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# Fabian Oweazim oral history interview by Charles Massucci and Dr. Fraser M. Ottanelli, October 9, 2009

Fabian Oweazim (Interviewee)

Charles Massucci (Interviewer)

Fraser M. Ottanelli (Interviewer)

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**Charles Massucci:** Good afternoon. This is Chuck Massucci, along with Dr. Fraser Ottanelli. Today is October 10, 2009, and we are here at the University of South Florida Tampa Campus Library conducting an oral interview with Mr. Fabian Oweazim for the Asaba Memorial Project. Welcome, sir. Could you tell us your name, date of birth, ancestral town, and your place of birth?

**Fabian Oweazim:** Thank you very much. My name is Fabian Oweazim. I am from Asaba. I was born in Jos, which is in Northern Nigeria, on the twenty-fifth of July 1954. So, I turned fifty-five this year.

CM: Okay. And in 1967, October, were you living in Asaba?

FO: I was living in Asaba.

CM: And who were you living with at the time?

FO: I was living with my uncle, because my parents lived in Western Nigeria, Ibadan, and I was schooling in Asaba. So, the war cut me off in Asaba.

CM: Okay. And with your uncle, how many relatives were you living with?

FO: My uncle was a polygamous person, and I had a lot of cousins. Most of them were girls, and there were just myself and two or three of us who were men, who were boys.

CM: Okay. And were you living in one of the quarters—that's the term that was given to me—in the city of Asaba proper?

FO: We lived in Asaba. Asaba has five quarters, and the village I lived in is one of them, in Asaba.

CM: In 1967, October, there was an event we're going to be talking about that involved the death of some of your neighbors, family, and friends. Prior to the event in October, do you have any recollections about military presence in the town, whether Biafran or national troops?

FO: Yes. Prior to the event in October, there had been what the federal government considered an infiltration into the Mid-West, because Asaba is in the Mid-West, the Mid-Western Region. The Biafran troops moved through Asaba and went off to Western Nigeria. The federal troops—the Nigerian troops—started fighting back the Biafran troops from the West, way back to Asaba. Asaba has a bridge that crosses the Niger [River], so across the Niger is Eastern Nigeria, which became Biafra. So, it was like a bottleneck. When the federal troops got to Asaba, their mobility was checked, so they had time to settle there in Asaba, and operated the way they operated.

CM: In your opinion, did the Biafran troops ever occupy or maintain any permanent residence in Asaba?

FO: Um, they were like troops on the move, okay? So, they were moving, and when they occupied the Mid-West Region, they kind of—the Mid-West Region was declared the Republic of Benin, created another republic in spite of Biafra. So, they were actually the force—the thrust was to move ahead into Lagos, to move off to Lagos, but when they were checked they started moving back. They did not really have like a permanent situation where they erected their barracks and stayed there permanently or something, no. It was such as a removal.

CM: Would you have a recollection—were there conflicts or cooperation with the Biafran troops as they moved through Asaba?

FO: Basically, the Biafran issue was something that concerned the Igbo tribe. The Asaba people belong to the Igbo tribe. When there was a pogrom in Northern Nigeria earlier, starting from 1966 after the coups, a lot of people from Asaba were killed. They are Igbos. So, I would not say that the Asaba people had the impression that there was no need for the war, but there were a lot of Asaba people who had been injured by the pogrom, by the genocide that was committed in Northern Nigeria, and later in some of Western Nigeria.

Myself, as a kid, in Ibadan—Western Nigeria—I knew of a couple of people who were killed because of their tribe. Okay? So, it's not a question of Asaba cooperating with the Biafran soldiers or not cooperating with the Biafran soldiers. Just like the Biafrans are Igbos, we are Igbos. So, naturally there were kids who wanted to go into the military, who were angered by happened, who joined the Biafran forces.

CM: The date that we were given for this event was October 7, 1967. In the days prior to this event, to these shootings, do you have a recollection of what the mood or the feeling was within the town of Asaba? Was there fear, concern, anything of that nature?

