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# Osakwe Igwemma oral history interview by S. Elizabeth Bird and Fraser Ottanelli, December 12, 2009


Osakwe Igwemma (Interviewee)

S. Elizabeth Bird (Interviewer)

Fraser M. Ottanelli (Interviewer)

Ifeanyi Uraih

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Translator: Ify Uraih (IU)  
Interviewer: S. Elizabeth Bird (EB), Fraser Ottanelli (FO)  
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Interview location: Asaba, Delta State, Nigeria  
Transcribed by: Sarah Dockray  
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Audit Edit by: Jenica Ibarra  
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Final Edit by: Mary Beth Isaacson, MLS  
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[Transcriber's note: Dr. Ify Uraih will be translating between English and Igbo for Elizabeth Bird, Fraser Ottanelli, and Osakwe Igwemma.]

**Elizabeth Bird:** All right, this is Sunday, December 12 [2009]. We're in Asaba, Delta State, Nigeria. This is Elizabeth Bird with Fraser Ottanelli, and we are interviewing Mr. Osakwe Igwemma. Also in the room is Dr. Ify Uraih, who is going to interpret for us. If you could—begin by talking a little bit about you, your family, and what life was like in Asaba before the war.

**Unknown Man:** (talking about another interviewee) (inaudible) He's an elderly man. He's very (inaudible). So, we have these groups from (inaudible), so we want to bring you to them. (inaudible) before the other young man. So, when we finish with this, please, it's next on the line.

EB: All right, that's good. Would you like to join—is he going to join us?

Unknown Man: Yeah, if you—

EB: Just put that chair over there, and he can just sit here and watch. (murmurs in the background)

**Ify Uraih:** (Speaking in Igbo)

**Osakwe Igwemma:** (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: He was with his uncle in the north. His father was already dead at the time before the war started. Then, when the crisis started in the north, they came back to Asaba. They were in Asaba when the war started.

EB: Who was living in the house with him at the time when the war started?

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: He was living with his mother and four brothers and two sisters.

EB: Was he oldest, youngest?

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: He was the oldest.

EB: He was the oldest. So, in—so, there was living as normal, before this happened.

IU: Yes.

EB: So, when did they first hear about the Federal Troops?

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: They started hearing that the Federal Troops were on their way from about the third of October [1967]. They were hearing shelling. But, because nobody knew the sounds of shelling, they thought it was the lookout cannon that we use for festivities around here. We didn't know what it sounded like. So, what they—everybody was agitated that something was going to happen.

EB: Were the people afraid, or were they excited?

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: There was so much excitement. People were frightened and families are separated and people are running around.

EB: So, what happened when the troops did come into—?

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: On the sixth—the first time, they danced around on the sixth to welcome, and they danced. Then on the seventh there were murders and they started to kill around the town, and then suspected that something was going to go wrong because they already seen corpses lining the road as they were moving along.

EB: We heard from other people that there were killings on the sixth of October near the soccer field, the—near the football field, near—and the people were killed, lots, in groups on the sixth by the—

IU: Yeah.

EB: —by the football fields. Does he recall—does he know about that—near the police station also?

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: He says yes. He saw a lot of corpses around the police station and in the lots opposite this hotel. And he was not—they were not sure what they are going to do with them because he saw two captains quarreling among themselves. One said they should wait first, because there are more troops coming from outside Asaba to reinforce. And at that time some corpses [were] already getting rotten and smelling.

EB: So, he didn't see the people killed on the sixth, he saw their—

IU: He just saw the corpses. He didn't see the action.

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: As we were dancing, they would take one or two people from the dance group and shoot them down.

EB: This is on the sixth?

OI: On the seventh morning.

IU: On the seventh morning.

EB: Okay, let's move—so we move to the seventh.

IU: Yes.

EB: So, if he could describe the day of October 7 from when he—

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: So, they danced around the town, until they got to the front of what was a place I will show you tomorrow, called *Mecab*. And then they moved all of them—another group joined them, and they moved all of them further inside and separated the men from the women. They took the women across the road to a maternity room, and then took the men further inside.

**Fraser Ottanelli:** Could you ask him, this group that he's part of, where it started out from?

IU: He told me already—

FO: Oh, okay.

