

December 2009

Gertrude Chinwe Ogunkeye oral history interview by S. Elizabeth Bird and Fraser Ottanelli, December 11, 2009

Gertrude Chinwe Ogunkeye (Interviewee)

S. Elizabeth Bird (Interviewer)

Fraser M. Ottanelli (Interviewer)

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Scholar Commons Citation

Ogunkeye, Gertrude Chinwe (Interviewee); Bird, S. Elizabeth (Interviewer); and Ottanelli, Fraser M. (Interviewer), "Gertrude Chinwe Ogunkeye oral history interview by S. Elizabeth Bird and Fraser Ottanelli, December 11, 2009" (2009). *Digital Collection - Holocaust & Genocide Studies Center Oral Histories*. Paper 18.
http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/hgstud_oh/18

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

Digital Object Identifier: A34-00018
Interviewee: Gertrude Chinwe Ogunkeye (GO)
Interviewers: S. Elizabeth Bird (EB), Fraser Ottanelli (FO)
Interview date: December 11, 2009
Interview location: Nigeria
Transcribed by: Michelle Joy
Transcription date: July 1, 2010 to August 3, 2010
Audit Edit by: Jenica Ibarra
Audit Edit date: August 4, 2010 to August 5, 2010
Final Edit by: Michelle Joy
Final Edit date: August 18, 2010

S. Elizabeth Bird: This is Friday, December 11 [2009]. This is Elizabeth Bird, and I am interviewing Dr. Gertrude Ogunkeye. Okay. Well, as Fraser said, we're just gonna have a conversation, really, and talk about various things. And I wondered if you could start off with really talking about your life before the war and before the Biafran troops first came through into Asaba. Just where were you living, what was your family structure, what was life like, generally.

Gertrude Ogunkeye: Before the war, or before my perception of the war, we lived in Enugu: my mom, aunt, myself, my siblings. My father was working in Lagos for the federal government, so he stayed in Lagos. And we stayed in Enugu because most of us were going to school in Enugu, and it was more convenient for us to stay there. And sometime in 1966, we started hearing stories about what was happening up north. Occasionally, there'd be pictures in the papers, on the news, on television, about victims being brought in from the north on the train, and sometimes at motor parks. They were all in horrible states, you know? Badly mutilated, lots of corpses coming in and all that. But you're a child; you don't really know anything about a war. All we knew—all I knew then was that there was something that involved the Igbos and the Hausas, and we felt as long as we are Igbos staying in an Igbo area, we were safe. So, we really didn't think much about it.

I was in boarding school. I was second year boarding school, secondary school. As the war progressed, we notice that those of us who were not core Igbos—those of us who came from then the Mid-West part of Nigeria—were being singled out and ostracized by the Igbos, the core Igbos. And there was all this talk about we should go back to where we are from, to the Mid-West State. And they'd come to schools, and single you out and taunt you, and tell you things about going back to where you are from and all. That was

the first time I began to think that perhaps I really didn't belong to where I felt I belonged to.

My father heard all that, and as soon as schools went on vacation, he decided that the best thing would be for us to come to Asaba and stay with my grandfather. My grandma had passed on the year before. He said, "It probably would be a good time to stay with your grandfather and keep him company, and then you'll be safe as well, because now you're where you're from." So, arrangements were made, and we're supposed to go to Asaba. We, as well, were hearing about the horrible things happening to Igbos in the west as well. So, as children, we'd tell my dad, whenever we got a chance to speak to him, to come back home; don't stay on in Lagos and things. But we didn't understand the politics of it.

After arrangements had been made, schools had gone on vacation, we made plans to come to Asaba. I thought it a bit odd that my mom practically packed everything she had to come down to Asaba. I mean, we'd gone on holidays before, and the house in Enugu was still there. But practically everything she had, we brought down with us to Asaba. We came into Asaba late in the evening of Saturday, and the following morning we heard the Biafrans had entered Asaba. Again, we really didn't think much—I didn't think much about it. But I'm sure my parents must have been very worried, my grandfather.

EB: This would be about August of sixty-seven [1967]—

GO: August, yes. I mean, schools had just gone on holidays. So, all of a sudden—

Fraser Ottanelli: This was you and how many siblings?

GO: Me and seven siblings. The last was a baby.

FO: What were you in age?

GO: I was about thirteen.

EB: And then, were you the oldest?

GO: I was the oldest, and the last was maybe about a year. My mom is Catholic, and she had kids the Catholic way: very quickly. You know, so the rest of—

EB: Was your mother—not your father, your father wasn't with you?

GO: My father wasn't with us. My father was in Lagos, working for the federal government. My mom was a teacher.

