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Emmanuel Chukwara oral history interview by S. Elizabeth Bird and Fraser Ottanelli, December 15, 2009

Emmanuel Chukwara (Interviewee)

S. Elizabeth Bird (Interviewer)

Fraser M. Ottanelli (Interviewer)

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Interviewers: S. Elizabeth Bird (EB) and Fraser Ottanelli (FO)
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S. Elizabeth Bird: This is Elizabeth Bird—(several voices interrupt her) This is our introduction. Tuesday, December—

Ify Uraih: Today is Tuesday, December 15.

EB: Tuesday, December 15, 2009. We are in Asaba, Delta State, Nigeria. I'm here in the room with Fraser Ottanelli, myself, Elizabeth Bird, and we have Dr. Ify Uraih, and we are interviewing Mr. Emmanuel Chukwara.¹ And Dr. Uraih is going to translate. So, if you could talk first about what life was like—what you were doing in Asaba before the war, just before the troops came, and how you were living, your family, and so on.

Emmanuel Chukwara: Before the war I was in the Northern Region; that is, North, the Northern side of Nigeria. I was in Jos. So after the problem there in Jos, we returned home, come back home. And then—

Fraser Ottanelli: What were you doing in Jos?

¹Ify Uraih was also interviewed for the Asaba Memorial Oral History Project (DOI A34-00003). Patience Chukura, Emmanuel Chukwara's sister-in-law, was also interviewed for the Asaba Memorial Oral History Project (DOI A34-00008). Mrs. Chukura spells her name differently than Mr. Chukwara.

EC: I was working.

EB: What was your occupation?

EC: I was working then at (inaudible). Now they call it—

IU: Ministry of Works.

EC: Ministry of Works. I was working at (inaudible) when the trouble there started, all of us had to come back home.

EB: When did you come back to Asaba?

EC: I guess it was 1960—(speaking in Igbo).

IU: Sixty-six [1966].

EC: Nineteen sixty—

IU: Six [1966].

EC: Six [1966], yeah.

EB: So you came back to your home in Asaba. Did you have your family? How many—who was in your family at the time?

EC: Well, my wife, and my six children. I have four girls and two boys. No, I'm sorry, three boys, three girls.

IU: What about other relations?

EC: My mother-in-law. We are all together—my mother—we are all here in Asaba.

EB: So the children, were they going to school here in Asaba?

IU: (speaking in Igbo)

EC: Yeah, the kids, they were then schooling. My wife was then a teacher; she teach in one of the schools here.

EB: Which school did she teach in?

EC: She taught in St. Joseph's Catholic School; that's for the, uh—

IU: Girls.

EC: For the girls.

IU: St. Joseph's Catholic School for girls.

EB: When did you first hear about the arrival of the federal troops? What was the news that you heard?

EC: I was here when they came in. In fact, I was here when the Biafran troops went from the Eastern side of the country, they crossed here to Benin. Whatever happens there, I didn't know. But later, we saw them coming back. Now, the tension was so much. Every place, you see people gathering, discussing what was happening then. You can see the atmosphere that there is no security, there is danger. So my mother-in-law—the mother was then at Onitsha, and I decided I should take my wife and my children to Onitsha because this place is not safe. Because we are back from the North, I wasn't so much conversant with the atmosphere here, and I decided I should take my wife, my

children, back to Onitsha with my wife's mother—to go and meet the mother of my wife at Onitsha.

So, on our way going, I had to—I was then with my most senior brother, Christian Chukwara, and my senior brother Edwin Chukwara. We were drinking along the road here when I took that decision. Because a lot of people [were] running from here to there, but I decided I can't be going here and there with the children, I have to take them to Onitsha to meet my great mother-in-law. So my wife and the children, we left my brothers here and then decided (inaudible) to Onitsha. On our way going to Onitsha—we had not gone up to three poles. We heard a very big bump—sound—where, I don't know what it is then, but now I know it is shelling.

When I got to Onitsha, I dropped my wife and the children, I decided to come back. But before I could come back, they had already blown up the fridge—I mean, the bridge there, so I had to go through somewhere to come here. So when I was coming back, that shelling that fell that day, that was the first shelling that landed in Asaba here. It was in our house. If we can go there now, you can see with your camera. That shelling fell on top of my house and killed my mother. You know, I left my mother going to take them. Then it was—when I met my junior brother to my mother, when I was coming from that side, he told me, “Where have you been since yesterday?” Then I told him I took my wife and the children and my wife's mother to Onitsha. He said, “Ah, they've just buried my mother now.” They said my mother died in the shelling that struck the ceiling, killed. My mother was the first person the shelling killed in Asaba.

