

December 2009


Nwka Obze oral history interview by S. Elizabeth Bird, December 10, 2009

Nwka Obze (Interviewee)

S. Elizabeth Bird (Interviewer)

Ifeanyi Uraih

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Scholar Commons Citation

Obze, Nwka (Interviewee); Bird, S. Elizabeth (Interviewer); and Uraih, Ifeanyi, "Nwka Obze oral history interview by S. Elizabeth Bird, December 10, 2009" (2009). *Digital Collection - Holocaust & Genocide Studies Center Oral Histories*. Paper 16.
http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/hgstud_oh/16

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Asaba Memorial Oral History Project
Oral History Program
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Digital Object Identifier: A34-00016
Interviewee: Nwka Obze (NO)
Translator: Dr. Ify Uraih (IU)
Interviewer: Elizabeth S. Bird (EB)
Interview date: December 10, 2009
Interview location: Asaba, Delta State, Nigeria
Transcribed by: Sarah Dockray
Transcription date: June 24, 2010 to July 1, 2010
Audit Edited by: Jenica Ibarra
Audit Edit date: July 15, 2010 to July 20, 2010
Final Edit by: Michelle Joy
Final Edit date: August 18, 2010

[Transcriber's note: Dr. Ify Uraih translates between English and Igbo for Elizabeth Bird and Nwka Obze. He sometimes refers to Nwka Obze as "he," though she is a woman; the transcriber has corrected this error. This interview was conducted outdoors, and there is considerable background noise.]

Nwka Obze: Nwka, Nwka.

Ify Uraih: Okay, [s]he said his [her] name is Nwka.

Elizabeth Bird: Nwka?

NO: Nwka, Nwka.

EB: How do you spell that?

IU: Nwka, they want the spelling?

NO: Nwka.

EB: Just one name? Two name? First name? First name.

IU: Nwka Obze.

NO: Obze.

EB: Nwka Obze. Nwka Obze. Uh-huh. Thank you. Um, could you tell us how old you are?

IU: Eighty-six.

EB: Eighty-six.

IU: Eighty-six.

EB: Eighty-six, yes, thank you. Could you talk about what happened before—just before the troops came in the war? Just, what was it like—

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

NO: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: She said it's—

Unidentified Voice: (Speaking in Igbo)

NO: (Speaking in Igbo)

Unidentified Voices: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: She's trying to explain the sentiment. Mama said that Asaba was very peaceful then. That is this love that we share within me.

NO: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: There is a good relationship between the—

NO: (Speaking in Igbo)

EB: At that time, was she living with her family? She was—was she married with children?

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

NO: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: Okay. She says she was not married then, that she was at a new school—

NO: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: She says she was married.

EB: She was married?

IU: Yes.

EB: Did she have children?

NO: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: Okay. She had—

NO: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: Okay. She had five children then, yes.

EB: How old were the children then? Does she remember?

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

NO: (Speaking in Igbo) Eleven.

IU: Okay. She said the first child was eleven years old then.

EB: The rest were younger?

IU: Yeah, they were younger.

NO: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: Okay.

EB: Could she talk about what happened when the federal troops started arriving into Asaba, what people thought?

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

NO: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: She was saying that when they came, they were cooking at one of the technical colleges we have there, you know? But one of the husband's brothers came from Benin to inform them—

NO: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: She said he's a soldier. So he came to inform them the motive of the federal troops, that they came in to kill, not for them to celebrate with them.

NO: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: [S]he said when they came in, they shot a gun.

EB: They shot a girl?

IU: A gun. So they said it was the people from the war, that they have come into Asaba. So they were rushing to entertain them—giving them water, you know, welcoming them to the town.

EB: Yes, yes.

NO: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: [S]he said that during that time, the brother who was a soldier came and told them that what they are doing is wrong, that these people have come to kill them. So giving them food and water—at the end they will still kill them. So that you all come out from (inaudible).

EB: This was her brother?

IU: Yeah.

EB: Who was in the federal army?

IU: Her brother was in the federal troop, he was a soldier. So he came to inform them the aim of why they came. So because of him, they have to flee away from—

EB: So this soldier knew that the plan was to—

IU: Yes—

EB: To kill.

IU: To come in and kill.

EB: Yeah.

NO: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: So [s]he said, immediately, they went home. They even got the information that they have started killing already. So they have to flee away from the town.

EB: So this is—what happened next?

IU: Okay. (Speaking in Igbo)

NO: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: Okay. So [s]he said when they heard of it, they now decide to flee away from the town. So they left the town because of these incidents.

EB: She and her whole family?

IU: She and her whole family, yes.

NO: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: So before they could run across to the—through the bridge, to the Eastern bloc, that they have already exploded the bridge. So there was no way they could go across. So they ran into the bush.

