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December 2009

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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Asaba Memorial Oral History Project Oral History Program Florida Studies Center University of South Florida, Tampa Library

Digital Object Identifier: A34-00010 Interviewee: Osakwe Igwemma (OI) Translator: Ify Uraih (IU)

Interviewer: S. Elizabeth Bird (EB), Fraser Ottanelli (FO)

Interview date: December 12, 2009

Interview location: Asaba, Delta State, Nigeria

Transcribed by: Sarah Dockray
Transcription date: June 1, 2010 to June 3, 2010

Audit Edit by: Jenica Ibarra Audit Edit date: June 14, 2010

Final Edit by: Mary Beth Isaacson, MLS

Final Edit date: June 30, 2010

[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)

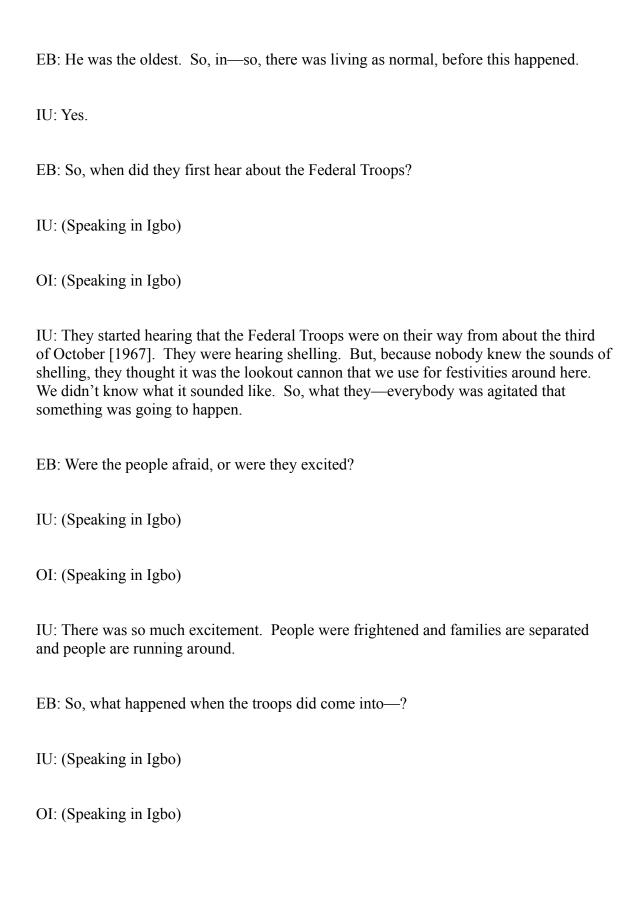
Ify Uraih: (Speaking in Igbo)

Osakwe Igwemma: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: He was the oldest.

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.

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: 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.

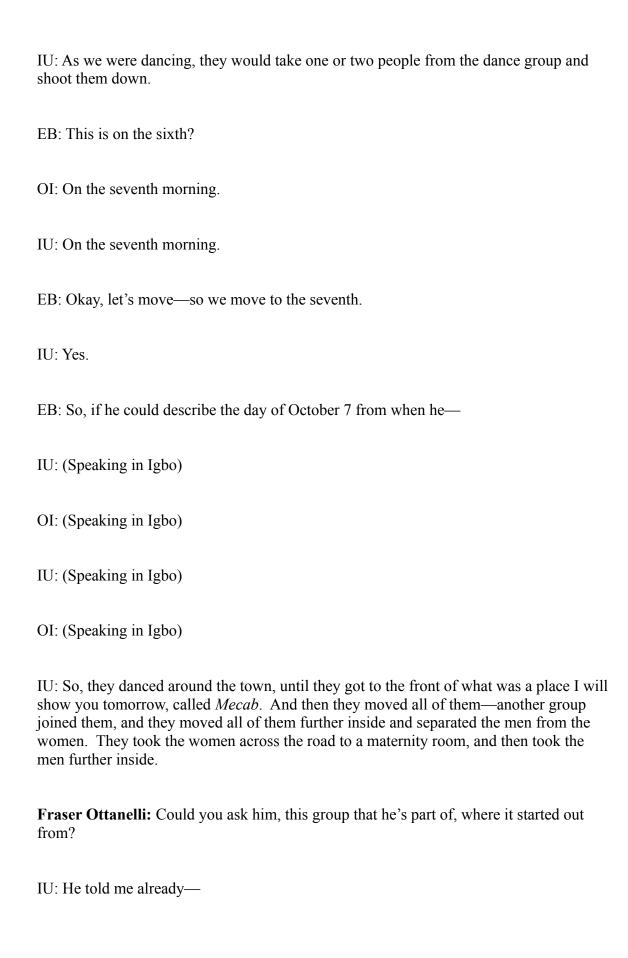
EB: So, he didn't see the people killed on the sixth, he saw their—