FO: There was a lot of fear, especially among the grownups, the elders, who knew the dangers of what was coming. I, as a kid, saw it as the sound of bangers, not as a game. As a matter of fact, a childhood friend of mine—we said, "Let's go see what it is." And we actually walked towards my secondary school, St. Patrick's College, from where they were advancing, until we actually knew and felt that this was not a bad joke, because you could hear the shelling coming to town with the sound (makes whooshing noise) and you hear the explosion, and you could hear the sound of bullets when they go (makes different whooshing noise). Then, we run.

We run back. We were actually going to where my father had his house, which was close to the bank of the Niger, and I wanted to open the story building so we could look and see those people. But we saw soldiers, Biafran soldiers, everybody running, so we ran back. So for us, the kids, we thought it was nothing, but for people who knew the dangers of war, they knew what was coming. And for people who had experienced what happened in Northern Nigeria and other parts of Nigeria, they were—everybody was apprehensive.

CM: So, there were rumors or stories or actual news reports of what happened in the North that caused the adults fear or concern.

FO: Yeah. Moreover, the people also knew that—the capital of Mid-West then was Benin City. When the federal troops got to Benin, the natives—a lot of Benin natives actually aided and pointed out people from my area who they wanted to get out of their system. A

couple of them were shot. Even within our own region, where we thought we were safe, there were groups, because they were not Igbos, who felt, for instance, that the Mid-West Civil Service was dominated by Igbos—who were more educated than the rest of them, anyway. So, it was not just by coincidence that we were in the Civil Service in the upper echelon. We had the chief jobs of the state: the (inaudible) general, the premier, they were from Asaba. Okay? So, animosity was there. They wanted to get rid of us and occupy the place. So, they encouraged—they aided the soldiers to do a couple of shootings, where this is an Igbo. They even had—they had written the names of Igbos, saying, “These are the Igbos.”

CM: Would that involve Biafran and federal soldiers, or just the federals?

FO: It was just federal soldiers, and the natives in those areas, who had never liked the fact that the people from my area dominated the Civil Service. Up till now, it’s still a contentious issue.

CM: Do you remember, from your childhood, when the federal soldiers arrived, and possibly how many, how well armed they were? What are your recollections of their arrival at the time of the massacre or in the days before?

FO: It’s a very big one, because the Second Division of the Nigerian Army was the division that arrived in Asaba, with several commanders (inaudible). And when they came in, it was easy to identify who the Nigerian soldier is and who the Biafran soldier was, then. The Biafran soldiers were not as equipped as the Nigerian soldiers. They also bore the half of the sun emblem. And a lot of them were just high school kids. Some people went to war with machetes. So, a lot of them were kids we knew around the place. But when the Nigerian soldiers came, they were very well armed. They had their guns. They had their armor, well packed, so it was not—and the division that came to Asaba were, incidentally, a group that were well built, what we call *ngudu gudu*, because of their size. So, it was a well-equipped army that came into Asaba.

CM: Where did you first encounter the troops, or what was your first recollection or understanding that they were arriving and there was danger?

FO: My first encounter of the troops was going from my uncle’s house—so, I’m at my uncle’s house at the back. It’s maybe like half a block away. There’s a road that divides the place. Crossing that road, I turn to my right, and I saw these very dark, big—maybe because of my—I’m six [feet] two [inches] right now; maybe I wouldn’t consider them that big. But they were like, “Who are these giants?” So, I saw them. I ran back and went back to the house and said, “These soldiers are around.” That was in the morning hours,

maybe like the sixth of October. Then everybody—in less than fifteen, twenty minutes they were all over the place. You could see them. The thing was that, as they were approaching, you would see houses burning. You would see the smoke; they set fires and all kinds of stuff.