NO: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: So they [she] said they went through Oko, to a town, and went to the—there's a town they call Atani, in Anambra [State]. That is where they went and hid.

NO: (Speaking in Igbo)

(microphone is moved)

IU: I'm behind the microphone. So [s]he said that from Atani, the soldiers even came across to Atani. They themselves had to run away from Atani to Oko, to go and stay.

EB: So how far from Asaba were they staying?

IU: Okay, Atani is about thirty kilometers away from Asaba. It is not too far from here.

EB: And there were soldiers there, too?

IU: Yeah.

NO: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

NO: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: [S]he said that when they came back, after the incidents, the mother, who was in town, told them that they have killed all their relations. Some of them were even buried alive, not even killed. Yes. So that was what happened.

EB: So, she came back—when did she come back to the town?

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

NO: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

NO: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: Okay. She says she came back—

NO: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: —after three weeks. And that was when she came back.

EB: So everybody was buried by then?

IU: Yeah, virtually all those they killed. There are some who were buried alive. But the town was virtually empty; they couldn't meet anybody in the town.

EB: What did she—what did people tell her about what happened with the killings?

IU: The killings. Okay. (Speaking in Igbo)

NO: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: [S]he said the mother who witnessed what went within that period explained to her that some of them were buried alive. Some were killed. And there is a particular area [s]he mentioned where those who were buried alive were buried alive, without shooting them.

EB: They didn't shoot them at all, they just—

IU: No, they just dig grave and ask them to jump into the grave, and they covered them and they died inside it.

NO: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: She said there were about three women she came back with, you know, to—maybe to take their family away from the town. So, they were told the incidents of how the whole thing happened.

EB: Does she know—was it just—was it only men and boys, or were some women killed, too?

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

NO: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: She said that what she knows is what she has just narrated. That she cannot actually say some women were killed, or children were killed.

NO: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: She said during the war, you don't know where the children are. So everybody was just trying to have a shelter over his head, so most people ran into the bush.

EB: So the people who, they say, were buried alive, did she talk to someone who saw that happen?

IU: Okay. (Speaking in Igbo)

NO: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: [S]he said it was after the war. They now came back and identified the area where they were buried. The people took them to show them the areas they were—people were buried alive. They point to the grave together.

EB: They had seen them being buried alive?

IU: No. They said—

EB: No—

IU: They didn't say that, but it was the mother.

EB: I see.

IU: But she is not alive today.

EB: How did—we heard stories about how women and young girls were also assaulted by the troops. Does she know about that?

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

NO: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: She said so many of the women were assaulted, so many. Yes, both the young ones and the elderly ones.

EB: When she came back after the war, how did she start to rebuild her life?

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

NO: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: She said they have these relief group who were feeding them, giving them food items, clothes, to live on. So that was how they started rehabilitating gradually. Yeah.

EB: Can she talk a little bit about the impact, particularly on women, of everything that happened, losing all the men, and—

IU: Okay. (Speaking in Igbo)

NO: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: She said there were so much, so bad, and there were all these stories. But, well, life has to go on. So, they have to pick up from where they saw, and they were able to meet up once again.

EB: Did many of her close relatives—her family went with her to the bush. Did she have other close relatives who died?

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

NO: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: She said there were so many that they cannot count. You know, so many of the family's relations were affected.

NO: (Speaking in Igbo)

EB: How does she feel—does she still feel—does she feel angry, or bitter, or has she forgiven? How does she feel?

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

NO: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: She said, well, that there is no way she can forget about it, but life has to go on. So that is it.

NO: (Speaking in Igbo)

EB: What does she think about the need to do a memorial or a monument? Does she think it's important to have a memory, a formal memory?

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

NO: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: For her, as a person, that she would not feel happy having something in remembrance of what has happened.

EB: She doesn't?

IU: No. She says she is not happy—she would not be happy about it, because it will be recalling the past events.

EB: So, she thinks we should leave it—

IU: Yeah. For her, she said she wouldn't want such a thing. It is just a reminder of the past.

NO: (Speaking in Igbo)

Unidentified Voices: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

NO: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

NO: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

NO: (Speaking in Igbo)

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

IU: Okay. (Speaking in Igbo)

NO: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: [S]he said that whatever you people feel you can do—you know, for the town—it would be better, that that is the only thing she feels she can say. Whatever you people feel you can do to the town, that they will appreciate it.

EB: What would she like us to do?

IU: (Speaking in Igbo)

NO: (Speaking in Igbo)

IU: She is talking of a kind of compensation to the families involved, you know? Or even a building in memory to—

EB: A building?

IU: Yes, that is what she is suggesting.

EB: Thank you very much. Thank you.

End of interview