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

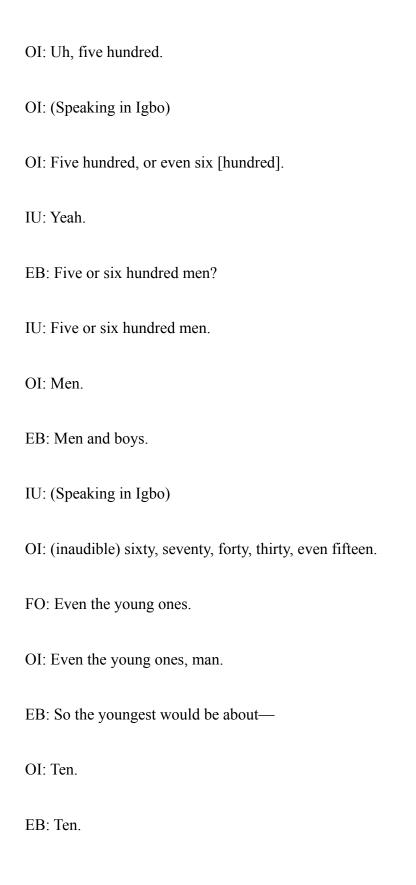
OI: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

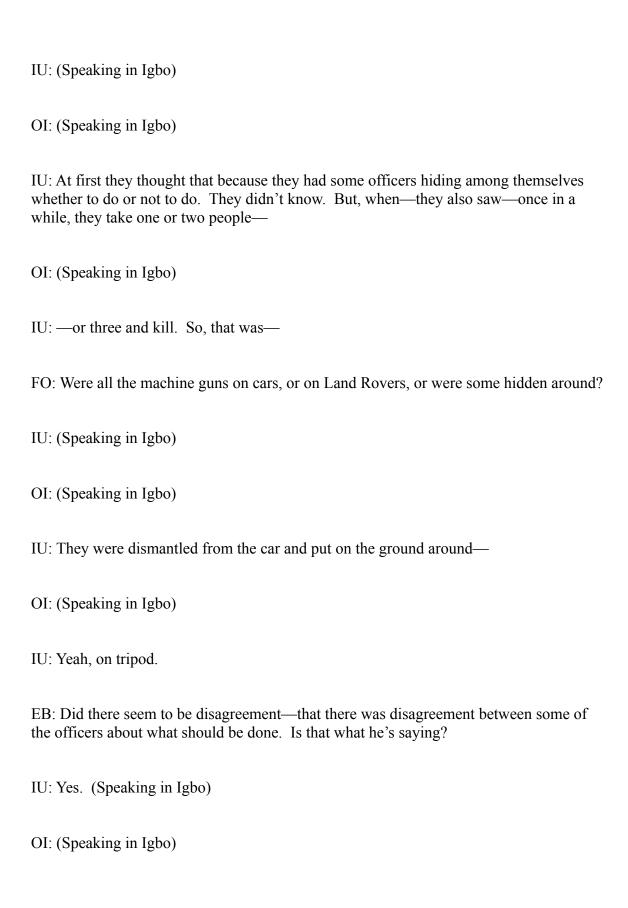
OI: (Speaking in Igbo)