So, when we came to Asaba, because we didn't—we had never really stayed there for a long time, I don't know that I saw anything like federal troops in Asaba. I can't remember that. But the following morning, we now saw the Biafran troops, and they were very easy to identify because they have the Biafran sun logo on their uniforms, and they were like—they were like, everywhere. They did not disturb anybody because they barely stayed in Asaba. They were like moving on, you know? There were a lot of rumbles of trucks and things moving on. And their movement was fast, but I don't think the federal troops thought they were gonna get into Asaba at all. They were very fast. In a matter of maybe days, maybe weeks, I don't really remember, they were said to be in the west. But there was nothing; we didn't really feel their presence in Asaba.

EB: So what was life like on a day-to-day basis? You were living in your grandfather's house?

GO: That's when we got to Asaba?

EB: Yeah.

GO: Oh, yes. Life was good; there was no—we didn't feel any affects of the war. There was no fighting there, there were no planes passing over, nothing. And we heard that there was a war going on in Biafra, but it felt like, well, we're neutral (inaudible) here. We're not Igbos, so we didn't have anything to do with it. Life was okay. Everything was happening normally. Everything was happening normally.

EB: And so you were on vacation, you just were with your family, just going about daily life.

GO: Daily life.

EB: Did you have friends there, of your age?

GO: Not really, because we didn't grow up at home, so I didn't really have friends at Asaba then. Most of my friends were either in Lagos or in Enugu. No, I didn't have friends in Asaba. But life was good, you know, to give us a chance to grow up at home, meet relatives that I ordinarily wouldn't have met and things. Life was just—everybody was just doing everything as normal. And in fact, the bridge, the Niger Bridge, I remember that people used to cross the bridge regularly, to go to Onitsha. Nobody stopped you, nobody did anything, you know? So life was normal. Life was normal.

EB: What did people feel, then, about Biafra? Was there support for the Biafran cause? Was it more a sense of, “We want to remain part of Ni—” What were—I mean, I know you were young, but what was the general sense?

GO: The general sense was that we really didn't belong in the West. That's what I felt. We really didn't belong anywhere because we are not core Igbo, and the Nigerians thought we were Igbo anyway, even if you're not core Igbo. We felt—the bad thing that happened was that people felt that we didn't really belong. But we felt safe in the Mid-West. Safe from Biafra, because the Biafrans didn't accept us, you understand? They didn't accept us as Igbos. So, we felt safe in Asaba because—well, we're not core Igbos; they didn't see us as core Igbos anyway. They taunted us and made us all leave and all that, so it felt safe. It just felt that the war wasn't gonna touch us. It's a bit like Switzerland during the Second World War, you know what I mean? You're neutral, so—you know.

We really didn't have any sympathies for the Biafrans, no, we didn't. We didn't. We didn't have sympathies for the federal troops either. We're like neutral. We're neutral. I mean, we understood that people had been killed. That was terrible and we felt for it. But the politics of the war and all that, I don't think that my people actually got involved in it, no.

EB: The people you describe as core Igbo, these are the Igbo on the other side of the river —

GO: Of the river, yes.

EB: The people who identified as Biafran.

GO: Yes, yes, yes. We were not identified as Biafrans.

EB: So, now we're heading towards the times of early October, and the Biafrans are sort of—they basically left everybody alone. When did you hear about the federal troops coming in?

GO: All right. When the federal troops fought the Biafrans at Ore—'cause then I remember that name, Ore—and overran the Biafran troops at Ore, there was a little anxiety on the face of elders. And I think the anxiety was born out of the fact that they weren't quite sure what all this now meant. Because, like I said, the Biafrans didn't bother anybody. I think Asaba for them was just a conduit. They just passed through to get to where they wanted to go, to the west. The radio was the most popular means of getting the news, and every morning, you'd see everybody gathered around the radio listening. So, we got to know when Ore was captured from the Biafrans, and when they got to Benin and all that. But there was no sense of fear on the part of people in Asaba, there wasn't. It was a case of, "Well, the Biafrans came and went, passed through. The federal troops, they're gonna come again and pass through, you know, and the war would continue where the war was, in Biafra." So, there was no sense of fear.

When the war started getting towards our side, what I remember is seeing is a lot of Biafran troops running without arms, nothing. And most of them, when they get to Asaba, would take off their uniforms. That was—you know, they took off their uniforms and then crossed over without wearing anything. Then, as time went on, we started hearing the sound of guns. It took maybe about a week, two weeks, for the war itself to get to Asaba. We heard the sound of guns, and the nearer the sound of guns got to us the more we saw the Biafran troops in a panic running. And most of them were young men shedding their uniforms, just running across. And they did not tell us anything. Like, you know, they didn't say things like, "You guys should start running," or anything. Most of them, if you asked them questions, they would say things like, "Oh, there's no problem, you know, there's no problem. We're just, like, trying to go back to Biafra to regroup. There's no problem."

