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# Chief Philip Asiodu oral history interview by Dr. Fraser Ottanelli and Dr. S. Elizabeth Bird, October 8, 2009

Philip C. Asiodu (Interviewee)

Fraser M. Ottanelli (Interviewer)

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**Dr. Fraser Ottanelli:** Okay. Good afternoon. This is Dr. [Fraser] Ottanelli and Dr. Elizabeth Bird. It's October 8, 2009, and we're at the University of South Florida's Tampa Campus Library conducting an oral history with Chief Philip Asiodu for the Asaba Memorial Project.

Please state your name, spell your name, your place of birth, and your date of birth.

**Chief Philip Asiodu:** Yes, my name is Philip Chikwuedo Asiodu. Asiodu is A-s-i-o-d-u. I was born in Lagos, the twenty-sixth of February 1934, and lived in Lagos a little bit and on to Calabar and back to Lagos for my secondary education. I went to England for my university education.

FO: And you were in England for how long?

PA: I was in England fifty-three [1953] to fifty-seven [1957], and went back to Nigeria and joined the External Affairs Division of the Chief Secretary's office. The Chief Secretary, of course, was an Englishman, Ralph Gray, later on Lord Caradon. The British were still in charge. The Governor-General was Sir James Robertson. But I decided to start preparing Nigerians for diplomatic service. I was one of the first batch of people selected for that. So, that was what took me back to Lagos, although I still hadn't finished my first degree, and I was thinking of becoming a lawyer. But I changed my mind, and joined the Foreign Service.

FO: And what was your career after that, after independence?

PA: Well, still before independence, on that training that we had, I was sent to Australia, to the British High Commission there, and to the British High Commission in New Zealand, and then went back to Nigeria briefly. And then I went to France and studied some French. Just before independence, I was posted to New York, to the British Mission to the United Nations. The idea was to help in finding offices, setting up the Nigerian Mission, but diplomatically, I was a member of the British Mission. Come October 1960—that is after several months of being in New York—we became independent, and officially I now became a member of the Nigerian Mission.

I stayed there till sixty-two [1962], went back home in the Foreign Service, then became the Nigerian representative on the provisional secretariat of the OAU [Organization of African Unity]. But by this time, I decided I wanted to transfer from the Foreign Service to domestic Civil Service, which I did in sixty-four [1964]. Then in sixty-five [1965], I became a permanent secretary in the Ministry of Health.

Tragically, unfortunately, by January sixty-six [1966], there was a military coup, and that was the end of the first democratic administration in Nigeria. But the Civil Service, in the British model, was a nonprofessional, nonpolitical permanent civil service. So, for the next nine years I saw service as permanent secretary in the Ministry of Industries, from sixty-six [1966] to seventy-one [1971], then Mines and Power from seventy-one [1971] to seventy-five [1975]. Mines and Power dealt with oil and petroleum, gas. It was becoming important, and I did that. In July seventy-five [1975], unfortunately, the military had their third coup and removed General Gowon.

But in between, you know that we had this terrible crisis, because after the second coup, the military commander in the East, [Chukwuemeka Odumegwu] Ojukwu, would not accept [Yakubu] Gowon as head of the federal military government, on the grounds that he was not the most senior officer, and the most senior should take over. That was the beginning of the crisis between the Eastern Region, which was predominantly controlled by Igbos, because there were large minorities in the Southeastern Rivers State, and the rest of the country under General Gowon. This deteriorated, as you know, into Biafran secession.

I must say that there were attempts when Gowon took over, even though it was patently a revenge coup, because in the first coup of 1966, all the senior Northern officers but one were killed. The Northern premier, Sir Ahmadu Bello, was killed. The Northern prime minister [Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa] was killed. The Yoruba Western premier [Samuel Ladoke Akintola] was killed. One Igbo officer was killed, but the majority of officers who were Igbos were not touched. Soon it became more and more apparent to those

northern officers that this was a premeditated plan to eliminate their leadership, civil and military, and impose Igbo domination.

Of course, Gowon tried to say, “No, please, we’ve had enough killings. Let us reexamine the basis of Nigerian Federation.” And he called for what they called an ad hoc constitutional conference. Unfortunately, they were in the midst of that when elements in the North unleashed massive killings of Igbos, by the hundreds, in May 1966. Then the first military ruler, an Igbo man, General [Johnson Thomas Ummakwe Aguiyi] Ironsi, was still alive.

We thought we had contained it, but in July, there was this revenge coup in which General Ironsi was killed, and any Igbo officer they could see around, because many escaped the officers. And then there were massive killings in the North, of civilians, and again in September, while the conference was going on. And after that, the cry was that Easterners were no longer safe anywhere in Nigeria but in the East. This led to the exodus of Easterners, some second, third generation who had lived in the North. They didn’t even speak Igbo, but they were of Igbo parentage. And all these people are to go to the East.

