Anambra community leader
- Allegation baseless, they say

12th May 2021 in Lifeline

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From **Mokwugwo Solomon**, Nnewi

**When Egbuna Mbanefo's wife and children bade him farewell on Thursday, April 1, 2021, as he left to do some work at a construction site in Atani, Ogbaru Local Government Area of Anambra State, they did not have the slightest inkling that it was their last time of seeing him alive.**

It was gathered that he arrived the construction site hale and hearty but was found dead the next day, yet, the circumstances surrounding his death have remained a mystery. While some believe that he was murdered, others have argued that he died a natural death.

But a member of the community, Chijioke Mbanefo, who claimed that the deceased was his paternal uncle, linked the tragedy to a land depute that he said involved a large expanse of land belonging to

Umuoniha kindred. He accused two powerful persons in the area, the Ogbaru Local Government Council chairman and the traditional ruler, of having a hand in what happened to his uncle.

According to him, Egbuna went to a building site that fateful afternoon to do some work but did not return. He said Egbuna's body was found at the building site the next day, when his friends and family members went searching for him.

Narrating their ordeal, Chijioke Mbanefo said: "Umuoniha kindred has very massive land at different areas within Atani community, and it happened that a particular group in the kindred called Ogene family went on to sell the land belonging to the kindred in general, and were telling people that the land belonged to their family alone.

"I have a farm on one of the lands. One day, workers in my farm were arrested and taken to Atani Police Station. When I went there to know what happened, a certain man called Uche surfaced and said my farm was part of 450 plots of land he bought from the Ogene family. I secured my workers on bail and left.

"Days after, I went to my farm and saw some beacons. I removed them. Later on, chairman of Ogbaru Local Government Area, Hon. Arinze Awogu, came to us and said that the piece of land belonged to him. He told us that he bought 150 plots of land from the Ogene family.

"Another day, we went to the farm, and noticed that there were beacons in some other parts of the land. We verified the beacons and noticed it was the traditional ruler of Atani, Igwe Azuka Ngoddy, that put the beacons, because we saw his name and phone number on them. When we called him, he confirmed that he bought some plots of land from the Ogene family, though he did not disclose the size. We told him that the land belonged to a kindred, not a particular family, and that those lands were not for sale."

Mbanefo further claimed that the Ogbaru council boss, as a way of compensating the Ogene family for the massive land sold to him, appointed one of their sons, Nwike Ogene, as transition councillor in the council. He also claimed that the traditional ruler, Igwe Ngoddy, in compensating the Ogene family for the massive land sold to him, equally removed the youth president of Atani community, Arinze Nzeli, and singlehandedly appointed a member of the Ogene family, Chukwudi Ogene, as the community's youth president.

According to him, on March 30, 2021, the Umuoniha kindred, as a way of checkmating incessant encroachment and sale of their collective land, sent Egbuna Mbanefo to announce to the community that nobody, including natives and visitors, should buy land from the Umuoniha land, as it was not for sale. He alleged that when Egbuna was making the announcement, the new youth president appointed by the traditional ruler, Chukwudi Ogene, attacked him, and took away the instruments he was using for the announcement, adding that Egbuna was murdered two days after his encounter with the youth president.

He heaped the blame of Egbuna's death on the doorsteps of council boss and the Atani traditional ruler, because of their interest in the land. He then appealed to the authorities to intervene and restore normalcy to Atani, which, according to him, had been a very peaceful community.

"No story of this kind has been heard that a citizen of Atani went to his place of work and was killed. The local government chairman, being an Atani person, was involved in the land scandal that led to the death of Egbuna Mbanefo; but he said nothing about the death. The traditional ruler of Atani, being the number one citizen as well as the chief security officer of the community, was aware that the deceased was a member of the Atani Council of Elders, as well as a town crier in the community; but when he was killed, the Igwe did not say anything, because of his vested interest in the land.

"In the past, Atani community sanctioned some members of the Ogene family for their involvement in destroying people's buildings, and for pouring substance suspected to be acid on a member of the community. It was the Igwe that singlehandedly lifted the sanction because of his interest in the Umuoniha land," he said.

Daily Sun sought from Igwe Azuka Ngoddy, his level of involvement in the dispute, and he said that he did not know from the outset that the land in question was in dispute, explaining that there was no link between the said land and Egbuna's death.

He said: "I was in the United States when one of my workers informed me that there was a parcel of land for sale. He told me the land was genuine. So, we bought it.

"There was no link between the land dispute and Egbuna Mbanefo's death. Nobody killed him. He collapsed and died at a building site where he was working. It was believed he was having heart-related problems. He died and his family wanted to use his death to score a point in the dispute," he said.

The traditional ruler also denied that he removed the community's youth president and replaced him with Chukwudi Ogene. He said that the current youth president, Chukwudi, was selected by the community, and not him.

When contacted, the transition chairman of Ogbaru Local Government, Arinze Ayogu, acknowledged that he procured 150 plots of land from the disputed area; but said that he made the purchase on behalf of an agro-company, which consulted him for that purpose.

"A company that is into agro business consulted me to procure some hectares of land for it. That was how we came about buying the land. It is not my personal property," he said.

On the allegation that he appointed a member of Ogene family councillor as compensation for the land they sold to him, Ayogu said: "The young man was made councillor in 2019, and the land was bought in 2021. How has the appointment made earlier become compensation for land purchased later?"

The council boss urged the affected family to make proper report to the police over the death of Egbuna Mbanefo, stating the person or persons suspected to be involved in the murder, if he was actually murdered.

Concerted efforts made to get reactions from members of the Ogene family, who were accused of murder and sale of communal land, were not successful.

However, police public relations officer for Anambra State, DSP Tochukwu Ikenga, said the command headquarters was working on the report.

“The matter was reported a few days ago, and we’re working on it. We’re making efforts to get everybody involved. Our investigation will determine the next line of action. But I will assure you that the police will unravel the mystery behind his death; if we fail to do so, more of such will happen,” he said.