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# Frank Igeh oral history interview by Fraser Ottanelli and S. Elizabeth Bird, December 13, 2009

Frank Igeh (Interviewee)

Fraser M. Ottanelli (Interviewer)

S. Elizabeth Bird (Interviewer)

Ifeanyi Uraih

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Interviewers: Fraser Ottanelli (FO), S. Elizabeth Bird (EB)  
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[Transcriber's note: Ify Uraih does not translate for the entire interview. He aids communication only when Frank Igeh does not understand the question in English.]

**Fraser Ottanelli:** Today is Sunday, December 13 [2009], and we are in Asaba, Delta State, and we are talking to Mr. Frank Igeh. I'm Fraser Ottanelli. Together with me in the room is Liz Bird and Dr. Ify Uraih.<sup>1</sup> Good afternoon, and thank you very much for agreeing to meet with us. I would like to start asking a question about your family, who were the members of the family, where you lived, what your father did: this is in the period even before the war broke out.

**Frank Igeh:** Do I have to start with my father?

FO: You may start with—yes, if you wish.

FI: Well, my father died when I was very young. My father died when I was very young, and I was brought up by an uncle.

FO: So you were living with—?

FI: I was living with my uncle.

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<sup>1</sup>Ify Uraih was also interviewed for the Asaba Memorial Oral History Project DOI: A34-00003.

FO: Did you have any brothers and sisters?

FI: Yes, I had brothers and sisters.

FO: How many did you have?

FI: I have two sisters and a brother from the same mother.

FO: And were they older than you? Were they—

FI: That is a two—my mother had both two male and two female.

FO: And where were you in this number of kids?

FI: Number of, uh? (speaking in Igbo)

**Ify Uraih:** Yes, in Igbo (speaking in Igbo).

FI: I was number three among the children of my mother.

FO: When the war began, where were you living?

FI: I was in Asaba, here.

FO: In Asaba. Okay. Could you describe, then, the events leading up to what happened in October of 1967? You can decide when you want—where you want to begin, but if you could tell us what your recollections are of the period leading up to the killings.

FI: Well, um, that was before the massacre of the persons in Asaba, or before the whole crisis started?

FO: Wherever you want, if you want to begin before the crisis began and then we can move on to the massacre in Asaba. Wherever you want to begin.

IU: (speaking in Igbo)

FI: The third [of October 1967] was very quiet, of course, with some (inaudible) activities of the inhabitants. So, that is just about that, about that. I personally was a member of Nigerian Red Cross Society; that's then British Red Cross Society. When the crisis started, I was called upon to come to training at Benin [City]; that is in preparation for the events of the war coming up. Then, after the training, I came back to Asaba. Then when the troubles started in Asaba—'cause at the time Biafrans crossed over to Benin, I was in Asaba. Some of my people crossed over to Biafra. I still stayed in Asaba hoping that I still have the duty—implemented the training that I got from Benin. Because I was brought up—I mean, I was trained as a Red Cross to give first aid to victims of the crisis. So, I stayed back in Asaba.

FO: How old were you when these events—at this time?

FI: Well, I was born in 1930. Then 1932—uh, 1960—1967—no, 1966.

FO: And in sixty-six [1966] you had been trained by the Red Cross in Benin?

FI: Yes.

FO: And so, did you witness the arrival or the passage of the Biafran army through Asaba in September?

IU: (speaking in Igbo)

FI: I was in Asaba. I was in Asaba. When they crossed over to Benin—from Benin to Ore, we—in fact, we thought that it was just a war between the combatants. We didn't know that the war would descend to civilians. So, I was in Asaba. But the saddest thing was when these people—when the federal troops captured Benin, driving Biafrans back home, back, back, some of our people—many of our people crossed over with the Biafrans. Then we stayed in Asaba or until they came on that October, October—that was on the day that they came to Asaba.

FO: How did you feel when you knew that the troops were coming? Were you afraid? Were you happy?

