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Sylvester Okocha oral history interview by S. Elizabeth Bird and Fraser Ottanelli, December 15, 2009

Sylvester Okocha (Interviewee)

S. Elizabeth Bird (Interviewer)

Fraser M. Ottanelli (Interviewer)

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Interviewers: S. Elizabeth Bird (EB), Fraser Ottanelli (FO)
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Transcribed by: Jenica Ibarra
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[Transcriber's note: This interview is conducted outdoors, and there is audible background noise. Mr. Okocha is very elderly and is sometimes difficult to understand.]

Elizabeth Bird: Okay, could we start now, properly, and we'll start the—this is the interview. If you could start by saying your full name and your—well, full name first.

Sylvester Okocha: My full name is (inaudible) Sylvester Okocha (inaudible).

EB: And you are, you said, ninety-six years old?

SO: No, above that. I'd say clocking ninety-seven.

EB: Oh, clocking ninety-seven. (both laugh) Okay.

SO: Above that. (inaudible) I saw him in 1960. "In 1947," he said, "I am ninety-nine and one-third." (both laugh) I still remember. You know who (inaudible)?

EB: Oh, yes, very much, yes.

SO: (inaudible)

EB: Yes, yes, yes. I'm English, so—I'm from England.

SO: Oh, you are?

EB: Yes, he's one of our most famous players.

SO: Then you heard about (inaudible).

EB: Yes, yes.

SO: (inaudible)

EB: Oh yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes.

SO: After starting from that school, I came here, I was (inaudible) I went to school (inaudible).

EB: Yeah, well that—you should be honored to be the school nurse. (laughs)

SO: Well, I did (inaudible).

EB: Yeah. Um, so we wanted to talk a little bit—were you living in Asaba at the beginning of the civil war?

SO: No, I was in Benin, as I said. I was the head of the Social Welfare Department.

EB: Yeah. And, uh—

SO: When the war came there, I ran home. Everything I had in Benin, all perished. They came here; they were here, all looted or burnt.

EB: Mm-hm, yes.

SO: I had nothing. My wife, my children, we had nothing. No food, no clothes to wear.

EB: Yeah. Did you have—you had a home here? You had a house in Asaba to come to?

SO: I had a house, but it was looted and burned.

EB: When the civil war—when you were here in Asaba, with the civil war, when did you hear about the federal troops coming into Asaba?

SO: Well, I was here.

EB: You were here? Yeah.

SO: And when they came here, I left my wife and little children, ran into the bush.

EB: You took—you went—your wife and children stayed here, and you went into the bush?

SO: Into the bush.

EB: Why did—

SO: When we heard that they left, I came back.

EB: Oh, okay. So, why did you run to the bush? Did you know something bad was going to happen?

SO: Well, they said they were—they had instruction to kill every man, every male, up to five years.

EB: Who told you, who—

SO: Well, that's what we heard.

EB: You heard.

SO: So, when people were running away, I followed the way around into the bush.

EB: Yeah. Now, some people stayed here, and they were told about coming in to welcome the troops.

SO: Yes.

EB: Why do you think they stayed and they didn't run to the bush?

SO: Those that didn't run to bush came out to welcome them. Just, well—and they were the best people we had in town. They said they would take the children and women away, surrender the men and kill them like rats.

EB: You didn't see this?

SO: I didn't see this. But, what I did was, when I came back, I sent a town crier to go around the town, and anybody who lost somebody to come and make a report. They were coming all the way, writing down.

EB: So they came to you to report this?

SO: No, they went to the place I directed them.

EB: Oh.

SO: And that was a court. They wrote their names, and those names appeared in a book, *Blood on the Niger*.¹

EB: Yes, we know Emma Okocha, and we've read his book, and we've talked to him a lot about this. So, we've seen the names, and we've seen many of the stories. So, you had—you were a senior—you had a very senior status in Asaba at that time? You were able to organize people and help—

SO: Oh, yes, oh, yes.

EB: What did you hear about—from people who had seen the massacre firsthand? What did you hear?