Of course, this exacerbated feelings, and on the plea, on the insistence that Igbos are not safe anywhere else, Ojukwu first ordered to remit federal avengers to the East, then tried to get the other companies too, superiorities too. Everything calculated practically to sever the East from the rest. And, of course, Gowon, as a member of the Nigerian Army, was sworn to defend the territoriality and integrity of Nigeria. Also, of course, there was a great deal of belief that once you started breaking up Nigeria, there was no peaceful way to end, because it is a patchwork of tribes and people put together under the British. It was the end of the nineteenth century and early twentieth, but we’d been ruled. With good leadership, we were beginning to call ourselves Nigerians and feel like Nigerians. But once you start breaking, you don’t know the end of it. So, he had made it clear he wouldn’t tolerate secession.

I’m just telling you how the crisis escalated. But after a series of moves, including hijacking of a federal Nigerian Airways plane, it was quite clear that the East was determined to secede. But we had had, even under the British, a great deal of demand by the so-called minorities. When we became independent, with three regions, not East-West, but within the North, there was a great movement for a middle belt state. In the West, there was a demand for Mid-West states. In the East, there was a demand for Calabar-Ogoja-Rivers. And all these led to, even before independence, a commission by the British, willing commission, which admitted these minority fears, but said everywhere to wait as British, to create new states and consolidate it, then we wouldn’t have independence in October 1960, which had been fixed. But the founding fathers, so to speak—Zik [Benjamin Nnamdi Azikiwe], Ahmadu Bello, [Jeremiah Obafemi]

Awolowo—decided that we should have independence in 1960, we should take care of the minority problems. We never took care of them, partly in answer to those historical demands, but I must confess more the requirement to contain the escalated crisis of Ojukwu, into the mind of Eastern secession from within.

Gowon, on May 27, 1967, proclaimed twelve states. He broke up the North into six; and the East into three; and in the West, which had already, under the civilians, been broken into West and Mid-West, Gowon now created a Lagos State. So, there are three states in the former West, three states in the East, and six in the North. Answering the fear before that, the way the British left Nigeria, one state, the Northern Region, could dominate everybody, have an assured majority. Fortunately, it was the most backward state in terms of education, and in terms of manpower to man bureaucratic and technological offices.

Thereupon, Ojukwu, with the states created, declared Biafran secession, and it was only a matter of weeks [until] war broke out. The Federalists said it was a police action, just to contain the rebellion. As far as Biafrans were concerned, it was a war for freedom and independence. That's really [what] led to the civil war, which lasted, as you know, till January 1970. Maybe one or two million people were killed. Children were starved, because there was a lot of starvation in the East. Briefly, the Biafrans broke across the river into the Mid-West and overran the Mid-West, tried to go to Lagos and Ibadan. Of course they didn't; they were pushed back over a period of six weeks, finally leaving Asaba on October 5.

Tragically, October 5 and 6, there were killings in Asaba, and then the massacre we are talking about, of course, on October 7, 1967. That was the very worst incident of the mass killings, premeditated, not done by rioters like you could pretend happened in the North. It was done by troops, which were supposed to be disciplined, which had been given a code of conduct which had all the elements of the Geneva Convention about the treatment of civilians and prisoners of war. So, this was a very, very bad incident.

I must say at that time in Lagos, where we were—I was a federal official, I remained a federal official. As a young man, I'd been brought up on Zik's—Zik was the first president, a kind of ceremonial Indian type of president; the power was really with the prime minister. But he had been the leader of the independence movement. He had inspired even people like Nkrumah.<sup>1</sup> As far back as 1937, he had written his book about *Renascent Africa*. They were talking in terms of Pan-Africanism, and Nigeria just being a catalyst in this Pan-African movement. I bought that philosophy.

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<sup>1</sup>Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of Ghana.

I still—I had become a federal official. That's one road, you know, to preserve the federal republic, because I'd been appointed a permanent secretary, no longer an ordinary civil servant. It was a political appointment by the prime minister—by the president, on the recommendation of the prime minister. And so you are required to swear an oath of allegiance to the federal government, to defend the constitution, to preserve the unity of the country.

So, both by conviction, by failure following of Dr. Zik, and my own oath of office, I didn't really see that the future of the black man lay in autonomous little states. Whatever the tragedies of the moment—and historically, of course, I knew that great countries we now call great had passed through very bad patches of history. When I was in Europe, I remember reading all those histories of people being invited to dinner and beheaded by the lords of England, or the St. Bartholomew's Massacre in France, and of course the terrible things which happened in Asia.

And so, I remained in Lagos in the federal government, but anxiously following the progress, because—one thing is to issue instructions, brief people. But in the theatre of war, often people lose any semblance of humanity. They become dehumanized, seeing a lot of blood. They kill and get killed. So, I was very anxious, like many others, because if massacres and killings became the order of the day, then there was no business to keep talking about the Nigerian unity. But when the things happened in Asaba, there we were in Lagos. We didn't really get proper reports. The people who perpetrated it knew what they did was criminal. There should be court-martials. So, they must have done their best to suppress reports coming out. But gradually, things started trickling out. So much horror! Horrible things had happened. But then, you didn't know who was killed and who wasn't killed, really.