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—

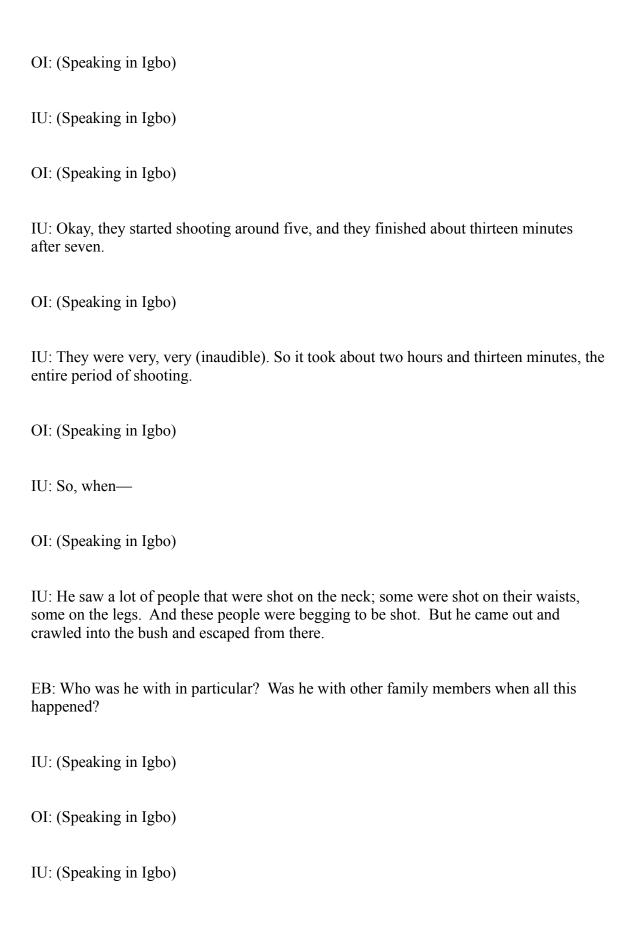


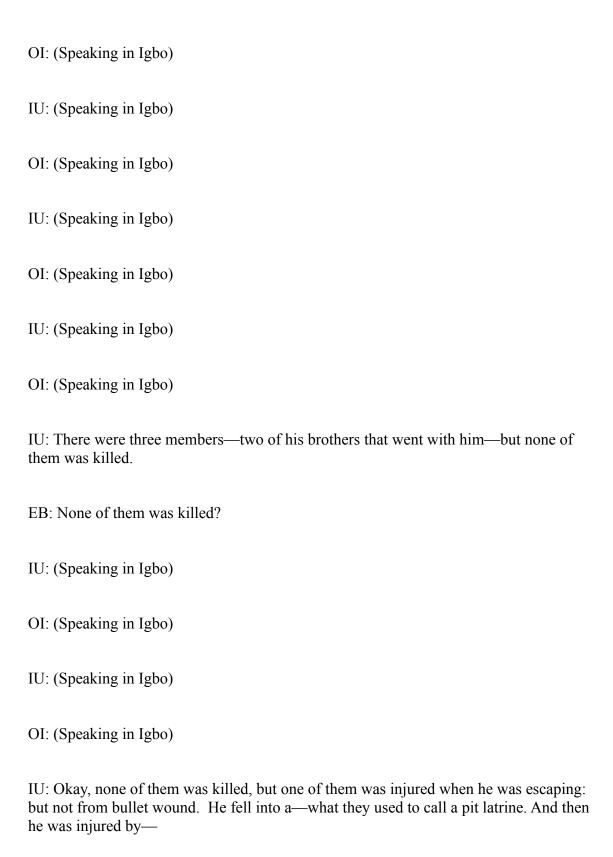
IU: Around ten. The youngest would be about ten.
EB: Can you let him describe what happened—the men and boys were separated from the women. Then—what happened then?
OI: (Speaking in Igbo)
IU: Once the women and children were asked to go, they asked everybody to kneel down
OI: (Speaking in Igbo)
IU: And 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—