FI: Well, in fact, the very day they came, we were not happy because there was a sort of—you know, people were crossing. There's no celebrating anymore in the town. There's no celebrating anymore in the town. But what I did was, we went to a certain place in our—behind our house, to hide. After hiding—we were hiding there until we first woke up, meaning that these people came in and started burning the house. So, I went inside the house and put on my Red Cross uniform. I told my people, "If you see me, better—if you don't see me, know they've killed me." Then I just went out. On my way going, I just—I went to verify actually whether the people are federal troops or still Biafran troops. By the time I was outside from my house towards one of the routes, I heard them spoke Hausa; then it came to my mind that these people are Biafran soldiers. Then, I couldn't run anywhere. There were two soldiers. They came very close to me, they pointed gun at me, asking me, who am I? I would say to them, "Red Cross," but they did not know what Red Cross is.

FO: These were federal troops?

IU: Federal troops.

FI: Federal troops. They did not know what Red Cross is. I decided, since one of them ask the one pointing gun at me to shoot—he just spoke in Hausa. Then I heard it, I told him, "Don't shoot me, take me to your officer." Then, he took me to one of the officers. When I got there, he started asking me, who am I? I was telling him, with my uniform on; he did not know what I was. And they took me to another officer, then the officer recognized my uniform and said that I should go. And I left the area, I went home. So it was around 7:30 [PM]: the night was just coming.

FO: When these events were taking place, did you see any people being hurt, or anyone being killed, or any dead bodies?

FI: That very day, I heard that the people were shot dead, but I didn't see them. I didn't see them. It was the following morning that the people started rampaging, breaking houses of those who crossed over, removing their properties; there's a lot of this. They came to our place. When they came to my place, they saw me with my uniform and everything. Then I told them that yesterday, when I was taken away to one of the

officers, the first officer we met told them to take me to Captain Mathias, so I just captured the name that day, that day.

FO: And this is just as the troops had arrived?

FI: Yeah, that was the very day they arrived. So by the time they came before the morning, I wanted to break our place and see something. I told them that Captain Mathias said nobody should come near. They were surprised that I knew that officer.

FO: Could you spell the name of that captain?

IU: Mathias.

FI: Mathias.

FO: Oh, Mathias.

FI: Captain Mathias. So, they left that place and they went to round the houses, break in the houses, and then removing radio, properties, valuable properties. They just cart them away that day, (inaudible) that day. Then the third day, that was the day of massacre. That very day, they were just shooting gun indiscriminately, shooting everywhere. Few of us who were around—in fact, not few of us, because at the sound of this, the people were just—the people were hidden. The saddest thing, when they told the people to come out and welcome the soldiers, then they started coming out, and that was the time some people went around telling them, “Come out.” People were organizing to raise money and give to them.

FO: Was your family told to go out and greet the soldiers, too? Was your family asked to go and greet the soldiers?

FI: Yes, of course. Even my brother who was killed was one of them, just like us, as somebody in this place, this mindset. My brother was one of the people telling people, “Come out, let us dance.” And then they shortly killed him later, among the plaza at Ogbeosowa; he was one of the people they killed.

FO: So, people were told to go and welcome the troops?

FI: Yes.

FO: And what did you experience then? What did you see happen?

FI: Well, the people trooped out and as they trooped out singing, welcoming them, that was the group—these men who lived here (inaudible). They were taking them around, gathering other people, including some members of my family who were there killed, followed them. But they went around—but I didn't go out with them, I was just watching our area. Then they went out (inaudible) kill all of them.

FO: So, you did not join everybody else?

FI: I didn't join them. I didn't go out with them.

**Elizabeth Bird:** Why not? Why did you not go? Why? Why did you decide to stay?

FI: Well, naturally, I am not used to dancing. It was a gathering of people dancing and other things. Inasmuch as I don't like dancing, I didn't follow them to go anywhere. We did not even know that it was for them to gather there, to gather the people and kill. We thought it was ordinary dancing and welcoming them. But I didn't like going out and dancing. I didn't follow them.

