

Peter Okonjo

Asaba Memorial Project

Interviewer: Elizabeth Bird (EB) and Fraser Ottanelli (FO)
December 14, 2009, Asaba, Nigeria

Elizabeth Bird: Good morning, this is Monday, December 14, [2009], we are in Asaba, Delta State, Nigeria and I am conducting an interview with Mr. Peter Okonjo. We wanted to start today by talking a little bit about your life before the war, before the things that happened in October 1967. Your family, how you were living, what you—and who your family were.

Peter Okonjo: Before the civil war?

EB: Yes.

PO: I was—more or less, I was a toddler. I was a boy between the age of sixteen and seventeen. I was living with my family. With my family and the extended family.

EB: Here in Asaba?

PO: Here in Asaba.

EB: Could you just describe the members of your family, the names and ages of family that were living with you.

PO: Okay. I lived with my brothers and sisters , cousins, ... I have a large family, extended family.

EB: Yes, yes. And your father and mother were there also?

PO: Yes.

EB: What was your father's profession?

PO: My father worked with the Asaba—the council—then it was called AUDC, Asaba Urban Development—

Unidentified Male Voice: Council.

PO: Council.

EB: And he had always lived in Asaba?

PO: We all lived in Asaba.

EB: So, thinking back to the days in early October—October of 1967—before things happened, when did you first start to hear about the—that the Federal Troops were soon to be arriving?

[Mr. Okonjo gives an overview of the background to the war].

FO: What are your recollections of this period? You as a young boy.

PO: Actually, when the war started, the federal troops, in an attempt to enter Asaba, they had a strong resistance, but from the River Niger. But before that time, we know Asaba is very close to Eastern part of Nigeria, that is Onitsha and the rest. And because we're all Igbos, they came here, they had an easy ride. They went as far as to Ore, wanting to go as fast to Lagos. But because they had a ragtag army, they could not go farther. So the Federal Troops were able to force them back. They retreated and went back to the East. And as they were going back to the east, the bridge here was blown off, it was blown off. So when the federal gov—uh, federal troops came in, the people told them the stories that when the Biafrans were here, the Asaba people harbored them because they had that affinity—affiliation of Igbos speaking. So with that annoyance, they decided to kill every surviving male. So my—where I witnessed it was at, um—when they came—as a boy—we were hearing the sound of the bullet. So we were attracted. We didn't know the severity. We just thought it was a dance. We surged forward to see who was playing the music. We didn't know that thing would kill until we started hearing shells dropping in several areas. So—

EB: Could we just—back—just for a second—about what date was this? Was this—?

PO: If I remember vividly—

EB: When you first heard—

PO: This was before the—this was some few days before the real massacre at the particular spot.

PO: So, we all—they ask us to come and dance, that is, proclaiming one Nigeria, that everything is calm. So we thought, We are one. So we all came out, all the males and females, we came out. We started from the police station here, so we all got out. We're dancing one Nigeria, but unfortunately, as we got closer to this post office here—very close to this grand hotel—we saw corpses littered—littered the whole place there. Already they had started killing, but nobody knew. But we're still in position, we were dancing. So we're dan—as we're dancing down this road, corpses littered the whole place.

EB: What were you thinking at this time? When you saw the corpses and you were all walking here—you're dancing. What thoughts were going through your—?

PO: No, there was the impression that everything is calm, that those who were killed were those who harbored the Biafran soldiers, some of them were soldiers. That—now that we've come out to dance and welcome them, we're all part and parcel of one Nigeria. So we raised up our hands and said, One Nigeria, one Nigeria. But the soldiers, they were guiding us, so we thought everything is calm. Until we now got to this particular spot. And you know then, as children—most children were there with their mothers. But some of us, like me, I didn't go there with my mother, my mother went elsewhere. So as—like I told you, we were inquisitive, we wanted to know what was happening. So by the time we went to that dancing spot, where many Igbo were massacred, I was alone there.