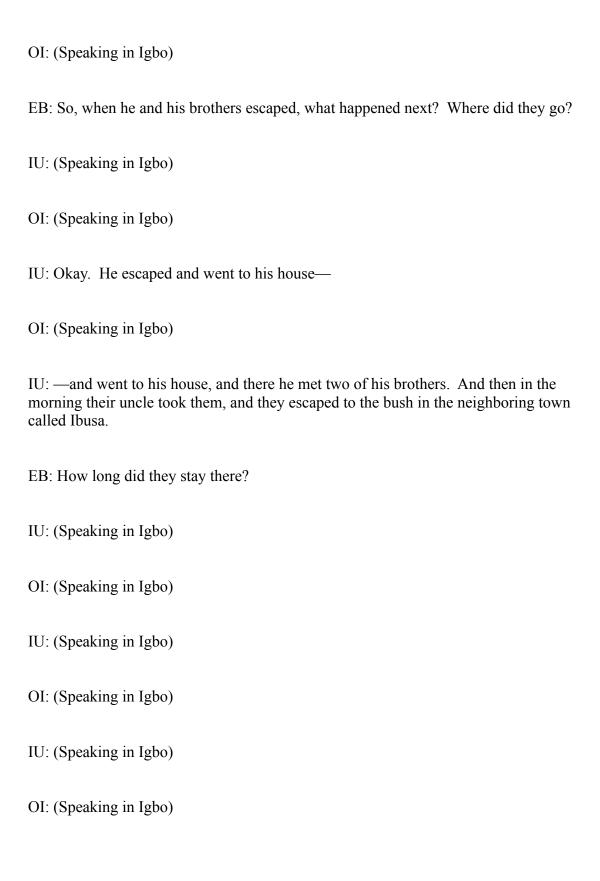


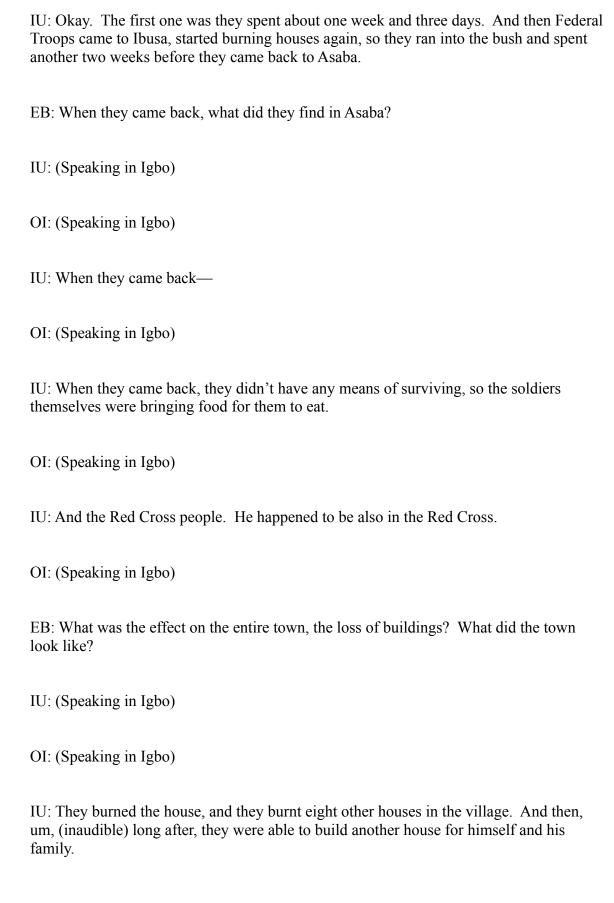
IU: He said that there was disagreement among the officers. Some didn't want it to happen, but some were insisting that they had to shoot, so the ones that insisted thus continued. EB: So, they knew the order of them. IU: Yes, but he didn't know about ranking at that time. He didn't know it was mostly 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)