So, there was no sense of fear or panic in Asaba people. The Sunday before the horrible events of October happened, the Sunday before that day, at mass, the Reverend Father had said something to the effect that people were to stay calm and remain in their houses and just stock food and water, because if there's going to be a war, it might take a while for things to settle before you can leave your homes and all that. You can—if you're afraid of being caught by stray bullets, you can hide in the roofs of your homes and all, but generally, just stay calm and wait for the war to pass through Asaba, and then your life can continue again as normal. And that was essentially what we did.

Now, my grandfather's house was in the township part of Asaba, not the village part. So, the Wednesday night after that mass on Sunday, my grandpa decided it would be safer for us to leave the township part, which was near the riverbank, and move into the village of Umuezei inside Asaba, so that—because he felt that if there was going to be fighting, the fighting would be more on the riverbank, so we stood a chance of getting hurt. So, early on Thursday morning, about five o'clock on Thursday morning, we packed a few things, a change of clothes. I remember packing carrying two or three bags of yams for us to eat and all that. And we took a walk from the township, which was not very far, to the village.

EB: What was the name of the village?

GO: Umuezei.

EB: Umuezei.

GO: Umuezei. It was on that journey from the township to the village that I think that the older ones knew that things were not going to be like we thought it was going to be. Because going there, along the road—now I know they were dead bodies, but then I just thought, “What are those things covered in white, on the ground?” But my mother would make a big fuss of, “Don't look there, don't look there,” and she shepherded us—we kept on going from one side of the road to the other because there was a corpse here, or that thing covered in white. We'd go across to the other side.

So, as we got to the village, there were more and more of those white things covered on the ground. And the elders got quieter—the children were just talking and playing, but the older ones, they got quieter until we got into the village. The village was quiet, 'cause I think those of them who were in the village—the village was nearer the exit from the town—must have seen more of the effects of the war than those of us who were in the township area. So, most of them were in their homes. When we got into my grandfather's house, we tried to settle; it was about seven o'clock in the morning. We tried to settle, and my mom put some yams on the fire for breakfast. And that was when all hell broke loose.

EB: This was—was this the day of—was this October 7?

GO: I don't remember the date exactly. I remember that that day was a Thursday. It was a Thursday. And by then, I'm not sure that the events of Ogbeosowa—I'm not sure if it

had happened or was yet to happen. It probably had not happened, because we were not aware of federal troops coming into Asaba. What we were trying to do was avoid the fighting if it got to Asaba.

EB: So, you said, “All hell broke loose.” What happened?

GO: All hell broke loose. All this time, coming from the township to the village, we didn't see any soldiers, federal or Biafran. We didn't see any. Like I said, the village was very quiet, streets were empty, there was nothing there. Not long after we got into the house, I heard the sound of heavy traffic noise along the road. Now, the main road into the town, Nnebisi Road, is not far from my grandfather's house in the village. I heard that. Then we started hearing people speaking Hausa, Yoruba. And then, looking out from the window (inaudible) of my grandfather's house, I saw people in helmets. And they were not, like, walking normally; they were, like, walking stealthily, hiding and coming.

My grandma was in the kitchen—my mother was in the kitchen, outside the house, and she just ran in and shut the door, and said everybody should stay inside, that there were soldiers outside. Close on that, a bullet just went through the house, and my mom shouted, “My ears, my ears!” She was very lucky because it just missed her head by inches. And next thing I heard was, “*Kobokobo! Kobokobo!* All of you, come out from house, come out from the house!” My grandfather told us to just keep quiet. Now we knew that something was not right, even the kids knew it was not right. “Come out from your house!” And they were banging on the shutters. The shutters were wooden. They were banging on the shutters, banging on the door and everything. And we all just (inaudible) keep quiet.

Then, after a while, my grandpa looked through the sitting room window, and felt it was better for him to come out of the house and declare that, you know, these are just civilians staying here. And what he did was, he had a big—he walks with a walking stick. What he did was he came out of the house, took off his singlet, put it on the walking stick and came out and said—oh, I forgot the word he used, but it meant, kind of, “Peace, peace,” you know? “We're here.” He said, “One Nigeria, one Nigeria, come on, one Nigeria, one Nigeria.” Then, one of them came and snatched the stick from his hand and asked him if there were people in the house. My grandfather said, “Yes, my daughter, her children—they're here.”