I had a young brother who was teaching secondary school in Warri; that is the non-Igbo part of Mid-West. When the Biafrans came, of course, the schools were closed. He then went to Asaba. One didn't know what happened. Even when, finally, the Biafrans left—that is, were pushed across—I then asked the general commanding the division, gave him the name of my brother and all that, thinking that he might be in hiding, they might find him. No. It's only a few months later, when we were able to go to Asaba, that we discovered his diary. The last entry was October 6. So, he must have been one of those killed on October 7.

But apart from the killings and things happening in Asaba, things were happening in Lagos and other places which could convey to you personally what terrible things must be happening to people less highly placed. You know, I remember that—in fact, the day the Biafrans invaded the Mid-West, all kinds of disturbances in Lagos, one or two people killed. But the worst thing is that the harassment now, every Mid-Westerner, and mostly Igbo, were now suspect. Are these fifth-columnists? You know.

Some, who had personal friends—I mean, personal enemies, grudges—were denounced by their neighbors as soldiers, some killed. But many were brought into detention. All they need to say is that, “This man was transmitting information to the Biafrans in the East,” or, “I overheard him talking about planting a bomb.” Because, unfortunately, the Biafrans managed—because Nigeria is really a very small place. I think we are one-tenth the size of the United States. But we are 150 million people, more than half the population of the States. The Biafrans, unfortunately, had one or two people who detonated bombs in the cinema house in Yaba Casino, in the Federal Palace Hotel, the most prominent government hotel at the time.

So, all you needed to do was to call a policeman and say, “I overheard that man discussing a bomb, and he comes from Asaba,” “He comes from Ogwashi,” or, “He comes from Enugu,” and point. The fellow is arrested. So, even before the killings in Asaba on the seventh, hundreds of people had been herded, innocent people, into prison. Unfortunately, in our legal system, even when you come to review, to release the prisoners who are being held without charge, they have this technicality that if you didn’t see which officer brought the man in—you know, to say this is what he did or he didn’t do—we should err on the side of keeping him locked up, because we don’t know if this is a murderer.

So, many people languished twenty-four months or more in jail, simply because those who brought them there had not made records to say, “This is why I brought this man.” Some who brought them had gone to the warfront and perhaps died, or didn’t know even whom they took. So, there were these terrible personal tragedies where people, of course, who wanted to harass people so as to take their possessions. Say, “Are you still waiting here? Haven’t you gone? We’ll come and kill you tomorrow,” all of these terrible things.

**Dr. S. Elizabeth Bird:** When you were—you said earlier that you had heard—you began to hear about what had happened in Asaba. Could you describe how the news did come to you, and what you started to hear?

PA: First, there were people managed—a few people—to escape. They took—they were very courageous in leaving, because you had stories of everybody being killed. Because personally, let me tell you, when there was this coup, the second coup in which General [Johnson Aguiyi] Ironsi was killed, Easterners were being slaughtered if they were army officers in the cantonment. And all the officers were running away—the story in Enugu was that any Igbo man trying to—any Igbo-speaking person trying to go to any airport would be killed.

But I had scheduled a meeting in Enugu before this coup, before this second coup. As Permanent Secretary Ministry of Industries, I am chairman of a certain industry. I had scheduled it for August 1. This coup happened July 29. The question was, should I cancel it? If I canceled it—this was before things became too bad—this would give credence to [the idea that] everything was finished. I went to the airport, not without some silly troops stopping me and saying, “Who are you?” and I said, “Well!” At that time, there was still great prestige for the Civil Service, and even on the night of the coup, for instance, when they were killing Igbos who were officers in the barracks and all that, and for two days, we seemed to have no government.

The Civil Service decided publicly to send a delegation to the headquarters of the coup makers, because they had not come into Lagos to take over. They just were in Ikeja in the cantonment. Their plan then was kill everybody you can who is not a Northerner, break the bridge, go back to the North, finish Nigeria, which is not sustainable. You know, we have just one railway line. It’s not double-track. You need somebody to tell the approaching train that there was another train coming. You only need some authorities, not—anyway, the point is that we’ll now send a delegation of permanent secretaries to go to tell them, “Stop this nonsense. You can’t go on. Even if we are breaking up Nigeria, it has to be negotiated and done orderly.” Of course, these soldiers are laying in camouflage. As soon as the federal party—of course, it included some Igbos—[the soldiers] said, “Who are you? Which tribe are you from?” and they answered, “We are civil servants.” And they let them through. They met Gowon and made the negotiations.