IU: So, I missed that. They started off from my house, my family house, the group he's talking about. (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: From the front of my family house they got a lot of people and they moved, so already there are people coming from different directions of the town.

EB: Does he remember why he learned—how did he learn that this was what was wanted—what was expected?

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: Okay, so the chiefs of the town got out themselves and told everyone, "Look, let's contribute money, and let us welcome the troops by offering them money and offering them presents." That's how they all knew. They were sending messages across to different people to come out and join.

EB: So, now he's in the group of men that's been separated from the women. Can he give us an idea of how many men and boys were in this group?

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: Five hundred thousand.

EB: Five hundred, not—



OI: Uh, five hundred.

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: Five hundred, or even six [hundred].

IU: Yeah.

EB: Five or six hundred men?

IU: Five or six hundred men.

OI: Men.

EB: Men and boys.

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: (inaudible) sixty, seventy, forty, thirty, even fifteen.

FO: Even the young ones.

OI: Even the young ones, man.

EB: So the youngest would be about—

OI: Ten.

EB: Ten.

IU: Around ten. The youngest would be about ten.

EB: Can you let him describe what happened—the men and boys were separated from the women. Then—what happened then?

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: Once the women and children were asked to go, they asked everybody to kneel down —

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: And they brought out their machine guns—you know, the ones with the chain bullets —and they started shooting at everybody.

OI: Close range.

EB: But had people seen the machine guns before then?

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: They were mounted on top of their Land Rovers and we are going along with the procession, so they saw.

FO: So these were machine guns on tripods.

IU: On tripods, yes.

EB: So—was it completely unexpected? Did they just—they set up the machine guns, and then they started firing just—

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: At first they thought that because they had some officers hiding among themselves whether to do or not to do. They didn't know. But, when—they also saw—once in a while, they take one or two people—

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: —or three and kill. So, that was—

FO: Were all the machine guns on cars, or on Land Rovers, or were some hidden around?

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: They were dismantled from the car and put on the ground around—

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: Yeah, on tripod.

EB: Did there seem to be disagreement—that there was disagreement between some of the officers about what should be done. Is that what he's saying?

IU: Yes. (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: He said that there was disagreement among the officers. Some didn't want it to happen, but some were insisting that they had to shoot, so the ones that insisted thus continued.

EB: So, they knew the order of them.

IU: Yes, but he didn't know about ranking at that time. He didn't know it was mostly the officer or the other.

EB: So, could you describe then what happened to you? You were there, and what did you see and what did you experience?

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: So, he said he was lucky, because he was in the middle of the pack and then a lot of corpses fell on top of him; that his head was covered with other human blood; and that while they were shooting, some people who were injured were asking them to do them a favor and kill them. (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: Okay, they started shooting around five, and they finished about thirteen minutes after seven.

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: They were very, very (inaudible). So it took about two hours and thirteen minutes, the entire period of shooting.

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: So, when—

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: He saw a lot of people that were shot on the neck; some were shot on their waists, some on the legs. And these people were begging to be shot. But he came out and crawled into the bush and escaped from there.

EB: Who was he with in particular? Was he with other family members when all this happened?

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: There were three members—two of his brothers that went with him—but none of them was killed.

EB: None of them was killed?

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: Okay, none of them was killed, but one of them was injured when he was escaping: but not from bullet wound. He fell into a—what they used to call a pit latrine. And then he was injured by—

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

EB: So, when he and his brothers escaped, what happened next? Where did they go?

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: Okay. He escaped and went to his house—

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: —and went to his house, and there he met two of his brothers. And then in the morning their uncle took them, and they escaped to the bush in the neighboring town called Ibusa.

EB: How long did they stay there?

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: Okay. The first one was they spent about one week and three days. And then Federal Troops came to Ibusa, started burning houses again, so they ran into the bush and spent another two weeks before they came back to Asaba.

EB: When they came back, what did they find in Asaba?

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: When they came back—

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: When they came back, they didn't have any means of surviving, so the soldiers themselves were bringing food for them to eat.

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: And the Red Cross people. He happened to be also in the Red Cross.

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

EB: What was the effect on the entire town, the loss of buildings? What did the town look like?