My grandfather's last son—he was a student in secondary school at Enugu—was also with us; and one of my cousins—also in secondary school, but they were like in the sixth form. They were in the house with us. The two of them now went and hid under the bed in the bedroom. So when they asked all of us to come out, (inaudible) first my

grandfather saw that he brought out of the house, and we all came out. Those two refused to come out. My grandfather made a move to go and bring them out. But as soon as he came out, they didn't want us to get back into the house again, so they now took us out.

It was when they took us out that suddenly we saw that the square we passed that was empty was full of people. I mean, more people were being brought out from houses. And when we came out, I noticed that the children and the old people were staying on the left, and right across from the little road into the village were a lot of young men just sitting on the ground together. They told all of us to sit on the ground, on the ground on the left. We sat. My grandfather was looking very perplexed. The look I can imagine him having was one that said, "This was not what I thought was gonna happen," you know, looking very perplexed. And my mom kept on counting her children, "One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight," you know?

So, we sat there. More people kept on coming out. Not long after we sat there, a man—a young man, maybe in his late twenties, early thirties—came with his wife. The wife just had a new baby—new baby, you know; baby could not be a week old. And he was carrying the baby, and she was holding a toddler, about two years old, and they all sat there. And he, in his panic, kept on shaking his leg, holding the baby—you know, it was like this (demonstrates)—and just looking.

Then, on the main road, I just heard one young boy—you know, young boy, secondary school student. He was like—he was begging. He was saying things like, "Please, come and tell them I'm not a soldier, come and tell them I'm not a soldier," you know? And he would look around the corner at people sitting there, and anyone he saw that he thought he knew, he would call the person's name, "Please, tell them I'm not a soldier." Then I heard this shot, pop, and the boy screamed. He screamed, and he said in our language, "(speaking in Igbo). They've shot me, they've shot me." And he kept on—I just saw him. You know, he was on the ground, turning, pleading, "I'm not a soldier, I'm in secondary school. I'm a student of St. Patrick's [College]. I'm in secondary school. I never fought." And they were abusing him and kicking him, lying on the ground on the main road there, with a gunshot wound.

The next thing I heard was something like (makes sound effect)—like that, you know? And I looked again, and the (inaudible) had gone over him. But, you see, I didn't have any perception of death, because the only dead person I'd ever seen in my life was my great-grandmother and she was very old. So, I was sitting there thinking that something was not right, it was horribly wrong, but I really wasn't scared. You know? I wasn't really scared.

Then, sitting where we were, the man with the baby, a soldier came to him and said, "What are you doing here? What are you doing here?" He didn't say anything. So they said, "Take that baby, give your wife, tell them bye-bye." He just took the baby and gave it to his wife. "I said, move!" He got and started moving. And as he was moving, he was starting to look at the soldier [who was] telling him to move like, "Where do you want me to go?" And the man pushed him at the back with a gun, put him at the back with a gun. "I said, move, move! Why won't he move? Say, 'One Nigeria.'" So the guy put up his hand and said, "One Nigeria." And we just heard a crack, pop, and they shot him. The wife didn't say a word. She just sat there holding her newborn baby, holding her baby, and just looking. She didn't say a word.

Then, the group of men in front of us—I just started hearing, "Left, right. Left, right." They were just marching the men across the field, across the main road. Then I now looked over, and I saw that there were bodies on that field. Now I know they were dead bodies. There were bodies on that field?" And those ones that were marched in front of us were asked to go there. They went there, and then I heard (makes sound effect), my first time of hearing the sound of an automatic weapon. (makes sound effect) And some were screaming and everything, and they were just falling. I could not believe it. I could not believe it.

My mom had a rosary; in fact, all of us had rosaries around our necks. And the soldiers came and one by one yanked all those rosaries off our necks. And they would stand there, and they were looking at us, and you find that sometimes the women didn't quite know what to do. They wanted to look; they couldn't look, you know? Then, after a while, they came with a bus and began to shepherd us into the bus, and my grandfather kept on asking them, "Where are we going?" They slapped him and told him that he had no right to question what they were doing. They took all of us and put us into the bus.

Among the people on the bus was my grandfather's houseboy. He was a boy from Nsukka, maybe he was about fifteen, a young lad. One of the soldiers saw him and wanted to get him out of the bus. My mother pushed him in. Another soldier came and said, "(inaudible)" and put him into the bus, and then told my mom that when we get into the bus, my grandfather's houseboy was to lie on the floor of the bus and if we all put our feet on him he wouldn't get seen, 'cause when the bus gets full, they're gonna come and check who is inside the bus. So we got into the bus and were taken to a village, and discharged at the house of the village chief and left there. That's how we left Asaba.

FO: What happened to the two young men in the house?