FO: What did you experience after the people left and participated in this dance? What happened to you? What happened to you during the rest of the day? What did you see?

FI: Well, later on we heard that those of our people who went out with them, they were all shot. They were all killed. Some of my brothers and my in-laws who came to stay with us from Benin, they were all killed. They went with the people to the area [where] they killed the people.

FO: Did you hear the shots? Did you hear the machine guns firing?

FI: The place is far from my place. It is a little bit far from our place.

FO: And when did you find out that this had happened?

FI: Then, the following day, I went to the site. I went to the place. I personally, I went to the area. I saw the corpses everywhere. Then some people were shouting that—you know, suffering and shouting. I saw an ambulance, which came from St. Patrick's College where the army is camped, to command they remove a man. But before they came, the man had died. So when I came, I met the ambulance. I told them, "Please, help and carry out—carry these people." They said, no, they told them already to bring a man, one man; that man has died.

Then I went with my bicycle to that area, to St. Patrick's. When I got there, I saw some soldiers at the gates. The leader of the people at the gates asked me, what did I come to do? I told him that I want them to give me an ambulance to go and—he directed somebody to go and shoot me somewhere. He said, "Go and kill this man." Another soldier said, "No. The man that is so bold to come all the way to this place and then you say to kill him? Don't kill him." The lieutenant asked me, what did I come to do? I told him I wanted them to give me this ambulance to go to bring the people who were not dead. They direct me to go to MTD, that is the Motor Traffic Division of the army. When I got there, I told them, they asked the ambulance man to go along with me. On our way, it was finished. The motor couldn't move. It was there I left him; with my bicycle, I went home. The following day—before, the day before, those people who were crying have all died.

FO: Could you describe what you saw when you entered the square where the massacre had taken place and where these—could you give us a description of what you saw there?

FI: In fact, before you reach a place, you will find very—that is, you will find that that is the area, you know, people with different attire. It was just like a—in fact, I cannot describe it. It was a horrible sight to see the people there. So I got there (inaudible) I met this ambulance, I said, I went out to it.

FO: Were there piles of bodies, of dead people scattered around? Were they—were there women around? Soldiers?

FI: No, the women were not there. These are all men. Because the women were separated and taken to (inaudible).

FO: So who was in—so there were only the dead bodies in the square?

FI: Who?

FO: In the square where the massacre had taken place? Were there other—were there just those who had been shot were in the—you and those who had been shot, or were there other people in the square with you?

IU: When you got to the place, were there other people around there like you, who came to—

FI: No. No. I was just risking my life going here and there.

FO: Okay, that's important.

FI: People were afraid. Nobody come—nobody comes out.

IU: Were you wearing your Red Cross—

FI: I was wearing Red Cross uniform.

FO: Okay. So, you were somehow hoping that the Red Cross uniform would protect you? Hoping?

FI: Yes, I did one thing. At a certain stage—we had a circle [badge], the circle says Nigerian Red Cross. But at a certain stage when the Biafrans came in, they changed their circle to Biafran Red Cross. But I didn't change mine, so the military men that saw the circle see belonged to Nigeria and not to Biafra.

FO: Right.

EB: Were you the only Red Cross person in Asaba at the time? Were there other Red Cross officers?

FI: Almost all of them ran away, ran away. Almost all of them. Even—there was a woman I went to training with in Benin, who went across. I was only person. Then all I did, I started recruiting emergency members, that is, to assist me. All the corpses, all the corpses in Asaba, I did the burial. Those corpses are scattered everywhere. I did the burial of all of them.

FO: Could you describe—so these would be all the—what about the bodies that were in the main square, the big group? Did you—

FI: Well, that one, I did not do it; it's not me. It was after, when they have decayed—you know, smelling all over—that the people there gathered and then dug a common grave and they started putting them there.

FO: And where—and the other bodies, the ones that you buried, were they buried by the families?