But something occurred to me—when we got there the atmosphere changed. And women who came with their sons were removing their skirts and gloves to disguise—so that their male children—by the time they wear it,

they no longer become—they are no longer men, but women. So when I saw this scenario going on and I felt something is wrong. If these women can disguise their children, and my mother is not here, what do I do? And I looked at the whole place, there is nowhere for escape. So, I was just praying, hoping on God to do his miracle. Then all of the sudden, gunshots [Okonjo imitates machine gun fire], people were falling. So when people fell, I fell with them. At this state there was a sort of lacuna -no gunshots again. So it was by that time (inaudible). I cannot describe how I left the place, but it was after about two poles, and I knew that I was able to mingle away and escaped. So, when we escaped, where we were after the escape, they were now telling us that many people were killed at that particular time. I was there when the shooting went, but I don't know how I left the place. But I later found my place at a safe distance -- that was how I escaped.

EB: When they opened fire, had you seen the machine guns? Did you—were the machine guns visible around and what were people expecting?

PO: Yes. They set the machine gun. When they opened fire, people were falling, some out of fright and fear, before even the bullets could come, some of us fell, and some who fell, who were felled by the bullet, but those who fall because of the sound of the gun—the fear, we just fell, even though you are not—the bullet didn't touch you. That was how some people were saved—many people were saved, and some were shot. By the time you fall, the bullet would not pierce through somebody—the person would fall upon you. And you would remain there.

EB: So you had to come out from under—

PO: From—yes. When at least—after sometime they were not shooting again. That was when some of us were able to wriggle out.

FO: And the soldiers had left the square at this point.

PO: What'd you say?

FO: The soldiers had left the square—

PO: No, they didn't leave—they were still there—they didn't leave. It appeared they were backing us, making some other plan. People were crying, so they did—maybe they didn't want to face us. They felt guilty about the action. So they rested a little—thinking that everybody who fell on the ground was a dead person.

EB: Do you—did you get any impression of who or what started—who ordered, was there somebody who ordered the shooting? What was happening immediately before they opened fire?

PO: Actually, it was only later seen, we asked—we said—they now said because the Biafran soldiers—we harbored them here, there was instruction as they were leaving Lagos that when you get to Asaba, the gateway to Onitsha -- any male child there is a Biafran soldier and that informed the action that—because, during this shooting, no woman was touched. They brought women to one side, just left only male—

EB: But did you see anybody, an officer, did you see anybody give an order, or anything that actually started the shooting? Was there somebody who said something or—do you know—could you see anything happening or just completely unexp—

PO: As of that time, as a boy, all I knew was they started shooting, but you know soldiers, they don't just shoot, there must be an order. If not on the spot, before they got to the spot there was an order that when you get to some place, finish them.

EB: So afterwards—you said you don't remember how you got away, but where did you go to?

PO: It was a miracle, I wouldn't—I can't be able to describe. All I knew was that I found myself out of that scene.

EB: And where did you—where were you next?

PO: I went to a safe place, the Ogbe-Eke, who have a square, Ogbe-Eke [Market] Square. That was where some of us who escaped got at.

EB: Where is that? How close is that to the—

PO: It's about (pauses), about five hundred yards from the city.

EB: And you went there, were there other people gathering there, too?

PO: Yes.

EB: And then what did you do? Did you leave Asaba? Did you—?

PO: When we got there, after sharing our experience, everybody had to run to the bush, because we now felt the town was no longer safe for anybody. And while we were there we were still hearing gunshots.

EB: So this was in the evening of that day? Late in the day?

PO: All afternoon.

EB: So you left, you went to the bush—

PO: Went to the bush, the neighboring town, Achalla.

EB: Who were you with at that time?

PO: Who I went there with?

EB: Mm-hmm.

PO: No, we just ran to the bush. You meet people going into farmlands where we took refuge.

EB: And how long did you stay—outside of the town, in the farm?

PO: Uh, in short, I would say months.

EB: Months?

PO: Months.

EB: Did you know at that time where your family was? Your other—the rest of your family.

PO: We later located our families in different locations, so had to join up again. Some went across the Niger, that is to the Eastern part of this state, of the country.

EB: So when you came back to Asaba after being in the bush for a couple of months— what did you find when you returned?

PO: We found a lot of burnt houses, nothing to find in such homes, everything razed to the ground. First of all, they would raze, they would loot, and then put fire.

EB: Was your own house burnt?

PO: Everything. Complete.

EB: Where was your mother and father at this time?

PO: They all went to the East—they ran to the East.

EB: So there was nothing—you didn't go to the East?

PO: I didn't go to the East.