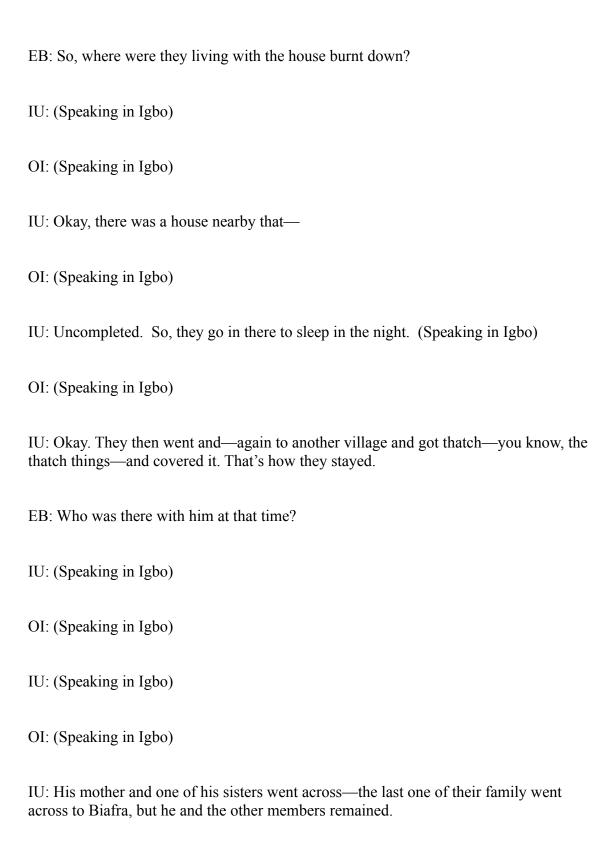
IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