GO: About a week or so—okay, the young man who told my mom to put the houseboy on the ground was among those who took us to the village. So when we got to the village—he was just an angel, you know, just an angel, an angel for my mom and us. (cries)

EB: Take your time, have some tissues.

(long pause)

GO: Anyway, when we got to the village that they took us to—I think the soldier was (inaudible) by my mom with all the children, you know. I don't know; something must have touched him. So, he took us to the house of the chief, and told the chief that the chief was to look after us especially, and that he would come by to make sure that if there was anything he could do to help, he would help. And the chief's name is (inaudible). We found out later the village they took us to was a village called Issele-Azagba.

After they dropped us, I saw he was talking to my mom, and later on, my mom was telling him that—she told him that her brother was in the house and described the house that it was, and said, “Please go to the house and look out for him,” and do anything he could to take care of him and my other cousin, a female, who stayed back at the house with him. About two days later, my mom tells me, he came back and asked for my grandfather, and my mom said my grandfather was staying at another house in the same village. So he said he was gonna give my mom news about her brother and she was to try and make sure my grandfather didn't know about it.

He said that when he went back to the house, he saw a grave at the back of the house, a shallow grave, and that he started asking questions from the people around there. And it transpired that sometime in the evening of that day, my uncle and my cousin had tried to escape from the house when they thought things were easier. They met some soldiers just in the compound there. Those ones now came back to them and they questioned him, told him he was an escaping Biafran soldier that had met his Waterloo, and told him to dig his grave. So, he dug his grave. As he was digging the grave, my female cousin was begging them to spare him, telling them that he was a student at a secondary school in Enugu. The fact that she mentioned Enugu at all made matters even worse, as she was telling us later. So, he was digging the grave, and he was digging this grave with bits and pieces of items he saw in the compound. So when he had dug a grave they felt was okay, they asked him to lie in it, and they shot him inside of the grave. And having shot him, they now told my female cousin to cover it.

Well, when he told my mom, my mom now told him to please help her see that the grave was properly dug, because he was telling her that the grave was shallow, that part of his foot was showing, and all that. So this guy, this soldier—his name is Andrew—the

Nigerian soldier now arranged for a grave to be dug, and then when they dug it and buried him properly, he came and told my mom that he had planted something there, and that if we survived the war, she was to go back to the village, that behind a particular window there's a particular tree there, that that was where they buried my uncle. His name was Joe.

EB: And what about your cousin? What happened?

GO: Oh, she ran off. Initially, when they got into Asaba, the women were not their problem; it was the young men that they targeted. You know, women weren't their problem. But later on, as they settled into Asaba, (inaudible) rape and everything else that went on. But she ran off and went into the bush.

EB: Her brother? You said there was your uncle and your—

GO: Yeah, my uncle and my female cousin.

EB: And the boy cousin, what happened to him?

GO: No, that's the female cousin—

EB: Oh, I'm sorry.

GO: That's my female cousin.

EB: Yeah. What was the name of your—could you tell me the name of your uncle who died?

GO: Joseph Obiakpani.

EB: Same name, same—

GO: My grandf—no, my mother's maiden name was Obiakpani.

EB: What we wanted to do is make sure that we knew the names of everyone.

GO: Yes.

EB: Yeah. So, it was Joseph?

GO: Joseph Obiakpani.

EB: Could you spell it?

GO: O-b-i-a-k-p-a-n-i.

EB: So the soldier, Andrew, who helped you, that must have been very unusual.

GO: Very, very unusual. Very unusual, because—you know, with the mind of a child, I just thought that all the soldiers there were totally emotionless, like they were just doing their duty, totally emotionless, you know? They would shoot you and just continue, shoot you and kick the body, and just continue walking. And I remember thinking, you know, that—well, they were chewing gum. They were chewing gum. They would stand in clusters and talk, and everything looked normal. You know, everything just—they were standing, chewing gum, and shooting people. Everything just looked normal. Everything looked normal.

And in the midst of all that—my brothers were very young, 'cause my mom had three daughters first, before she had her sons. They were very young, and my brothers would go to them and say things like, “Let me see your gun.” And they would show my brothers their guns, and show them how to shoot it, you know. And turn again and just shoot people.

EB: Unbelievable. Your grandfather survived.

GO: He survived the war, yes. He was elderly and had a limp. Yeah, he survived the war.

EB: You described a large number of people being shot in the field. Another person we talked to said a large number of people were shot near the police station. Is this the same incident, you think?

GO: The police station? Yes, maybe. Probably the same incident, yes, because the police station is along that Nnebisi Road. Yeah, and this—what I'm talking about is a field that's just on Nnebisi Road.

EB: So it may be the same group?

GO: Yes, very likely the same group. Yes, very likely the same group.