EB: You came back to Asaba.

PO: I came back.

EB: So where did you live after you returned?

PO: When I returned that was around 1969. My uncle, who was working in Sapele at the time of the war, now was in Abo, so he asked us to come to Abo, at least to get rehabilitated. So I now went to Abo. Then the war has not ended though—because the war ended in 1970. That was sixty-nine [1969].

EB: Many people we've been talking to have mentioned that there was a second set of killings when—in March of 1968 when the troops came into Asaba again. People have told us that many people moved out of Asaba to St. Patrick's College.

PO: I remember—yes.

EB: Do you remember that?

PO: As of that time we—there was something we called first operation and second operation.

EB: Yes.

PO: Yes. We had something like that. At this stage, people were moved from town here to SPC [St. Patrick's College] where they were camped. But some of us who had relations outside—if you have relations, you have to move out of Asaba, because it wasn't safe for male children to remain in Asaba. They were raping women, raping girls.

EB: So, in the second operation you left again and went—

PO: By second operation—by second operation, I was still in the bush. I came back around sixty-nine [1969]. I didn't stay long in Asaba here, I had to join my uncle who was in Abo so that I would be free from molestation.

EB: Yeah. Several people have mentioned this about assaults and rapes on girls and women. Is that something that happened a lot?

PO: Yes.

EB: In both operation one and operation two?

PO: That wasn't until—they would come around—they want to—even when that person is somebody's wife, they don't care. They want to have any woman they feel like.

EB: So this happened a lot, to many women.

PO: Yes. Especially young girls.

EB: What do you think was the impact—or how did this all change Asaba as a community, what was the impact of these events?

PO: Well, to some extent we suffered the impact of the war, but it appeared that after the war maybe those old buildings we had then, in an attempt to rebuild we now have more modern buildings. But, all the same, in terms of socialization, maybe, it opened up our degree of socialization.

EB: In what way? Could you explain that?—

PO: And in terms of development, like I said earlier—back then, some people had thatch houses, but after those houses were burnt we now want to rebuild—you build a more modern building, unlike in the past.

EB: How were people able to rebuild if they had lost everything, did people have resources?

PO: No, government then had a way of trying to rehabilitate, though it didn't go around everybody. But I remember then we heard this organization called Caritas[International], during the war they were bringing food items. The council, people in the missions, like the churches. So immediately after the war, people were asked to go and register whose houses were burnt. They registered and they gave them token building material. It wasn't enough. Some people didn't even care to go through all those hurdles, those who, their children outside Asaba, and well to do—they didn't bother. On their own they had to start from scratch to put up a new building.

EB: I just wanted to ask you a little about what you think should be done about remembering, memorializing this, these massacres. What do you think is the appropriate thing to do next?

PO: Before I say that, before now, the Head of State then, Gowon, General [Yakubu] Gowon, he was in Asaba. He actually apologized, but our people thought we should be paid reparation for all the damages. They killed the Igbo intellectuals and the upcoming ones. So we thought that the Nigerian government would have done that before now— but nothing has been done. Nothing has been done. Like the question you ask, actually, people who think, when we start giving out names of those who were massacred during the war, it may bring us sad memories. But it's part of history, we need them. And if there's anything anybody can do to appease the entire community for what transpired here during the war—I think it is worthwhile doing. We suffered a lot. For no just cause.

EB: Did you lose close family members, cousins, uncles, brothers, did anybody die in your family?

PO: Actually, I would say, I am lucky. In my family, nobody died during that war. But maybe after the war.

EB: After the war, as a result of the war or—?

PO: No. Natural death.

EB: Natural death, okay.

PO: Natural death.

EB: Thank you. Fraser?

FO: Is there anything that we have not asked that you think you would like to say?

PO: What I want to say is, like my last statement, at least, about reparation. We should be compensated, entire community. At least by putting something, a nice edifice to show that—we call that war, but genocide—to show that something—our people were actually murdered, for no just cause. It's supposed to be soldier to soldier, but they descended on civilian population. They were not killing soldiers here. They didn't meet any Biafrans here, but they just met the entire Asaba community. And they made sure—the total elimination of everybody that got on ground. Especially the male—male—the male.

EB: Thank you very much. Thank you.

FO: Thank you very much.

end of interview.