FI: As I went around, as I went—as I went around, I saw some corpses decaying and rotting and all sorts of things. With the emergency recruits—I mean, the people I recruited, I used them to do the burial.

FO: And were they buried back—were they given back to their families? Where were they buried?

FI: No (inaudible). Where we saw corpses, we just dig ground under them and bury them. Anywhere we saw corpses (inaudible).

EB: Who were the people that you recruited to help you? Did they just—who were they?

FI: Well, the people—these are the people, the people that were hiding when these things happened. By the time they saw me bold coming out, they came out with me and they were just taking cover under me.

FO: Uh-huh. And was it mostly women, or some men?

FI: No, these are men.

FO: These are men. So they were hoping that your Red Cross uniform would protect them as well.

FI: Yes.

FO: How many people do you think you buried?

FI: There are so many, I cannot remember. So many, so many, so many.

FO: Were some of these people people whose names you know?

FI: I cannot know their names. Even—I came to police barrack area, I saw some policemen, shot by the army. They scattered them somewhere. I started doing the burial.

FO: (to EB) Do you have a question?

EB: What about your own family? At that time, you were married, you had children?

FI: No, no. I was not married.

EB: Not married.

FO: How many family—you lost family members, you said.

FI: Well, uh, three Igehs and my mother. Though my mother was not shot, but died as a result of frustration during that time.

FO: So there were three direct blood relations, three Igehs were killed. And then, clearly, your mother of heartache, because she had lost. What happened after this? What happened once the killing stopped? What did you do at that point?

FI: When the killing started?

FO: When the killing stopped. Stopped.

FI: When it stopped, then we started rehabilitation. That is the—I went to the army. I asked them that they should be giving us ration, and they asked me to nominate somebody who would be coming to collect ration from them. So I directed one of my cousins to go there, collect some parts of a cow that they kill, and then come to our place and we share. Because as I was in the, the rehab—the army didn't recognize what I was doing. And then when I set up a clinic—there was no hospital, no clinic, nothing. But I set up one in my house. And there we treated about fifty, sixty patients. A doctor seconded three nurses to my clinic. And the one lady Principal of Assembly, Ms. Bacouse, also aided me, gave me some drugs from the hospital and other things. So we—I mean, I was just doing some treatment in my own house.

FO: And you treated, you say, fifty, sixty, people?

FI: At least in a day. We treat not less than fifty, sixty people in my own house.

FO: A day.

FI: A day. In fact, all the rehabilitations, I did it.

EB: Were these people with gunshot wounds? They were shot? These people were shot?

FI: Some of them were with bullet wounds, and some had ordinary sickness.

FO: Now, do you have any recollections about the second incident that took place around—in March of 1968?

FI: Well, it was—the second incidence was the time they burned the house. What happened was that the Biafrans were encroaching, but they wanted to come through Ibusa. When the army in Asaba heard of their coming, then they started killing people again in Asaba. Allegedly, the Asaba people brought them in. They started killing people—many people are now buried in Asaba—started burning houses and everything. They burned my own house already.

FO: Now, some people were moved, were moved to the college, though.

FI: Yes, that was the time—what happened was at that time, when they started killing people, I went to—some people came to me and we started thinking of what to do. We decided we should go to the headquarters of the army and ask them to remove people to St. Patrick's so that if they could see, you know, that person, that would know he is from Biafran. But for the meantime, the people within us were led—they removed them to St. Patrick's, and that was what they did.

FO: So this was not the army's idea, this was your idea—

FI: My own idea, yes. That we move—they went around Asaba, made announcement that the people should go to St. Patrick's College. Then, we went to St. Patrick's. I removed my clinic and these things to St. Patrick's, and I started giving them treatment and all these things.

FO: How long were people in St. Patrick's for?

FI: For about two months.

FO: And how were they fed?

FI: The army gave us food. In fact, all the food we were eating at the St. Patrick's camp was from the army. It was when the war ended that the relief materials started coming in from Caritas and the Red Cross and other places. But all the food we were eating during the war came from the army.