So, that was the first encounter. Then, not quite long from then, we had this—three soldiers come to the house, actually, and asked everybody to come out from the house. They told the men—including myself, who was a boy—to come out. Then, my uncle's friend, Mr. [Michael Chukwudebe] Ugoh, who happened to be—I think he was talked about in *Blood on the Niger*—who had offered money to spare the people of Asaba.<sup>1</sup> He happened to have come to the house with his own children, because his village received the encounter; that's Dr. [Ifeanyi] Uraih's village. He comes from the same village with Dr. Uraih. They had run—you know, moving away from this, and so they ended up in our house. Ugoh had three grownup boys, three of them, well-built. Then myself, my cousins, and all them, we came out.

The soldiers said, "Oh, you are Okubu?" Okubu had worked all his life in Northern Nigeria. He worked with the Federal Survey Department. He even married from Northern Nigeria and all that. So, he was at home with the language of the Hausa people. I was born in Jos, and we all spoke Hausa and (inaudible). "You have money, Okubu. You have money. Bring me money." Then, he said, "Give us a transistor radio."

So, they brought a transistor radio. He said, "No, he doesn't want a transistor radio anymore; he wants money." They brought money, gave him money. Mrs. Ugoh, who was staying in the house, went. I saw her go somewhere where she had kept some money away—not inside the house, like in the fence or something—and brought a can of Ovaltine beverage that she had stuffed money in, and brought out the money and gave to the guy. The guy stuffed them in his armored bag.

One of the soldiers with him—he had two—was literally crying. He said, "Boss, it's okay. Let's go. Let's go. Let's go." He curled his whip on the face of the guy and told him to shut up. At this point, he turned around and told Mr. Ugoh—Mr. Ugoh is this good-looking man, with good hair. I mean, Ugoh had money. He told Ugoh to roll on the ground. He was wearing not just this (indicates his clothes), but the big one, the (inaudible). The man rolled on the ground, he turned to roll back, and he rolled down. When he stood up, he must have been dizzy. He fell.

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<sup>1</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.

At that point, one of my cousins, who was hotheaded, said, “Why are we standing for this? Let’s take this guy on and drag them into the house!” My uncle and Mr. Ugoh said, “No. Leave them.” Then, they finished. They left.

So now, there were a group of Asaba people. The Asaba people had started pulling people out. “Let’s go and we’ll welcome dance and welcome these people.” A lady who lives not far from our house, who really—excuse me.

CM: Take as much time as you need, sir.

FO: She was singing. (sings in Igbo) “Asaba people, come out, so that things will be okay!” That call brought a lot of people out. And what happened at the end of the day? Ugoh and Okubu joined a group and went for the supposedly welcome dance, and they separated them at that point, men and women. I had joined them. When I got to the market area, Okubu asked me to go home. “You should be hungry now. Go home.” And I went back. And then, they did their—whatever they did. They shot the people and killed them.

But the thing about this whole thing was that Okubu himself—that’s a man (inaudible). Before the federal troops came in, when the Asaba people knew the federal troops are coming in, they had had meetings, and had made a decision to be on the safe side, to present a welcome address to these people, let them know that we are not soldiers; we are not fighting or anything. He called me—I was a little kid; I was like twelve—wrote a letter, which he put in a khaki colored envelope, put a red seal on it, and asked me to go give this to a man they called Ughelli, in the next village. They were contemporaries; they belonged to the (inaudible) administrative group in Asaba, the Oporoza and all that, and I believe Okubu at that time was the secretary of Oporoza.

I got there. I gave this letter to the man, Ughelli. Ughelli gave me a typewriter, which I carried to Okubu. That typewriter he used to write the welcome address that was to be presented to the federal troops. When I delivered the typewriter—he lived upstairs in his house, the family stayed downstairs. So, he told me not to go down. He locked the door and he kept writing. And he writes, he brings some copies, tells me to burn them. I burn them. But one of the times he gives to me and he goes back to typing, I was curious, so I read the welcome address to the federal troops. So, I said, “Okay.” That’s the same man that, on the seventh, he was in the group that were gathered and killed.