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: They burned the house, and they burnt eight other houses in the village. And then, um, (inaudible) long after, they were able to build another house for himself and his family.



EB: So, where were they living with the house burnt down?

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: Okay, there was a house nearby that—

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: Uncompleted. So, they go in there to sleep in the night. (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: Okay. They then went and—again to another village and got thatch—you know, the thatch things—and covered it. That's how they stayed.

EB: Who was there with him at that time?

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: His mother and one of his sisters went across—the last one of their family went across to Biafra, but he and the other members remained.

EB: What was your work—profession—at that—you were—how old was he in—

IU: He was born in—

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

EB: Were you—what were you working as? Were you a student or—

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: He was a welder.

EB: A welder?

IU: Yes. (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: Okay. He was a welder, then a marine sea trader.

EB: And he wasn't married then?

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: No, he was unmarried.

EB: Did you stay in Asaba—have you always been in Asaba since then?

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: He left Asaba in 1972 and went to Lagos, and then he left Lagos later on to Maiduguri, where he became a trader.

FO: How did he support—how did you support yourself after you had to leave Asaba and go into the bush and came back to Asaba?

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: In the farms, inside the bush they were going to have raise crops of people that have gone away. Like yams: they would dig up the yam and get snails from the bush and eat until they came back to Asaba, where the soldiers were feeding them.

EB: Snails?

IU: Snails. Snails.

EB: We heard from other people that another thing happened in 1968, March of 1968. That the federal troops came back and took people out of the town to Saint Patrick's College and then killed people who remained in the town.

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: Okay. He said that afternoon he started hearing gunshots again and a lot of people ran away. Then they were taken to Saint Patrick's. It was at Saint Patrick's that the Red Cross were feeding them. (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: They were there for two months.

EB: And were people killed in Asaba who did not flee?

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: In Saint Patrick's, all they did was they dug a trench around and protected the people there. But the people in the town—they killed a lot of people who didn't come to Saint Patrick's.

EB: When you came back from Saint Patrick's into Asaba, did you find people dead?

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: Okay. They burnt houses and they saw skeleton of people on the ground when they came back.

EB: What do you think should happen now? What should happen to remember, to memorialize? Is it important to remember this?

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: He said the memory of it is very painful to him, and that in his family, in his extended family, that seven people got killed. And many of the people that the—

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: They were the breadwinners of the house. All their children opted to leave and they have nobody to train them. So when he remembers, that is so painful to him. (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: He said that what he wants done is for the children of those people to be helped. Then I said, "What kind of help?" He said like, "Train them to learn some job." I said, "Well, this is forty-two years ago and those children are now men." Then he said, "But they could have been better people than they now are," and that their children need help.

EB: So, these terrible disasters, they changed the town of Asaba. Did they change things that—how did they change the way of the Asaba people?

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: He said that—

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: He said that the reason why we survived is because the people of the town loved themselves—that there was a lot of self-help. A lot of people helped people who did not have to begin treat. And that is how he managed to overcome some of the problems.

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: Even when he was leaving town to go to Lagos, he didn't have any money to do so. He was therefore relieved that one of the Indians, who was a vendor, he had a (inaudible) that carries newspapers from Asaba to Lagos, and he didn't pay any money for it.

EB: One of the things we wanted to do was try to document the names of all the people that died. Would he be able to tell us the names of the seven family members who died?

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

EB: And the relationship.

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: [Speaking in Igbo – translation based on interviewer’s notes]

Ogbueshi Nwosisi - Uncle

Godwin Okocha – Uncle

A.C. Chacha – Uncle

Sam Chacha – Uncle

Christopher Igwemma – Uncle

Godwin Okocha – Uncle

Emeka Ejinekonye – Uncle

EB: Is there anything else he would like to tell us?

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: He said that he destructed a lot of lives, people’s lives. A lot of people could not go further than they did, because their father was killed.

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: And then some people never were able to build their homes again. They opted to (inaudible) people’s homes. (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: He says that each time he passes the place where they were shot at, that he gets very bad memories and that he doesn’t pass it anymore. But that he would like to see a memorial built there so that people will come there and see—

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: And ask questions and see what has happened. That is what he would like.

EB: Thank you very much.

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

***End of interview***