FO: When these events were taking place, did you have contact with the Red Cross? Were you informing them of what was happening?

FI: Yes, of course. During the war, they sent people from Geneva to us. (inaudible) One of the Geneva persons asked me to give him—to make a report, and I wrote a report; he took it to Geneva. But they knew we were hiding things 'cause they—if they could—if they [the federal troops] know that I am giving them report of what happened, they would know—they would arrest me.

FO: So you were giving reports?

FI: I was just giving—yes, at that time. They took it to Geneva.

FO: And you were doing this secretly, so that the federal troops wouldn't find out that you were giving these reports?

FI: Yes.

EB: Um, just a couple things. If you could please tell us the full names of your brothers who died? We know they're Igeh; what were their first names?

FI: One is Tropical Igeh.

FO: Tropical.

FI: Another one is Sunday Igeh. Another one is Sunday, again, who worked with NBC.

IU: Another Sunday?

FI: Another Sunday, yeah.

**Unidentified Man:** Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation?

FI: Yes.

EB: You mentioned—you said that your mother, afterwards, was so—that she died.

FI: Uh, it was, it was—

*Pause in recording*

EB: Yeah, we were talking a little bit about your mother, and if you could, maybe tell us how it was for her after this happened. And you said that you think she really died as a result of this—not directly, but how was her life when all of this happened?

FI: The fact is that, um, many of her grandchildren and children—that is, relations—crossed to Biafra. And every time we heard of a death in Biafra—so, she couldn't cope, the stories and all sorts of—all these things (inaudible) not a bullet, not a gun, just died of the stress and all sorts of things.

FO: Was she an older woman?

FI: No, not all that old.

FO: And how was your life changed, and the life of your community changed, by this experience?

FI: Well, in fact, I can't say that my life was so bad, because I started doing noble work, which was recognized by everybody in Asaba. So, my life wasn't as much bad as others that I know. It wasn't as much bad. But the little thing I know that I suffered is because of certain people, trying to save people and all sorts of other things. But I was just relieved with the happiness that I am in a position to do it, what I am doing, I did it. In fact, all these reliefs, all these reliefs helped—that is, the reliefs for the victims of the war—was done by me and those people I recruited. After Asaba people have been withdrawn back to their home, they brought another group of people to St. Patrick's that I started taking care of. That was Ibusa people. They brought Ibusa people and I started taking care of them. They brought other people to (inaudible) home there; I started taking care of them (inaudible).

FO: So, do you think that is what helped you cope, the fact that you were able to help others?

FI: Yes.

FO: How do you think this event—what happened in Asaba forty-two years ago, how do you think it should be remembered?

FI: Well, this is—you cannot say that it should be forgotten. You cannot say that it should be forgotten. In fact, the way the people were massacred, the way the people were killed, nobody who saw the pogrom will forget it forever until he is dead. Nobody. In fact, in my association with Northerners now, I don't know. I am not feeling well with them, because the way they treated us at that material time was so bad. Nobody can just forget it. It's not possible. It's not possible at all that the people should forget what happened.

FO: Do you think—what about future generations? Do you think young people today know, or remember, what happened here?

FI: In fact, the future generation—well, they can only know this by history, because some of them—many of the people here now are very young. Many adults during that time have died. The ones—the people we are with now are very young. They did not know much about the crisis, the trouble. So, what I want to say to them, for Asaba people to forget what happened in Asaba is not possible. It's not possible at all.

FO: (to IU) Do you have any questions?

IU: One question: You said the ambulance came for somebody; do you know who that person was?

FI: Yes, I know them. The lady who requested for the ambulance to come and carry her husband was from Umuaji, but married to an Ogwashi Ukwu man. They came to Asaba, probably to take refuge, before they killed the husband. But when they shot the husband, they took the wife to St. Patrick's; then, it was there that the wife told them that the husband was not dead. But the army there directed that they should go and bring him. Before they could come, he had already died.