So, the thing was broadcast from the East and everywhere that any Igbo—when I went to the airport, flew to Enugu, because Nigerian Airways was still flying, then went to see Ojukwu, who was a friend in Oxford, a friend in Kings College—you know, a good friend, a personal friend. And, in fact, he had wanted me to come and work in the East when he was made governor, and I told him, “I’m not rich enough. I am in Foreign Service, federal.” And he said, “Where did you—how did you come?” I said, “I came by air.” Nobody could believe it.

So, go now one year down the line. Things are worse, killings and all that. So, these people were extraordinarily brave, for they did come. The military governor himself said he rode a bicycle for twenty-four hours and came to Lagos. He was not Igbo; he was Ijaw. Those people who came would give accounts: how people were asked to come to a reception and mowed down, you know. Well, of course, the more eyewitness accounts from wives and sisters who actually saw their children and husbands being slaughtered would come later, when we could go to Asaba. So, this is how we received the news.

Knowing what had happened, even when the questions started, the harassment of Igbos at that time, because I was Igbo-speaking, all right, but nobody thought of me as somebody to be confined or removed from office. In fact, I participated throughout the crisis and

civil war. And there was a small group of officers who met every night with the head of government, in the principal staff of the army headquarters, to review situation reports and hand out decisions. I participated in all of the important delegations to Europe, Britain, Russia, trying to counter the perception that this was a war of Muslim dervishes against Christians, and all is finished in Nigeria. So, I immediately had to address a memorandum to the head of government and say, “Look here, here is what has happened. We can’t allow this to continue, because it’ll destroy the whole hope of trying to keep one country.”

Some action was taken immediately, and the military government in Benin [City], which was in charge of the Mid-West, action taken to try and reopen schools, relief materials, stop any further indiscipline. But the worst that happened, happened on the seventh in Asaba. Thereafter, there was no such premeditated massacre, but there was a great deal of frayed nerves, a perception that committed the atrocities. People can’t be happy. So, even if there was a rustle in the forest, the troops would think an ambush had come.

Then, as the starvation loomed in the East, because of the effective blockade—and of course, that strategy of creating states for the minorities worked, because the minorities in Port Harcourt and Calabar welcomed federal troops, and soon the states were created and functioning, hemming in Igbos in these central states, because people must eat. And there are many tributaries and distributaries of the Niger going into the Mid-West. So, you had add in questions of—euphemistically, the Biafrans called it “attack trade.” They were sending cautions to go and capture food and fuel and things like that, which kept people on tenterhooks.

You did have one or two bad incidents after Asaba, in a place called Ishiagu, where there was a little ambush and, of course, a massive reprisal by the army, but not to the extent of Asaba. And, of course, since Asaba happened, nobody would wait for federal troops to actually come and meet them in town. So, as soon as federal troops were coming to mount a reprisal, what you had was people disappearing into the bush. The troops never dared to leave the road, because inside the jungle, they don’t know who is there.

But, as I said, in reaction, the military governor was advised and he acted energetically. Schools were reopened, and so on. But it waited for the war to end formally before people would now feel relaxed enough. The civil servants who had been detained in Benin were released. Some got back their jobs—this was before the war ended. And there were two other developments.

One, seeing what had happened and the absolute necessity of keeping the federal government’s relations with the international community acceptable enough for not many countries to recognize Biafra, because if many countries recognized Biafra and decided to

fly arms openly to Biafra, we had no capability to stop it. But, luckily, none of the great powers did; and even France, which was ambivalent and hostile, pushed one or two of its ex-colonies to recognize Biafra, but they themselves didn't. And you know how these things happen. Before this crisis, Nigeria had bought Panhards as the preferred armored cars, from the French.

FO: That's a French tank.

PA: Yes. And they needed spare parts; they needed ammunition for it and so on. Of course, the French would not supply that direct, but you know *la France* and their diplomacy. They would then use Latin American countries, (inaudible) certificates. So, it was mixed up. And we later on discovered that in France itself, never minding what had happened, their commercial relationship with Nigeria was more important than all the ex-French-speaking African countries together. So, there was a real (inaudible).

There was Monsieur [Jacques] Foccart from [Charles] de Gaulle's office, who was one of the old French empire people, who didn't like Nigeria remaining one country. In fact, they were annoyed [that] the British did not do to Nigeria what they had done to French West Africa and French Equatorial Africa before independence, because before independence, they ruled those territories as two countries: French West Africa with capital in Dakar, and Equatorial Africa, capital in Brazzaville. When independence was coming, they split them up into about fourteen countries. And, of course, when we talk about Europe, we talk about Britain, France, and Germany, not Monaco and Liechtenstein and Luxembourg. It was no service to the black but they thought, "This is what the British have done to us."

So, this was an opportunity. But the Ministry of Defense in France, they have big commercial interests. They knew that the empire had gone. And so, we are lucky in that respect that there was not a monolithic French government. And remember when de Gaulle went to Quebec and said, "*Vive le Québec libre*"?<sup>2</sup> The rest of the French government didn't follow him. (FO laughs) And this is what happened to us. So, that was critical, that we maintained good relations.