FO: Yeah, it's the same.

EB: This is the day before the, um—

GO: Ogbeosowa.

EB: Ogbeosowa, yes.

GO: Yes, yes.

EB: So when you left Asaba, where did you go after that with your family?

GO: Well, the soldiers took us to a village, Issele-Azagba. My father, like I said, was in Lagos, and by this time he knew that the federal troops had come to—had got to Asaba—and was now looking for his family. So, he was talking to all the commanders and everybody. The funny thing was that most of them who were in Lagos did not hear of what happened at Asaba. Of all these stories about the war, that is one story that you never get to hear about, you know, unless people who were there talk about it. And when we talk about it, people are surprised, because that wasn't where the war was supposed to be holding. So how come people got caught in it so badly?

Anyways, so I think about two months or so, or three months—I can't really remember the timeframe, because he was looking for us. They sent drivers to get in touch with

army commanders and whatever villages had dropped people in; they were looking for them in the villages. But then, the practice was that young girls were not seen outside in the daytime during the war, because of abduction and rape by soldiers.

So where we're staying—around five in the morning we all got to the farm that was deep in the bush and stayed there till about dusk, and then come back and then go and stay in the house. I have a feeling that this gentleman must have come around there several times, but didn't see anybody who knew us. And we didn't really—people didn't know us by name, just knew us as refugees from Asaba. But as luck would have it, this Sunday, for some reason, after mass we were sitting outside the house of the man who hosted us. Somebody was doing somebody's hair, or something. And we heard someone call our name, which was my father's driver from Lagos. He came with some soldiers, and that's how we came back to Lagos.

EB: Did you go back to Asaba at all?

GO: No, we didn't go back to Asaba until after the war.

EB: What do you think led the soldiers to behave—do you have any thoughts on—did they really think people were Biafran soldiers, or what was—what was happening?

GO: Well, I think—everything that I'm going to say now is based on things that I got to know about after the war, when I got much older and started asking questions. Asaba was part of the Mid-Western State. Asabas are Igbos, but we are not like the core Igbos, in the sense that the average Asaba man, the biggest industry is work—is civil service work. We're not traders. So, most of my people went to school, and worked in establishments and all that. The most establishments in Nigeria at that time—we were like (inaudible) people at high levels. When the Mid-Western State was created, we were among the group of people that made up the Mid-Western State, that were educated and had worked in service. And a lot of the positions that would serve the state were held by Asaba people. I think that created a sort of resentment amongst the people in the area where the capital was sited, Benin [City].

What we heard was that when federal troops—okay, that when Biafran troops entered Asaba, the Benins thought—well, whatever. The impression that the federal troops got was that it would open the door for the Biafrans to get into Asaba. And (inaudible) if the federal government realized that Asaba was in a strategic point during the war, how come there was not a strong federal military presence at the beginning—at the head of the bridge? There was nothing. There was nothing there. How can you open a thing that's not locked? People were freely moving across the bridge. The Biafrans didn't fire a shot

to enter Asaba; they didn't, because there was nobody there to fight them. So how could they have said we opened the bridge?

Then, the other factor was that there were some members of the military who came from the then-Mid-Western Igbo part of Asaba. And in those days, if you're Mid-West Igbo, and they asked you where you're from, you say you're from Asaba. Now, most of these were people who were in the Nigerian Defense Academy in Kaduna. They were career military officers. But when the war started, they aligned themselves with the Biafran side. So the federal troops, I think, also saw them as Asaba people working with the Biafrans, and therefore Asaba (inaudible) to the federal government. We heard that when the federal troops were going to come into Asaba, they were told that we had poisoned their water, 'cause when they came in, for a long time they were carrying their—they were bringing water for their troops in tankers. They were also advised not to eat any food, that we also poisoned the food. Although there again, if they were thinking properly, if someone is poisoning your water or poisoning your food, why would I stay as a sitting duck where they might get me? I'd have made my escape.

If we felt threatened by the federal troops, we wouldn't have sat down there, sitting ducks, waiting for them to come and get us. They'd have come and met an empty town—like they met empty towns, most of the towns they captured in the east. But they met a full town of people who were waiting to receive them when they came in, you know? So, all these were just stories. But the federal troops, the federal government worked with it and used it to label every male Asaba person an enemy, and therefore a person that had to be eliminated, you know? This, I think, is what happened.

EB: Yeah, everyone said, of course, that they targeted men and boys. But women—I know you had mentioned that there were stories of rape. Was this also a major thing that was going on?