IU: Okay. You said also that Asaba people will never forget what happened.

FI: Yes.

IU: Yeah, but how do you think that we should let the future generations know, after we are all dead?

FI: To know what?

IU: To know what happened.

FI: Well, it's just by stories, as I'm telling—as I'm saying now. Those people who probably can remember all these things, we still tell stories about it. We still tell stories about it.

FO: The person in the ambulance?

IU: The person in the ambulance, do you know the name?

FI: No. These are the soldiers from the camp, the military camp.

FO: But who they came to pick up?

IU: Yeah, the person they came to pick up, what was the name? The one who came from Ogwashi Ukwu?

FI: The lady from Umuaji was married to a man in Ogwashi Ukwu, so they came to Asaba to seek refuge before the man was killed. I don't know the name of the man.

IU: Okay.

FO: Let's—

EB: Just one quick question, please. You had talked about people going to Ibusa and escaping from Ibusa. Were people killed in Ibusa also?

FI: Yes, of course, there's some people who were killed there. Some people were killed.

EB: They were civilians, too, that the federal troops—?

FI: Yes, federal troops. In fact, when they heard that some of the military men—I was up—I mean, I came from Ibusa. Then they started—that is, in fact, they went there to kill some people, but they ran to the bush, and they caught some people and killed them.

EB: How far is Ibusa from Asaba?

FI: It's about, um, seven or eight minutes.

IU: (inaudible)

FI: Seven or eight kilometers.

EB: Seventy? —

FI: Seven.

FO: Seven, seven—

FI: Or eight kilometers.

FO: It's close.

EB: So, this was all part of the same period. They were looking—they went looking for people in Ibusa and in Asaba? The troops would—they wanted to kill people there and people in Asaba?

FI: No, they came from—they wanted to come from Ibusa, from Benin to that route, one of the—

(phone rings)

FO: Go ahead.

FI: One of the bridges along the road was blown, so they turned around and they followed the Okpanam Road to Asaba.

FO: Is, um, (to EB) are we done with our—? Yes.

(to FI) Is there anything that you would like to add that we have not asked you? Is there anything that you would like to say that we have not asked you that you would like to add?

FI: In fact, I can only add if you ask me something, then I will remember, (laughs) 'cause I didn't write it. If you ask me, then I will remember what—

Unidentified Man: Let me ask you a question. These killings that you saw during the war, how has it affected your life? That is, what part has it played: did it make your life to progress or has it let your life down? How has it affected your life, even now that you are (inaudible)?

FI: Well, it actually—when I say that I was doing all the things there, it brought a lot of self back to me. It brought a lot of self back to me. If not were (inaudible) I know where—what I should have done, but the war brought me down.

FO: In what way? What way, do you think?

FI: One is that they burned my house. I had to start living in a hired house, paying rent. I remember I lived in our mother's house. I was paying rent, of all of the things. So, the people that should have helped me financially or to progress, they died during the war. So I can't say—the war didn't bring anything good to my life at all.

Unidentified Man: Did you complete your education before the war came?

FI: Yes, of course. Actually, I was an adult. I can't say I was schooling, no. That was the reason why I was able to belong to an organization, and did training, and be able to help others.

EB: Just one thing about the Red Cross. You told the people—you sent reports to Geneva, to the Red Cross, and yet—so they were getting reports that this happened, and

yet the story of what happened did not seem to go further. They didn't—news people weren't informed, nothing—what happened? Did the Red Cross suppress this?

FI: Well, um, one of the relief officers called (inaudible) he asked me to write all these things and give to him, so I wrote it and gave to him. So he went to them. By the time he was coming, he brought only kit, the Red Cross kit for medics, that they gave Red Cross kits to me from there. In fact, all these things they were doing, they were doing it secretly. So, just like that.

FO: Well, thank you. Thank you very much for sharing your stories with us. We really appreciate it. Thank you.

*End of interview*