So, I didn't know what to do again. Now, I decided not to go back to our house because there was nobody there again. I said, “Where can I get my father, my relation, Edwin Chukwara and Christian Chukwara, and others?” So my mother's brother told me they're all in Umuezei—Umuezei is (inaudible)—said they've all ran to Umuezei. So—

EB: Umuezei, is that the village in—

IU: (inaudible)

EC: It's another village here.

IU: That's where we went to see the king of Asaba, the Asagba.

EC: So when we went there, I saw my father, Christian, Edwin, with the wife; they were all sitting there. I said, “How—what do we do now?” They said they don’t know. My father—that’s our father—left, and then went away. So after a very short time, Edwin and Christian Chukwara decided they should now go and look for our father. On their way going, the army people saw them along the way, opposite the police barracks there, and shot them and killed them.

EB: Both of them?

EC: Oh, yes, they shoot them, both of them. That’s my most senior brother. So, I decided the place is not safe again. (inaudible) I had to go back to Onitsha, to go meet my
—

EB: Do you know what day this was when they shot—the day that the shelling started and then the day that your brothers were killed?

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

EC: If my wife was here, she would have been very much, because she’s well—more educated than myself. She remembers all these things. If you want, I could go and bring her.

EB: It’s okay, we’ll continue.

EC: I couldn’t remember. It was within that time. That was the second day—that was the first day the federal troops landed in Asaba. They came through this way and I feel that shelling. They shoot that shelling from SPC [St. Patrick’s College] or from Okpanam, some miles away. The shelling landed on our house.

EB: What—

FO: Let me ask him. When your brother, your senior brother, was killed, was that the day before the big massacre, or was it—

EC: (speaking in Igbo)

IU: (speaking in Igbo)

EC: Yes.

IU: (speaking in Igbo)

EC: (speaking in Igbo)

IU: That same day.

EC: The same day.

EB: Your brothers went to—

EC: Because they were going to look for our father, they were killed. And before I had left, I had the information that my father was going back to the house, and they killed him along the river there, very close to our house.

EB: So they killed your father and two brothers?

EC: In fact, the whole family. There is another big brother which they killed. I was only the one left. I was only the one left: myself, my wife, and my children, because we ran to the other side. We went to the other side.

IU: (speaking in Igbo)

EC: (speaking in Igbo)

IU: (speaking in Igbo)

EC: Edwin Chukwara, Eddie Chukwara, was killed. Christian, and David Chukwara, our father. (speaking in Igbo) John Chukwara was killed, and my mother, my mother.

FO: So your mother was killed by the shellings that were—

EC: The shelling killed my mother the day I left with my wife. Because I was leaving—we'd gone out to the Catholic church here when we heard that heavy noise. I didn't know it was on top of her house. So, when I got to Onitsha and dropped my children and my wife, I found a way through the bush. Coming this side now, I meet a junior brother to my mother, who told me, "Where have you been since yesterday?" I said, "I've just relocated my family." Which he was the one that told me that just—but, in fact, without a coffin. They buried her with cloth, you know, they tied her. But there was nobody around, you see?

EB: What about your brothers and your father? Were they buried, or were they buried properly?

IU: (speaking in Igbo)

EC: (speaking in Igbo) They buried my two brothers just in front of the police barrack. If you come there, I can show you.

IU: (speaking in Igbo)

EC: (speaking in Igbo) We are not there, but we are told when we come back that they buried them just where they shot them, opposite the police barracks, just at the main road there. You know, you have police barracks there. We'll go there.

IU: I think he's talking about Ogbeosowa, where you have that mass grave.

EB: He was part of the, uh—he participated in the dance—

EC: (speaking in Igbo)

IU: Okay. Most of them were in there.

EC: Because I was not there when they killed my daddy.

EB: Who buried your brothers?

EC: (speaking in Igbo) The wife of Eddie [Edwin] and the wife of Christian, when they heard they had killed their husbands, so they came down from the village there. So they dug the ground (inaudible).

EB: Are they still here?

IU: Okay. (speaking in Igbo)

EC: Oh, yes. (speaking in Igbo)

IU: The woman you interviewed.

FO: Interviewed, yes.

EB: Oh, my gosh!

FO: Oh, yes.

EC: That's the wife to the brother.

EB: (laughs)

IU: (speaking in Igbo)

EB: Oh, yes, Mrs. Chukura. Yes, yes, of course. Yes.