In the morning, one of the wives had joined to go for that welcome thing. She came back. There was the whole town—it was like you could hear a pin drop. They could not cry, because you do not want to attract the attention of the soldiers. They brought him back.

When that happened, they came back, they told all of the boys in the house to go upstairs and clean the ceiling to hide us away. So, myself, my older cousins, [and] the Ugohs' children, we went up the ceiling. The stairs that go to the ceiling—that go to the story building that goes upstairs—they put empty cases, so that it would look like nobody uses the place.

So, we are staying in the ceiling. We are in the ceiling when the women went to fish Okubu out of the heap of the dead, and brought him to bury him. We watched from the ceiling. He received a bullet wound here. (indicates location) He had one on his hip and one on his thigh. That grave was dug by women, maybe two feet or three feet, and they put him there. And we couldn't cry. You don't want to attract attention.

And that was what they did for the first operation. Thereafter, a lot of people ran across the Niger and went to the East and North. After the killing of people in Asaba, what else did they do? They started raping the women. They come to the house. They say they heard gunshots around, that the women are hiding the soldiers. They take them away, then they bring them back later. These girls come back, they cannot talk. They can't tell you what happened.

One of my cousins, up till recently, when she sees me, she says, "Fabian, do you remember what happened when they came to take us away?" She told me, "I have not discussed this. I have never mentioned it to my husband." She is feeling bad that she wants to tell her husband. I said, "Listen, it's your deal. If you want to tell him, tell him." She says, "I want you to tell him." So, we went out to their staff club—he's a lecturer somewhere—and told him. He wasn't in the country then. The guy said he'd never heard, and when he got home, they cried. Anyway, at the end, that was a way for her to forget, because she's been carrying it in her mind all along. But I had to say what I had to say.

Generally—the question now is, how did this affect me as a person? When I graduated from college in 1979, the first job I took was I went to the police force. The Nigerian police force, they took graduates for the police academy, and you are supposed be the cream of the crop of the place. At one point, we are doing drills, regular drills: how to stop actions and all that. The instructor, an assistant commissioner of police, kept talking and talking and talking, and my stomach kept churning.

After a point, I told him—his name was Mahaldi—I said, "What you are saying cannot (inaudible) with me, because as far as I'm concerned, in this country, if you are not of my tribe, you will shoot me first. Even if you're my unit commander, or I'm somebody under you, you will turn around and shoot me first before shooting the enemy." He said, "Why?" I told him what happened in Asaba. He said, "You know something? See me after this class."

So, we went in. There was another gentleman, an assistant commissioner of police, a very smooth person, Dixon Sonomi. Both of them sat me down, they talked to me and said, “Repeat what you said.” I said yes. So, he said, “If he goes into an operation with me, what will happen?” I said, “I’ll take you out first, because I do not trust that you will not take me out at the earliest opportunity.” He said, “Well, you had better reconsider your career.” I said, “Yeah, I know.”

I resigned. I trained for one year, worked for nine months and quit—for sure, because I know what my temperament is, know that what I saw happened to people just because of—I don’t know why Asaba got that end of the stick, because thereafter, the federal troops went to other places. There were a few places they did a couple of funny things, killing people, but [not] to the magnitude that was done in Asaba. It’s incredible.

One of the persons I’m sure you will talk to, Dr. [Joe] Nwajei, his youngest brother, Harry, was my playmate. We used to draw lines on the ground and play tennis with wooden bats. He was killed. He was in my class. So, there was no way—if I was there, I would have been killed, too. The oldest man, Obiokoba, was shot right there. So, if you say they [the townspeople] are soldiers, why would they shoot a man that is almost eighty, or maybe ninety? Then, a twelve year old kid, or eleven year old, you shoot him because you say they are soldiers? So, there was a calculated attempt to get to this town and do what they did. It’s unfortunate that it happened.