And so, this made the federal government agree with the international community to now have international observers. They sent military people from Canada, from Britain, from India, Poland, and people from the United Nations to come and go to the warfront, reporting on any genocide, treatment of war prisoners, treatment of civilians. Now, with

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<sup>2</sup>This is an excerpt from a speech that French President Charles de Gaulle gave in Montréal, Quebec, on July 24, 1967. De Gaulle, who was on an official visit to the World's Fair, concluded his speech by saying, "*Vive le Québec libre*," [translated] "Long live free Quebec." The incident was considered to be a serious diplomatic faux pas, due to Quebec's French history and widespread sovereignty movement.

international observers likely to come to you with the approval of the federal government, any field commander would be obliged to be a bit more disciplined and control his troop. It was good.

So, that observation led into accord. Official senior officers from Lagos, including myself, would go to the warfront. It was easy for me to go to the warfront. I met Hausa or Fulani or Tiv federal soldiers. They didn't [say], "You're Igbo!" and shoot you. That didn't happen. It required a little bit of faith and courage, but it also wasn't irrational, it was in the conviction that these people had got the message and must conform. So, that is how we managed. But there were incidents which lesser people could access superior authority would suffer. They would be denounced and taken to prison.

FO: You lost your brother in this.

PA: Yes.

FO: Could you tell us what you found out and how you—well, first of all, how you went about finding out what had happened to him, and what you were able to determine? What were the circumstances that led to his death?

PA: I tell you that immediately after Asaba was liberated, of course I was anxious to see him and to get him up to Lagos, because—if I may say something else? I had another brother who was in the air force. But when these killings of Igbo-speaking officers occurred, and Southerners generally were uncomfortable, as part of the initial reaction in September 1966, they sent all troops to go back to their places of origin.

So, my brother, being a Mid-Westerner, was deployed to Benin with all the other Mid-Western military naval and air force officers, because there was no air force establishment in the Mid-West. Pilots and engineers, they had nothing to do. But he felt the situation was untenable and unsafe, and wrote anxious letters saying, "Get me out of here, or I will die, I will be killed!" On the basis of those letters, I was able to intervene with the military authorities, and he was given honorable discharge, brought back to Lagos, and I put him in [Ministry of] Industry and he went abroad to convert from being a military aircraft engineer to being a miller.

So, I was anxious to get my [other] brother back, and I contacted the Army authorities, gave details. Nothing came of it, because the poor fellow had been killed. Now, later on, we were able to get somebody to go to the house where he was last, and they retrieved his diary. It was from his diary that we saw that the last entry was October 6. But the diary

didn't say, "This is what I'm going to do," because I don't think he believed that people would come and meet a civilian in the house and kill him. Now, in Emma's book, there was the impression that he was running to try to go to the East and the bridge was broken, and coming back, they were killed.<sup>3</sup> I'm not so sure. What the diary says is—

And in his own case, he was a great athlete. Like all of us, he was born in Calabar, but came to Lagos within two years when my father was posted back from Calabar to Lagos. So, he grew up all his life in Lagos. He went to Igbobi College in Lagos. But because he was a good athlete and an Olympic athlete, Dr. Azikiwe, the president at the time—who was a great athlete and promoted athletics and sports and all that—gave him a scholarship to Nsukka, the University of Nigeria. That is where he did his university education. This may have made him really listen more, (inaudible), thinking that they were really militarily in-touch in the Mid-West. I wish to believe that if he knew the situation was that bad, he might have tried earlier to come back to Lagos, where all of us were. Unfortunately, he went to teach in Hussey College in Warri.

One of the entries in his diary was [that] the federal troops had occupied Ogwashi-Uku. Ogwashi-Uku is just about twenty-two kilometers, if you like, from Asaba. And he put "Unbelievable!" because (inaudible) the day they had run away from Benin—and we were not in Benin; we were actually in fact in Abo—the Biafrans, they proclaimed the Republic of Benin and announced a governor. You know, in the warfront there in a country like Nigeria even now, with scant information and all that, those poor people think that this is authentic.

I have the firm belief that he didn't know how imminent the danger was. When these people were repulsed—the bridge was broken—he must have known the outcome, because he was in a house on the main road, which in the old days, for many, many years, was the point at which you cross the Niger [River] to go east. It was the point at which the telegraph cables crossed from east to west. This is why that area of Asaba is called Cable Point. So, they came back and went house-to-house hunting down people.

I suspect that he was slaughtered like a few other people in that house. I don't believe he was slaughtered at the beachhead or that he was slaughtered or killed in marching to go and dance. I believe he was killed, like a few people were—many people were killed—in those houses along the main road. Many, many cousins of mine and his, who even twenty-four hours earlier, went from Cable Point up two miles into what we call the Inland Town, the ancient village, and from there, of course, you disappear into farmlands and all that—all of them survived the war. But he was most unfortunate.