EC: You see?

EB: I see.

EC: It was terrible, you see, and—well, I didn't know what to say, but it's something one cannot recollect exactly what happened. There's just so much everywhere in Asaba. What was happening in the end of the village is not exactly what is happening here. You see? (speaking in Igbo) They bring out people and said that they should dance. While they were dancing, they started killing them.

EB: You were not there at that time?

EC: If you want—I think (inaudible) would have told you about the people—the other side.

IU: (inaudible) has told us.

EC: And my most senior sister, the husband, they killed him just the same place they killed Edwin (inaudible).

IU: Yes, the father.

EC: The father was killed just opposite there—in the same place.

IU: Okay.

EB: So there were many different people killed in many different places?

IU: (speaking in Igbo)

EC: (speaking in Igbo)

IU: Yes.

EC: (speaking Igbo) what happened the other side. (speaking in Igbo)

IU: Okay.

EC: (speaking in Igbo) In fact, as I've told you, my mother was the first victim. Yeah, she was the first victim. In fact, if you come to our house now where we used the zinc to close where the shelling—you'll see all those things. They are still there.

EB: So when the people were called out to go to the dance and into Ogbeosowa, you were not there? Your father was there?

EC: (speaking in Igbo)

IU: He was not there, but his father was there.

EB: Did you see the bodies, the dead people after the massacres?

EC: (speaking in Igbo)

IU: Okay. He did not see the corpses, but he saw—

EC: You can see the heap of sand over the place—

IU: At that time—

EC: I can show you where they buried people. In fact, the way going to my house now—there is a house there. There used to be a field there when they buried people there. It's just there where I saw my daddy's slippers. I hope you know what a slippers is?

FO: (inaudible)

EB: (inaudible)

EC: Uh-huh. I saw one of his slippers there, because he normally used one type of slippers—we call it Ghana slippers—and I saw one leg there. Which I suspected maybe he might not be one of those people that they buried there.

EB: So where were you when the people were being killed in the square?

EC: (speaking in Igbo)

IU: He escaped—

EC: I escaped.

IU: And he was on his way in the bush.

EC: To the same side—to the same road that I came by. I was now going back, because I was in Biafra when the war ended. I couldn't come back here again.

EB: So you left at that time?

EC: I left at that time, when the massacre was so much.

EB: And you didn't come back?

EC: I didn't come back again.

EB: So you made your way to Onitsha?

EC: Onitsha. Her mother was there. Three—actually, it was three years before the war ended.

EB: So you met up again with your wife and children?

EC: No, I was there with my wife and the children.

EB: What do you think about—what impact, what effect did this terrible event have on the town of Asaba? What, um—

EC: Well, what really happened is that, um, we don't have any say. We don't have any say. In fact, it was terrible. (crying) It's something that I remember. You see, it was terrible. We don't have any say. We are not part of the trouble. We are not part of the trouble. We aren't part of the trouble. You see?

(to unidentified person) Thank you. (crying)

You see, we came from North, from Jos, myself and my wife. And, um, for us, it's things like that. And we are not part of that problem. Why should we be—why should we suffer that type of killing? In fact, in the whole Nigeria, no place have suffered killing like this town. You—we are surprised now to see people coming out. There is no house, no room that did not suffer the killing. There are places that you have three doctors, they were all killed. Father, mother, everybody. In my mother's case, the senior brother was killed, the next sister was killed, the junior ones—about five of them were all killed. You see?

So, it's not something that you remember. We've forgotten about all these things. Anytime you remember a situation like that, you feel somehow. You see, when I came down from—I was only the man in the house, where you have more than thirty, twenty people. I was only the one in the house, left in the house. They were all killed. Dennis—a lot of them, if I could sit to remember those who are direct brothers and sisters and those who are relations—you know, nieces—of my father they killed. There were so many.

EB: It must have been a great responsibility for you—

EC: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

EB: —to be one of the few men left.

EC: Well, that is the responsibility. (speaking in Igbo) Oh, at that time, because you have the grown-up ones now. The ones—because my children, they are all big peoples now. They now take part of training most of the young people from other parents, which were all Chukwaras. They have the big ones now, so the burden is not so much on me now.

EB: But at the time?

EC: At that time, they were just small, small kids. They were small, small kids.

EB: So it was not just your children, but your brother's children and others you were taking care of?