CM: Do you have an opinion or knowledge of why Asaba was chosen for this massacre?

FO: Well, with what had happened or what had been said, people have tried to give justification and all that. One of the things they say is that [Patrick Chukwuma Kaduna] Nzeogwu was the leader of the coup that overthrew the federal government in January 1966. Nzeogwu comes from a town that is nine miles away from Asaba, Opanam, so they say he’s an Asaba man. Albert Okonkwo, who became the administrator of Benin Republic, which was Mid-West, comes from Ibusa. Ibusa is seven miles away from Asaba. Then, there were a couple of other people—Uchi, Amawo, all those people; they were senior officers in the military.

But because of the proximity to Asaba, a lot of people at that time—it was after the war years that you ask somebody, “Where are you from?” He will start telling you, “I come from Opanam,” or, “I come from Ibusa.” Before the Civil War, Asaba was the big town around the place, and a lot of people from Asaba—thank God for his blessings—were quite prominent. So, it was easy to say, “I’m from Asaba.” The thinking was that most of these officers, who were high-ranking in the military—we had a couple of Asaba high-

ranking officers; (inaudible) comes from Asaba, but they killed him in one of the coups, counter-coups that the Northern elements had.

So, that's one reason, people thought. Some other schools of thought figure that it was a deliberate calculation by the federal government of Nigeria to reduce the cream of Asaba people, who had a great number of pensioners; that it was deliberate, just to eliminate people there.

And for others, especially people who talk on the side of the federal government, they say it was just some silly soldiers, who were just being overzealous and thinking that they were actually shooting soldiers. Which is not tenable, because you cannot tell me that all these men, Okubu and the rest of them, they were much into their sixties, others are like in their eighties, and a little kid, that they were—Dr. Uraih, my friend, it was a childhood friend. He was my best man when I got married. We play tennis together. He was maybe like thirteen, fourteen; he's two years older than myself. You want to call them soldiers? No! It was just a calculated attempt to do away with a group of people.

CM: To go back to the incident, you were not brought to the square, so you did not witness the shooting, correct?

FO: No.

CM: Do you know why you were separated from the group that got brought to the square?

FO: I was not—I was asked to leave by my uncle. “Go. Leave. Just go home.” Otherwise, if I followed them, I would have ended up at the square. So, I walked back home. But when I walked back home, at about four o'clock—between three and four that evening, one soldier wandered into the house and asked all of us to come out. That was—after that incident, we are all asked to go into the ceiling. He lined us up. I was the smallest, the youngest among them. I was standing in front. He lined all the men, cocked his gun, and said he was going to shoot us.

And then, the translation started: “Bring money. Bring more. Bring money. Bring more. Bring money.” There was a lot of money in the house, because my uncle was loaded; his wives, they are businesspeople. “Bring money.” When he took enough—as a matter of fact, he looked—it's like a story building. The balcony downstairs—not the balcony; the verandah, what we called a verandah—that was where he lined us up. So, he was facing the door, and I was the person in front. I thought he was looking the other way. In my

mind, I said, "I should run away," and I did. As I turned, he said if I did, he would shoot me first. So, I was glued there. When he finished, he took his money and walked out. And that was it.

Thereafter, we all went into the ceiling, and the ceiling was, I went there as a kid—you had little bats that live in the ceiling. They were all making their noise, but you stay still. You are afraid. Every once in a while you hear bullets tear through the zinc; its aluminum shade tears through it, drops into the place. You move. You don't know where it'll come next. But then, very much late into the night, one of my cousins (inaudible) asked us to come down, and we eat something. We stayed down there; the soldiers didn't go out late in the night, so we stayed down. As soon as sunlight, we go there and with the tropical heat in the ceiling, it wasn't fun. And the droppings of the bats—when we come out, we looked like we'd been in a coal mine.

CM: How many days did you have to hide like that?