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<sup>3</sup>*Blood on the Niger: The First Black on Black Genocide, The Untold Story of the Asaba Massacre in the Nigerian Civil War* by Emmanuel "Emma" Okocha.

EB: Nobody had seen him, or knew?

PA: No. In fact, one cousin had seen him the day before, when he was leaving Cable Point to go to the village. Our own village—we called it village, or quarters—was in Maji. I said, “Why didn’t you tell him to follow you?” But, of course, he wasn’t staying with them in my father’s house in Cable Point; he was staying in my mother’s uncle’s house in Cable Point as well. That was the last they saw of him, so he must have been killed.

EB: His body was never found?

PA: No, his body was not found. I don’t even know where we could begin to search. Many of these people knew they were committing crimes. They would kill people and then drag them away and bury them in some shallow graves. Where everybody in the house is killed, there is nobody surviving to say, “This is when they came, and this is where they took the bodies to.” It’s a different matter, those who went to that square and were mowed down there. They couldn’t start carrying hundreds of corpses. If, hopefully, when people start doing some excavations, they may discover some mass graves of those, but I wouldn’t expect my brother’s amongst them, because he didn’t come to the Inland Town. He was in the Cable Point area.

EB: What do you think caused the killings to start? As you said, there was nothing quite like it in other areas. I know you weren’t there, but what are your thoughts on what must have happened?

PA: I believe that although the two principal characters are now dead on the federal side—that is General [Murtala] Mohammed, the divisional commander at the time, and Colonel Ibrahim Taiwo, who was his henchman. You see, the coup of sixty-six [1966], 1 January—I mean, 16 January, 15 January, 1966—was led by an officer [Patrick Chukwuma Kaduna] Nzeogwu, who is from Opanam, eight kilometers or nine kilometers north of Asaba. Many of the Mid-West officers, the majority of them, were from environs of Asaba: Ogwashi-Uku, Ibusa, in particular. And in those colonial days immediately after independence, Asaba Division covered from Agbo to Asaba. That is a distance of fifty miles, all that.

So, every officer who enlisted in the Nigerian army from that [region] put Asaba. As far as we were concerned, Asaba troops, an Asaba officer led the coup in which the premier of the North was killed and, as I told you, military officers. Vengeance must be wreaked. Many of these people escaped the killings of July sixty-six [1966]. It’s not too much to

imagine that this fellow who was the divisional commander was fairly tempestuous. It's not difficult to imagine that they must have said, "When we reach Asaba, we shall wreak punishment."

Never minding the elements of people in Benin and Kubo who would point out officers they didn't want to remain in post so they can take their post. They weren't meaning, "Go and kill them," but the soldier has nothing else to do with guns in that situation. So, I'm sure there was that element. Of course, when people come to investigate, there are successor officers who commanded that division, who were also practically the same seniority as those who are alive. You talk to them, they may not admit that, but there must have been that element.

EB: So, you feel it was premeditated, rather than spontaneous.

PA: I really think that it was premeditated, but whether it was planned one year before, two years before—giving the fact that the counter-coup was really twenty minutes, the Igbo-speaking officers whom they thought had done the first coup, and as far as they are concerned whether you are a Western Igbo or not, you're Igbo, Igbo-speaking. And, as a matter of fact, that first coup—not its intentions; its intentions were very different than Nzeogwu. And, in fact, when the federal troops found his body, he was killed on the front in Nsukka. They brought him, took him to Kaduna where he was born, because he was Kaduna Nzeogwu—never minding his parents came from near Asaba—and buried him with full military honors. They didn't believe he would have been a secessionist and all that. But they (inaudible) army headquarters, all that.

But the fact is that they asked these people to come. Machine guns had been prepared and camouflaged. When the crowd was enough, somebody gave a signal, and people were killed. It was not spontaneous. It's a different thing which happened in one or two places. Soldiers run into ambush, they manage to come out, so everybody around must be a sympathizer, and they go and shoot at them. No. This was come—and people were coming. They collected—if something happens in Nigeria, you are welcoming people, you collect some gifts. They thought they would go and make a speech welcoming them, pledging their loyalty, deliver these (inaudible) and these gifts, only to be met with bullets.

As I said at the time, the reports didn't come out. Even now, nobody has, except for Emma Okocha's book, has tried to say, "This exactly is what happened." You talk to people in private, they say, "Yes, I have met somebody who has killed, only because they thought he was dead. People had been shot, and he had fallen down and they fell on him, and they didn't see movement. When night came and he managed to get out, he ran away. If I had seen him moving, I would have shot him, too." So, you have those chilling

accounts. This particular man, unfortunately, died only a few weeks ago. He came back to Lagos, became head of a big insurance company, did very well. That's the paradox of it. You survive, you come back, you are reintegrated, you become what you are. But these memories cannot be eliminated.

FO: Are there any questions, or are there any issues that we have failed to bring up that you would like to discuss?