EC: Oh, yes. At that time, I took the whole—I was responsible for my children, for the children of my relations, too. Uh-huh. And the woman you met at Lagos, she was in charge of training all the children because she was then working. Uh-huh, you see? So, but that is what we—it was a terrible thing. They killed a lot of people here. There is no house, no room, which was not touched. You see?

EB: Can you tell us the names of everybody in your family who died?

EC: [Speaking in Igbo – translation based on interviewer's notes]

David Chukwara – Father
Edwin Chukwara – Brother
Christian Chukwara – Brother
Mgboke Chukwara – Mother
Dennis Chukwara – Brother
Samson Chukwara – Brother

We lost about five or six males, grown-up ones. The others were just small kids.

EB: Do you today feel bitter, angry, about what happened? How do you feel?

EC: We are all human beings. They'd been talking to us. We are Christians. So, what are we going to do? Are we going to fight back? We don't have gun, we don't have knife, we are not (inaudible) to fight. We should talk, just as I'm talking. Anybody who comes to ask what happened, we tell them. And it's a thing that one can never forget in life. I can never forget such a—even if I don't do anything because I don't have the

strength to do, I won't forget it. Because this was a house where there was peace, harmony, everybody was—suddenly, you see people falling just like that, shooting (inaudible). You can just imagine my mom, who told me, “Where I am going?” I said, “Let me just go and drop these children and my wife at Onitsha.” The next moment, the story I heard from the lookout, they had just buried her. Imagine what it means. You see? So it was just like that, all over the place. There is no house you go now—if I could get you somebody now, he would tell you such story, too. It's the same thing.

EB: Do you know—do you—you probably didn't see, but when the soldiers were shooting, do you think they were shooting because somebody ordered them? Why did so many—

IU: (speaking in Igbo)

EC: You know, what happened in Nigeria that time—in Nigeria, we have three regions at that time, where you have the Igbos, the Yorubas, and the Hausas. And the head of the government, the Prime Minister then, was a Hausa man, and there was a coup which somebody, Nzeogwu—Nzeogwu is somebody from this side who was in the army. So the feelings of those people there: maybe they thought it's a planned something where maybe the Yorubas or the Igbos planned—so anybody that answered Igbo name has been marked out to kill. So immediately they come down the Igbo—where you have the Igbo race. They started killing. I hope you understand what I am saying. So this is what I think. But not everybody's in the army and because we are (inaudible) where you have reasonable—the army people did what they feel they can do.

EB: What do you think should be done to remember? Do you think there should be a memorial? What kind of thing should be done?

EC: (speaking in Igbo)

IU: He's told me he thinks it would be nice to have a memorial, a monument where people will see, to know that this thing—

EC: What happened at that time.

IU: At that time.

EC: I think that is all you can do, because most of the people that were affected, most of them have died. When you talk in my family now, a lot of them have died. So, I don't think there is anything—it's just we that are left behind would occasionally remember things like that, just as you people are asking me now, otherwise (inaudible) completely. What would I do?

FO: Do you talk to your grandchildren about what happened?

EC: Oh, yes. Yes, they know, my children know. They know what happened. And they're not happy about it. I know for sure that the life we are living, one day, somebody will get up and say, "The way you killed my dad is not good." Maybe he might feel to revenge if a sort of settlement does not come. I hope you understand the point I am making.

EB: Some people have suggested that the grave should be opened and look for the people who died. What do you think about that?

EC: (speaking in Igbo) I think that is nice.

IU: He says that—first he says, "Will they know—"

EC: How can you know the corpse?

IU: How can you know the corpse? I said it's possible to know. Then he said that that would be nice.

EC: It would be nice. Just like myself, my two brothers there, I know where they were buried, and I know if they are dug out or something like that, we could know that these are our relations, are my brothers.

IU: But you father was buried in Ogbeosowa.

EC: In Ogbeosowa.

IU: Would you like for him to be exhumed?

EC: Of course, of course. If it is possible. But how can I know this is the bone of my father?

EB: Well, that's difficult.

EC: (laughs) Okay.

EB: Is there anything else you would like to tell us? Anything that we haven't asked, or that you think is important to say?

EC: (speaking in Igbo)

IU: Again, he says that—he's talking about reparation, and that the government did not do anything to heal their wounds. I think that is possible, then, that we—

EC: It could have been a little bit better.

EB: Thank you very much.

EC: Okay, thank you.

EB: We understand that it was painful and we—

EC: Thank you.

EB: We appreciate you taking the time.

EC: Thank you. (speaking in Igbo)

IU: Okay. He said that somebody—

EC: (speaking in Igbo)

End of interview