FO: Quite for some time, because the thing is, after that killing on the seventh, the town was—I don't know. Something supernatural was really happening in that town, because even the dogs, stray dogs, were crying, were moaning (mimics dog howling) all night. So, it was quite—I cannot remember the number of days, but it was quite some time before we felt comfortable enough to come down and just sit down. But you dare not step out, until after a while they relaxed, and life continued.

CM: Do you know how long the troops stayed in Asaba, the federal troops, after this shooting?

FO: The federal troops stayed very long in Asaba, because they could not cross over to Onitsha. The bridge had been blown, so they created their divisional headquarters in Asaba. They stayed there, all through. And there is—after the 1967 incident in October, sometime in 1968—I do not remember correctly the month—there was an infiltration of the Biafran soldiers from further south, and shooting started again in Asaba. This time, the federal troops herded the Asaba people out of town and put us in a camp in St. Patrick's College, my school, and went to town. What they did in that operation was they burned houses. They burned houses. They burned down houses. After staying in the camp, they let the Asaba people go back to their town. Most people didn't have a house to go to.

So, what was it? (laughs) They didn't stop to reason, but that was their modus operandi. That was how they operated, that was what they did. I mean, it's nothing that is healing. People who lived are still there. So—

CM: You mentioned that the women went and recovered the bodies of your family.

FO: Mm-hm.

CM: Where did they bury the bodies at?

FO: A lot of families, some ran. Like my uncle that was recovered; he was buried in his property, behind his house. But for those who were not—the troops had to force people to dig graves and put those people in. And even in the process, they shot some people who dug those graves into the graves. Okay? So, a lot of people were buried there.

CM: Did you witness any of those events?

FO: No. But I saw from the roof how my uncle was buried. I saw his bullet wounds. One was right here under his nose, one on his hip, one on his thigh. The women had to dress him, roll him in something and put him into the ground.

CM: Do you have an estimate of how many men from your town were killed during this one incident, or through the days after through the burial?

FO: I cannot really give a number, but I'll give you an example of what you can start imagining: There were kids who were in St. Patrick's College. In fact, there was a family, younger brother and elder brother; both of them were like—the elder was in his final year in his high school, the younger one was like two years or three years to his final year. [They were] the only two children of the family. These two kids were shot right there in front of their mother. So, if you take a census in Asaba in any family and say, "Tell me, during the Civil War—don't count people who were killed fighting in the fronts and all that—how many were killed right here?" It isn't easy to examine, but I can tell you it would run to several hundreds. There are families where their men folk were simply wiped out. [In] one, the only child got killed. The woman went mental, and remained mental until the day she died. So, it's something that shook the town to the root of our foundation.

**Dr. Fraser M. Ottanelli:** I want to go back to the issue of the burial. Am I correct to understand that those who could get their loved ones out of this—I mean, whose loved

ones had been killed, but who could get them out of this heap of bodies, were able to do so?

FO: Some were able to do.

FMO: But the majority—

FO: The majority couldn't. And I can even surmise why my family was able to recover Okubu, because the place, Ogbeosowa, is like ten minutes' walk from my place. So, it was easy, before the troops got back in the morning to start forcing people to dig shallow graves, to go recover him. A few people who lived close by, whose families lived close by, were able to go retrieve some of their dead, because of the proximity. But for a family that lives very far away, it would be difficult for them to get there. In fact, they're scared of walking the street to get there; they wouldn't have allowed them to come out there to pick up their loved ones.

FMO: Did you ever hear stories of pupils from St. Patrick's College being killed?

FO: I just told you two, two brothers.

FMO: Were there others?

FO: There were others. Oh there were a lot. These two brothers, the Wanukus, and there is an Ayinabo, who was already a sixth former. There are quite a lot of people who were at St. Patrick's, especially people who had gotten into the higher forms, who were killed, who were just wasted. One of my very good friends, Obogu, his elder brother, a very good-looking young man, was killed. You know? Nwajei—I'm sure he will tell you—his brother was at St. Patrick's. He was in the same class as myself. We are just starting high school at that time. So, that's the truth of it.