PA: No, I don't think in terms of this Asaba massacre. There are bigger issues about attitude of people to propaganda, gullibility, and all that, but that is not jejune to the inquiries in Asaba. And Asaba itself, no. I think the missionaries who were there did magnificent work, trying to save whom they could until one of them [Brother Roman Wicinski] was mistakenly killed, because they thought he was a Biafran agent. After that, of course, many of them felt it was unsafe. But by that time, the worst was over.

EB: When did you return to Asaba? Did you return to Asaba after the war? How soon after the massacre did you go back?

PA: Go to visit Asaba? I got to Asaba two or three months after that. I was in Asaba, went once or twice. Of course, the search for my brother, showing he wasn't around. I had went to a house that was still intact, which of course we looked at.

In fact, I was very sorry about the looting, too, because my father was in Customs from the 1920s. And in those days, it was still the practice in the British Navy and in Customs when you apprehend smugglers, 25 percent of the booty is given as bonus to the officers to distribute amongst themselves. My father had collected a lot of Delft's china and, more important, two fencing swords encrusted with precious stones and with bloodstains on them. I wish—I'm sure the people didn't know what it was, and must have taken them as cutlass and thrown away. If I had those two things to take to Sotheby's, (PA and FO laugh) it's quite a fortune.

All that I got from those things was a Bible, a family Bible dating from 1796, which I still have. The family which owned it, they used to write when they were baptized and all that. How it got into the smugglers' boat, how it arrived in Nigeria, the good Lord knows, but one of these days I may take it to a (inaudible).

So, the house was looted. Again, as I said, on periodic visits. I was at Asaba that New Year's Eve 1969. That is before the war ended. We knew the war was ending, but of course the propaganda was still strong. The resistance was wonderful. And when I was in

Australia in 1958 in the British Mission, my High Commissioner was Lord Carrington, later Foreign Minister. But at this point, the Conservatives were in opposition. The Labour government had a small majority under [Harold] Wilson, and a concentrated push by the Conservatives could have overturned their policy on Nigeria. They were weighing it.

So, they sent out Lord Carrington to come to Nigeria, go to the warfront, because they had had a report from the defense attaché of Britain saying, more or less, “These offenses will fail, that last push.” They made many critical observations about the Nigerian army, in terms of discipline, organization, and all that. True or false anyway. That ended in expulsion as *persona non grata*.

Then Lord Carrington came, and with him was somebody from the Conservative central office, whom I knew as a convinced Biafran. Of course, with federal approval, he went to the East, saw Ojukwu, after being taken around what was left of Biafran territory. By sheer coincidence, the High Commissioner [to Nigeria] at the time, Sir Cyril Pickard, was the Deputy High Commissioner when I served in New Zealand. So, he arranged a small dinner at which three of us met with Lord Carrington, and Lord Carrington said, “Oh, yes, you know these Biafrans still have—”

You want me to stop?

**Elizabeth Tucker:** Let’s cut.

FO: Yeah, let’s stop right here.

ET: And then we’ll come, and we’ll start again.

FO: Right after dinner.

***Pause in recording***

FO: We’re back.

PA: As I was saying, we arranged a dinner. So, we were there, a few of us—five of us—and he said he had been to Biafra, gone around. They still have a lot of territory, because

they took in round the area. And of course, essentially Lord Carrington had been—in the World War, I think, and he was a military cross. I think he was in the First World War. So, he knew. And when he finished speaking, I asked him, I said, “They were taking you around. Were you looking at the compass?” (laughs) And (inaudible). You could be taken around jungles. And I could see this official went red in the face. He didn’t want to hear that.

Anyway, the upshot was that we were able to tell him that, in fact, the area left was very small, because as I said, we’d been there over New Year’s, and we crossed, because by this time the Biafrans were no longer in Onitsha. It was very safe. We crossed to Onitsha. The commander insisted on taking us towards Nnewi, Ojukwu’s hometown. There were periodic gunshots, and he simply said they were wasting—there was no more fighting left, really. A few months before, in talking about peace talks and all that, the quantity of ammunition—things that are valuable to the Biafrans were running out. Morale there—people had started going back where federal had taken over and were getting relief and life was being resumed. So, he said, “No, the war will end in a matter of days.” As I was saying before then, for months, unofficially the troops on both sides had started giving themselves *laissez-passers* [travel documents], and having put these together, it was no longer.

So, we were able to tell Lord Carrington that taking you around and around with no compass is neither here nor there. And when he went back, he made a very important speech on behalf of the Conservatives, in which he still got the Conservatives to support Wilson’s Liberal government and the attitude of support for Nigeria, but hoping that things would turn out well. And, as the good military man he was, ten days later Biafra collapsed, against all the predictions of continuing the resistance. So, there are many sides to this. It wasn’t—and again, talk to Azikiwe, the first Nigerian president, leader of the independence movement, Igbo man from Onitsha, Igbo-speaking. People from Onitsha and Asaba don’t say they are Igbos, though we speak the language.