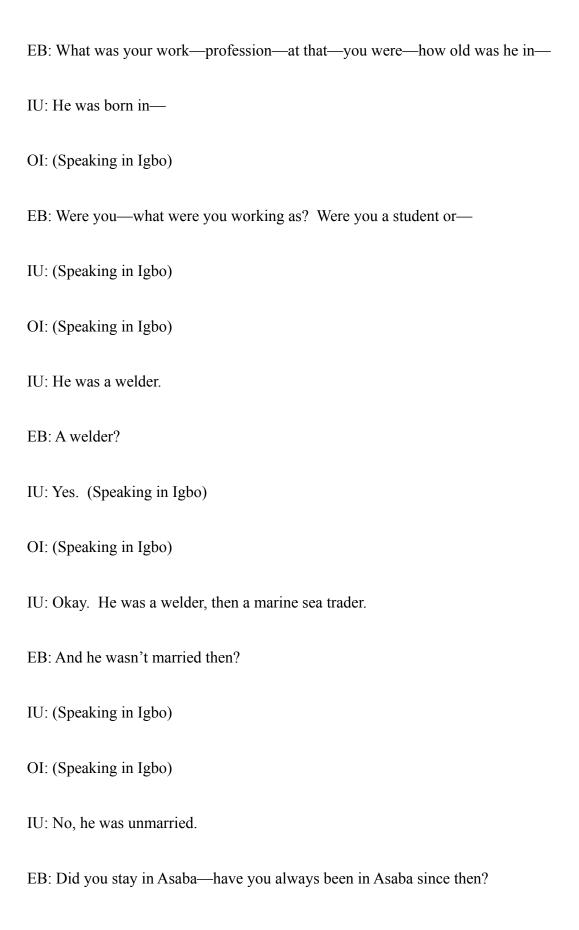


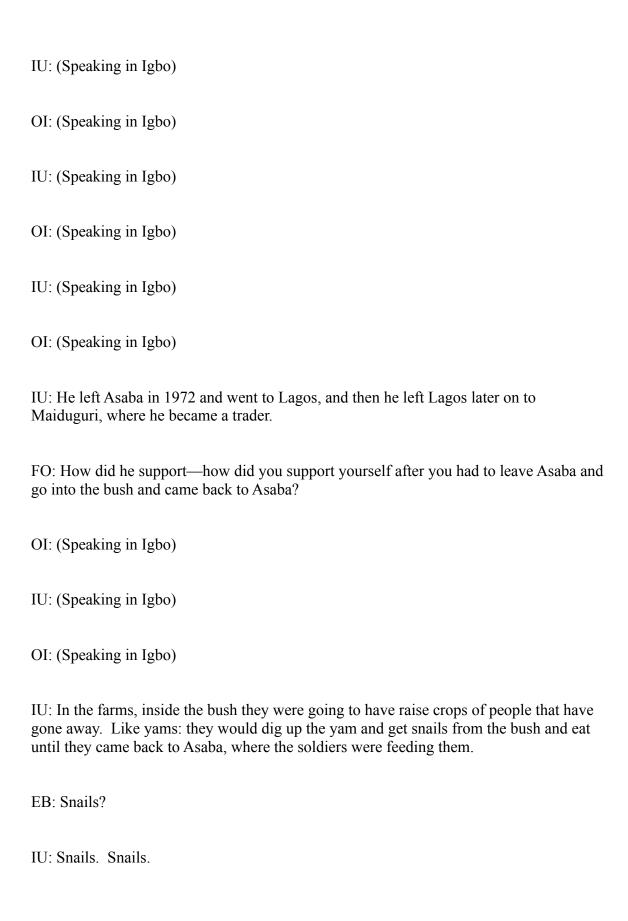










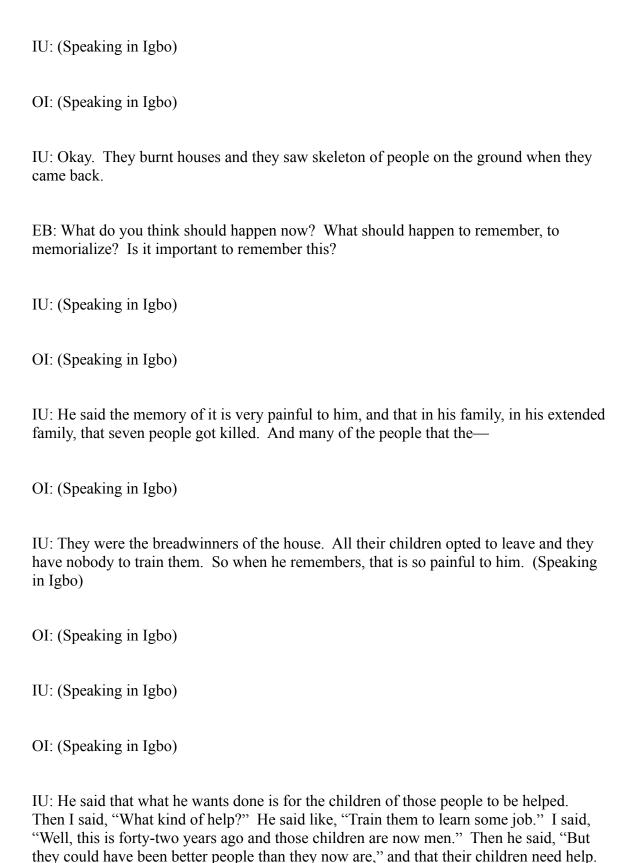


EB: We heard from other people that another thing happened in 1968, March of 1968. That the federal troops came back and took people out of the town to Saint Patrick's College and then killed people who remained in the town.

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?



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