FMO: Did you go back to St. Patrick's, when—?

FO: Yes. What happened during the Civil War in 1968, after the second operation—after the first operation, by January we had gone back to school, because we had American Marianist brothers [Society of Mary] who were running St. Patrick's College then. So, they came around and school started. They had moved to a place they call Fuga, which is another Marianist institution—I think it's St. John's or something—then they came back

to St. Patrick's. The principal of St. Patrick's then was Brother Roman [Wicinski]. He was killed in 1968 by troops, because he had gone to the next town, Ogwashi-Uku, where I think that was the place they had (inaudible). He was gunned down in the second operation—they said infiltration. Both parties—the federal troops claim he was shot by Biafrans, Biafrans claim he was shot by Nigerian soldiers.

So, after that, most of the reverend brothers left. Then, in 1968, they started a school they called Emergency Grammar School, where they brought all the schools in Asaba, all the high schools in Asaba, the girls' schools and St. Patrick's. St. Patrick's College was a boys' school. They started a school that was run out of the mission, out of the church mission, for a while, before we went back to our individual schools.

CM: How long did you live in Asaba following the—well, just in general, how long did you live in Asaba?

FO: I came to start living in Asaba when I came in 1965, to join my auntie because I really like her and had come for a vacation and liked spending time with her, and I had my cousins. I stayed in Asaba continuously until I left college and I went to university in seventy-five [1975], graduated in seventy-nine [1979]. After seventy-nine [1979], I did the National Youth Service, and then—I now go to Asaba for vacations. In October—this month, at the end of the month—I will be in Nigeria. I will be in Asaba for at least two, three days in a week.

CM: The locations of these burials, are they still available? Are you, as a citizen and now a visitor of Asaba, aware of where these burials occurred?

FO: Sure. The biggest one of them is the Ogbeosowa killing field. There were a couple of other places that, even then, after the incident when the soldiers had stopped harassing people—now, every once in a while they see a male kid walking the road, they call you and say, "Pull up your trousers." When you pull it up, they see marks. They say, "Oh, that's because you're a soldier. You wear boots." And they just take you out and shoot you. So, there were still a couple—after the major killings, you still go out and you see some shallow graves. I saw a grave, and it turned out to be the father of a childhood friend of mine, too. His son was taken out of the grave and placed in front of the house. You know? And that was after the major killing that happened. So, those people—a wandering soldier sees you and doesn't like your face, and says, "Boom!"

CM: Part of this project is possibly an excavation in Asaba. Do you have an opinion, if that's an important or a realistic proposition?

FO: It could be—it's a realistic proposition, but then, this is something that the Asaba people have to be asked, "Do you want this done?" In my society, there are a lot of taboos. There are things that they look at and say, "Hey, we don't want to go there." But it's something—if a good reason is presented why it should be done, I'm sure—most people are educated, and they will look at it from the angle you are coming [from].

CM: If it's done for the purpose of creating a memorial, do you think that's important to the people of Asaba?

FO: It's important to the people of Asaba inasmuch as it's important to me, because this is something that should not be forgotten. As a matter of fact, there is a record that the group in Asaba signed, *Onye Melona*. *Onye Melona* means "Every person is created. You do yours, you leave." So, this is a song that sings about this massacre, and they call names of individuals who were killed. They call a couple of them, and all that. That is something I have always kept, and there are days I feel like it, I put it on and I listen to it and just get myself sad. Then I stop. I let it go. So, I'm sure anything in memory of the people who were killed unnecessarily would be something that would be welcomed by the Asaba community.

CM: If the excavation was for the purpose of identifying and properly conducting—I use the word "proper," but conducting a more formal burial, do you think that's important to the people of Asaba?

FO: I'm sure. I'm sure. I'm sure it's something that some people want.