Now, he stopped over by mistake. He thought he was going on a direct flight from London, or wherever it is, to Monrovia, but the plane had to stop in Lagos. Once the federal people heard that Zik was on the plane, they impounded the plane and said, “You must come and visit the head of state.” But, of course, in his progress, the enthusiastic welcome, because he used to be the Nigerian—he used to win majorities in Lagos as a politician. When he came, he was very well received by Gowon and all that. And he promised to come back in September 1969, end of August, and he did. He went around the whole country, went to Enugu, Calabar, Port Harcourt, the warfront, went to Ibadan, went to Kano, Kaduna and all that. Very well received. People were really yearning to get back to normalcy.

When he returned to London, he issued a statement saying General (inaudible)'s propaganda was false, he'd been wrong, and there was no point continuing military resistance. So, it was a very good thing, because it also helped, I'm sure, to give Gowon more confidence in proclaiming no victor, no vanquished. When he went round, the enthusiasm with which he was received all over Nigeria—also must have impacted on those who had other ideas about what to do to settle this course after the war. So, this was very important. But my brother—

EB: Could you talk a little bit about Sydney and his life, who he was?

PA: Yes. My brother Sydney, he was born in 1942, the last son of my father. He, of course, went to school in Lagos, first in St. Paul's, where I was briefly for one year, and then he went to Igbobi College. I went to King's College, he went to Igbobi.

He was outstanding as a student. He was captain of cricket, captain of soccer, outstanding athlete, played tennis. My father had two wives, a polygamist. He was the son of the other lady. He took after my father more. My father was tall, I am short. (laughs) So, he was a nice, tall athlete. He was also good in his studies and, as I said, he got a scholarship from Dr. Zik to go to Nsukka. That is where he read biology. When he came out, he was my favorite brother, because he was an all-rounder. My other brothers, all full and half, were all athletes, and we all played games for school and college and all that. But they were not as bright as he was. He was an all-rounder.

My own first suggestion to him, after he graduated, he came back to Lagos and was looking for a job. He got a job, actually, to teach in his old school, be an assistant house master with accommodation. That is what I said he should do; or, if he didn't want to do that, I was going to put him in the Federal Institute of Industrial Research. I was Permanent Secretary of Industries. He'd be there for a year or so, and get his scholarship and come out and do his master's and postgraduate program.

Well, unfortunately, the influence of his mother and some brothers made him go to the Mid-West to teach in that school, Hussey College. If he had not gone there, like all of us, maybe he would have been alive today. And he went there. When he was going finally, I didn't see him. So, I was very, very sorry about that, because it is the little drawback when the patriarch of a polygamous family dies prematurely. While my father was alive, we lived together, we ate together. In fact, in later life, you find that sometimes—for instance, the only half-sister I have left—that is from the other lady—no, two of them—will not talk to her own full sister. She would prefer to stay with a half-brother when she comes to Asaba, and of course, would come to me. She and Sydney were very close.

But somehow, I don't know why Sydney agreed to go, when all of the rest remained in Lagos, including the mother. That just was very unfair. If they thought Lagos was so untenable, why did they let him go alone? Maybe if they were with him, they, knowing Asaba—Sydney and I never lived in Asaba. Sydney, none of us, did. Maybe they did a few months after my father died and they came back to Lagos. But if the mother had been there, she knows Asaba and probably would have known how to get out of Cable Point and come up to the Inland Town and maybe be safe. But that didn't happen.

But very good, Lagos being what it is. He had some colleagues in Igbobi who were fellow athletes. The present governor of Lagos went to Igbobi. I met him as a young fellow, could be my son. When they were now trying to resuscitate athletics in Lagos State, they decided to start a foundation named after him.<sup>4</sup>

FO: After your brother?

PA: Yes, Sydney Asiodu. That was launched last year. So, here you are. Bialosa Asiodu is Igbo-speaking. Yorubas are controlling Lagos. But they now saw it good to name this foundation after him, as an outstanding athlete of his school days.

EB: He was in the Olympic Games?

PA: Yes, he was in the Olympic Games. It was in 1962 or so—or sixty-four [1964].

FO: Sixty-four [1964], in Tokyo.

PA: Sixty-four [1964]. He went to the Tokyo Olympics.

EB: He was a runner?

PA: He was a sprinter. He was a sprinter, and he was in the Nigerian four-by-hundred meters relay team, as well as sprinting. But he was also a good triple jumper. He was a good athlete. If he had survived, he would have done a little bit more, maybe gone to sixty-eight [1968] Olympics, because he would be teaching—apart from whatever he taught in biology, he'd probably be the games master and would have the facilities to continue practicing. So, it was a great loss to the family. Of course, one tries to forgive. I

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<sup>4</sup>The Sydney Bialosa Asiodu Athletics Foundation.

couldn't understand why they insisted on influencing him at the last minute to go on that tragic journey into the Mid-West.

Thank you.

FO: Thank you very much.

PA: Good.

*End of interview*