GO: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. In fact, the family we stayed with in Issele-Azagba, their daughter was abducted by soldiers, because Issele-Azagba was along the route that soldiers took from the federal side into Asaba. Their daughter was abducted for about a week, taken from Asaba for about a week, and brought back to her father after a week. When she came back, she was a different girl, because we knew her when she left. Different girl: she wouldn't talk to anybody, she was very weepy, and all that. Of course, we got to hear later that she was taken by one of the officers and used for a week, and brought back to her parents. There were a lot of cases—in fact, it was because of her that they said that all the girls had to go to the farm in the daytime, so that nobody would be available for anybody to abduct.

Oh, there were lots of cases of rape, a lot of cases of rape. But you see, we come from a culture where thoughts like rape is taboo. You know, [if] a girl says she's been raped, getting married is, like, an impossibility. So lots of girls that had been raped [did] not say anything about it. But there were lots of cases of rape, yes.

EB: The soldiers would take the girls?

GO: Oh, yes.

EB: Young girls?

GO: Young girls. And they didn't really care; if you had a bit of bust on you, that was all they needed, and they would take you.

EB: That must have been very traumatic for many families.

GO: Yes, yes, yes, yes.

EB: After you were able to leave Asaba, what was the impact, the longer term impact on you and your family, in your experience?

GO: For some families, they've been brought to extinction. I know a family that had one son. If I had a crush on anybody as a young girl, I had a crush on him. He was a lawyer, was very good looking, very—you know, dressed properly and all that. He was very—went to school in England and came back to get married, and got caught by the war. He was the only son of his parents, like I said. He was shot by the waterside, and the soldier who shot him took his wallet from him. The mother happened to be at the place where soldiers were drinking, and this soldier was then looking at the wallet and picking out the stuff, and the woman saw the photograph and asked the soldier if he knew the person who had this wallet. And that's how she got to know that her son was killed at the waterside. I heard they tried to take her there to see if they could get the body, but it had washed away by that time. So that family, that bloodline—

EB: What was the name of that man?

GO: Omoko. Lawyer Omoko.

EB: Sorry, what was his first name?

GO: Lawyer, lawyer; he was a lawyer. We called him Lawyer Omoko. Omoko, O-m-o-k-o.

EB: So he was a young man?

GO: He was a young man, was a young man. There's a family I know that lost four out of five sons, you know? And then the list goes—it's endless, goes on and on and on, you know? So, that's why certain families, their bloodlines were eliminated. Then, for girls in my age group, most of the young men who we would have found husband material were those who were executed. So when it was time for us to get married, we found that in order to marry from Asaba, we didn't have many young men in your age group that you could, you know? So that's the other thing.

Then, with the war and soldiers and all that, sometimes—I mean, there were many girls who got married to soldiers because it was the expedient thing to do. You married a soldier, at least make sure there was a measure of safety for your family, and you shared food and all that. So some married soldiers—and that brought a lot of problems in families, because most fathers don't understand, most mothers do not understand. But that's my daughter; what do I do? So, it created lots of problems in families and all that.

But I think it's—and then the feeling that lots of young people had immediately after the war, that really, they did not belong to Nigeria. Because in the east, you were not really accepted; you came to Nigeria and they see you are from the east, and they treat you as if you are the enemy. Then, you could have asked yourself—but the war wasn't really about me to start with. And the amount of devastation that happened in my town didn't happen where the war was going on. So, were there different plots against me, you know, as a person that came from Asaba? (inaudible) So many of the young people had that feeling.

Then, it also presented a problem, too, for us and people from the Igbo-speaking Delta, who were not Igbo-speaking Mid-Western, who were not from Asaba. We wanted everybody to say exactly where they were from, because it felt like the fact that everyone who came from that side, came to Asaba, also worked against us. So, don't say you're from Asaba. In the past, if you said you were from Asaba, that was all; but now if you say you're from Asaba, we want to know, "Are you really Asaba, or—" You know? We wanted that—it created a divide that was not there initially.

EB: What would you like to see done about—I mean, now that people are talking more and people are talking about various ideas for memorials, what do you think would be the appropriate thing to do?

GO: After the war, the then-head of state, General [Yakubu] Gowon, said that the war was a war between brothers. No victor, no vanquished. But what happened in Asaba wasn't a war. What happened in Asaba was an elimination, like genocide. There was a plan to come there and kill as many young men as possible, irrespective of whether they were soldiers or not. I believe that Asaba people deserve an apology from the federal government, an unreserved apology from the federal government. We were not victims of war. It's a different thing from saying that we happened to be in the town and got caught by stray bullet. We were not victims of war. There was no fighting going on in Asaba when the federal troops got there, no fighting whatsoever. Those that they killed were not soldiers; they just took them and lined them up and killed them. We deserve an apology from the government, an unreserved apology.