CM: You mentioned the word "genocide" earlier in our discussion.

FO: Right.

CM: You have opinions as to why this massacre happened, which we talked about generally.

FO: Mm-hm.

CM: Just to clarify, do you believe this was an act carried out by the federal government wholly or completely—and I'm asking that in question form.

FO: In retrospect, if one looks—from my own point of view, what had happened, starting from 1966 in Northern Nigeria where the Igbo people were taken on because the Northern elements believed that they had a coup that was lopsided, that killed a couple of their big people—but they also killed a couple of big people in the South—and that they were out for a vendetta. The massacre in the North, the genocide in the North, was more than enough to say, “Okay, we’ve had our fair game.” But when the Biafran secession—because those were incidents that led finally to secession—when the secession came on and you think you were fighting a war to keep the country one—they had a slogan then that to keep Nigeria one is a task that must be done. So, are you doing any costs? What has the killing of people who are not armed to do with keeping Nigeria one? People who have come out to say, “We welcome you,” because—just to let you know that we are not Biafrans against you—it does not—

So, in some respects, you think that it was a calculated decision to do, because in recent times there have been generals who were involved in the incident who were interviewed. And one of them has openly said he has no regret in what he did. Another one, Gowon, who was the president then, the military head of state who actually conducted the war, has been in Asaba and, whether pretentiously or he really meant it, apologized. He said he had no idea that the incident was to this magnitude. But be it as it may, it depends on who is interpreting it.

For me, who comes from Asaba, it was a calculated attempt to reduce the people to women, to eliminate the men. And that actually influenced my decision—it has affected a lot of things I do in life, how I relate to people. And I understand the Hausa language because I grew up there, I was born there, and I understand the Yoruba language because I grew up in the West. So, I’m an evil person. One cannot say—I’m basically, supposedly, (inaudible). But when it comes to the issues of what happened in my hometown in 1967, it’s something that I hold very personal. And that is the reason why I cannot bear arms with you and trust that we are facing a common foe, meanwhile I’m the foe. When I made the statement I made in police college, it was with my inner feelings. I said, “No. If I go into operations with you, I would take you out first. And that’s the only way I’ll be sure that I can survive going through this operation.”

So, that’s how—I’m sure a lot of Asaba people are very, very bad. No matter how much education you have acquired, no matter how much religion you have in you, say, “Let’s forget.” As a matter of fact, you know how they describe Asaba people: (speaks Igbo), “the forgiving town.” (repeats Igbo phrase) And which is the attitude of most Asaba people; they are very forgiving. But when it comes to this, it’s difficult. It’s very, very difficult to say, “Oh, okay, nothing happened.” No, it happened, whether it was deliberate or it was an accident. I believe it was deliberate.

CM: Before we end the video, is there any other element of this incident, to you personally or to the people of Asaba, that you would like to add?

FO: Well, the thing I'd like to have concerning this incident that happened in Asaba is that it's good that even the Nigerians—my peers, my age-mates who are Nigerians—should know that this happened, because a lot of times when for some reason or another you have reason to mention it to them, it's like, “How could this have happened?” But it did.

As a matter of fact, in recent times there have been other incidents that involved soldiers going to communities and shooting them, you know, for one reason or the other. And each time that happens, it simply reminds me of what happened in Asaba. There's one in part of Northern Nigeria, there is one in Odi not too long ago.<sup>2</sup> So, the more people know about this, the more the people who are inclined to do such actions know that it should be known. You know? And that, I believe, is the only way to avoid people just gathering a group of people for whatever reason, for whatever hatred or whatever anger, and shooting them.

CM: Well, thank you very much, sir. We appreciate your time.

FO: Thank you.

FMO: Thank you very much.

***End of interview***

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<sup>2</sup>The Odi massacre took place on November 21, 1999. A nearby gang killed several police officers, and in retaliation, the Nigerian president ordered the military to attack Odi's civilian population.