The story of what happened in Asaba has got to be known, because it also bothered me that for a long time, until this young man, Okocha¹, started talking about it, nobody seemed to—when you talk about it, people look at you like, “Asaba? This happened in Asaba?” I'm telling you—I'm not telling you a story, I'm telling you what I saw. Nobody seemed to know about it. Even in the history books, in the military history books, there's no mention of it. It has got to be part of our history, because if you don't have a history, you cannot go ahead in life and go ahead properly. It's got to be a part of our history.

There has to be a memorial, in the same way that you have memorials where horrible consequences of war that were not planned happened: so that people will remember, so people don't forget, so it does not repeat itself again. There's got to be a memorial. Otherwise, all those who died will have died in vain. All those for whom their families are over, that would be like wasted effort. It has got to be there so I can bring my grandchildren and tell them that this is what happened in Asaba, here, as a part of our history.

When the Second World War was fought, what happened to the Jews happened to the Jews. It was horrible. If the Jews did not fight about it, nobody would know about the Holocaust and the horrible events of the Holocaust. No one would know about this part of history. Young Germans would not look at it and tell themselves, “This was awful, it

¹Emma Okocha, author of *Blood on the Niger: The First Black on Black Genocide*, published by Triatlantic Books International, New York, in 2006.

shouldn't happen again." You understand? That has got to be what happens in Asaba, because no other, no other, no other town in Nigeria during that war suffered like Asaba did. No other town. We want an apology. The federal government has got to come to us and apologize. They've forgotten part of the history of the Nigerian Civil War, and there has got to be a memorial put up, a memorial that we are all going to agree for the planning of it, the siting of it, and the content of it. It has got to be put up in Asaba, that history should not repeat itself.

And like I said, when they had the Truth Commission, I told them, I said, you know, that Nigeria is a mix of so many different people, different tribes, languages, religions, everything. I was born into this entity called Nigeria. I am proud, very, very proud, to be a Nigerian. But also, I am very proud to be female. I am very proud to be an Igbo woman. I'm very, very proud to be an Asaba woman. Nobody is going to take any of these aspects of my life away from me. Nobody is going to make me want to talk about these aspects of my life any less, because perhaps I will offend their sensibilities. No.

I want to belong to a Nigeria where I can raise up my head happily and proudly, and say that, "Yes, my name is Gertrude Chinwe Ogunkeye, I'm married to a Yoruba man, originally from Asaba, female, and proud to be all of these things." (inaudible) This country belongs to all of us equally. Nobody should be made to pay any price that is way beyond that is necessary to keep the country going. We paid more than the necessary price during the war—for nothing, for doing nothing, for not even knowing that we had any sins, talk about committing any. For doing nothing. And there's got to be some redress.

EB: Thank you very much.

GO: Thank you.

EB: Fraser?

FO: (inaudible)

EB: Thank you.

GO: Thank you.

EB: Is there anything else you wanted to say, or that we didn't touch on, or that we didn't ask?

GO: I think that most of what should be said has been said by others, I'm sure, who've come to talk about this. But it's a sore point in our history, and you know, like I said, we must talk about it, otherwise there's no (inaudible).

EB: Did you speak to the Truth Commission?

GO: Yes, I did, went to Enugu. I'm sorry, can I just say something else again? At the Truth Commission, you know, there was a young man who spoke—his brother was the young man who was beheaded as a prisoner in Kano.

EB: Yes.

GO: Okay, there was an incident in Kano where a young Igbo trader went to do his business, you know, in a rubbish dump, and cleaned his butt with a piece of paper. Now, apparently, that paper had Arabic writings on it. And some young northern boys who were there saw him and said he cleaned himself with a page from the holy Qur'an. And they chased him around and he ran into the prisons in Kano for safety. These youths got into the prison, got him out, beheaded him, and put his head on a pole and went around the streets of Kano with that head on a pole. And, as the Truth Commissioner said, if this were to happen in any Igbo-speaking part of Nigeria—if a Hausa boy used a bit of the Bible to clean his butt, was chased by Igbos, got into a federal prison, and got out of the federal prison again, by the same Igbos, and beheaded and his head put on a pole and run around, and people used that head on a pole to go around the town—Igbos, singing—this country would burn. There would be reprisals against every Igbo in the northern-speaking part of the country. When it happens to Igbos, nothing happens.

EB: When was this? Was this before—?

GO: This was after the war.

EB: After the war?

GO: After the war, after the war. So, I said that the government must work hard to ensure that all of us feel that we belong the same to this country, that the same rule that's going

to be applied to A will be applied to B. If it doesn't happen, (inaudible) as a nation. It's not gonna happen.

EB: Well, thank you.

End of interview