SO: Huh?

EB: What did you hear about the massacre, the killing of the men and boys in the square?

SO: One came to me to tell me that somebody fell on him, so he was there. When the soldiers left, he ran home. He told me that—he told me exactly what happened.

EB: How did he describe it?

SO: He said that they were surrounded. Plus, more people—ten people were taken out; they were killed. They called out, they said, “The next one.” So somebody said to them, in vernacular, (speaking in Igbo). They said that they are going to kill all of them. So, there was a sort of—

Unidentified Man: (inaudible)

SO: They all started to go together. And then, they were killing everybody.

EB: Do you know, or do you have any idea of how many people died?

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

SO: Over a thousand. Over a thousand.

EB: Over a thousand. All men and—men and boys. When you came back—when did you come back out of the bush, back to Asaba?

SO: Well, it was just for—I didn't—you know, it was bush area, but I crossed to Ibusa.

EB: Oh, you crossed—

SO: I crossed to Ibusa. I was with a friend of mine, who's still alive, (inaudible). We were there together when we heard that the people who—that the soldiers of Asaba were coming to Ibusa. We again ran into the bush. So, when we learned that they had come back to Asaba—I mean, the soldiers that were in Ibusa—then I, myself, I returned to Asaba.

EB: Was that later, was that in 1968? Was that after when the soldiers came to Ibusa? Or was that—you were in the bush for several months?

SO: No, not months. I was away for right up to—right up to a week.

EB: Oh, a week. So when you came back, the people had all been buried? Were there any corpses, any dead people still to be seen?

SO: No. There were—they said that they had some—they had mass graves, mass graves.

EB: And your wife and children were in Asaba all this time?

SO: Yes.

EB: In the house?

SO: Well, they were just in the house. Nothing to eat, nothing; they were just helpless.

EB: How many children did you have at that time living there?

SO: About, uh—four boys and two girls.

EB: Four boys, two girls. And they were all safe, they all survived? Or did—

SO: Yes, they survived.

EB: Yes. Did you—were there other family members who were killed?

SO: My family?

EB: Yeah, in your family.

SO: Oh, yes. In my family, my most senior brother was killed, and his fourth son was killed

EB: And their names were?

SO: And then there's another one, (inaudible): he was a member of my family; he was killed (inaudible). His first son was killed, too. We lost about five in our family.

EB: What was the name of your senior brother?

SO: B.I. Okocha.

EB: B.I. Okocha.

SO: His son is the one that wrote the—

Fraser Ottanelli: *Blood on the Niger.*

EB: *Blood on the Niger.*

SO: *Blood on the Niger.* (inaudible)

EB: So, Emma Okocha is your nephew.

SO: Who?

EB: Your, uh—Emma Okocha, who wrote *Blood on the Niger*—

SO: Oh, yes.

EB: He is your nephew?

SO: Yes, he's my nephew.

EB: I see. And your father's name was?

SO: Okocha.

EB: First name? What was your father's first name, Christian name?

SO: My father wasn't a Christian.

EB: Uh, his first—well, his first— (all laugh) his first name.

SO: Okocha was his name.

EB: Oko—yeah, okay. Now, we have been here now for several days; we've been talking to lots of people about the terrible things that happened in the civil war. And people have been talking about the need to do some kind of memorial, or commemoration.

SO: Yes.

EB: What do you think would be the best thing to do, or the—do you think this is a good thing? Do you think it—and what do you think is the appropriate way to do the memorial?

SO: The memorial—the names of those killed are down there. Go to where you have the mass graves, erect something to remember them. There were very, very well-known people in Asaba that were killed, I know. Somebody like Leo Okogwu—his son is Leo, too; he was ambassador.² Leo Okogwu, the first Leo, was a resident of Kaduna Province. During the colonial days, it was a great thing to be a resident, but Leo was a resident. Augustine—Augustine, whatever you call him, the very top headmaster. They were among those that were—many, many people were killed, murdered. Many, many, many people were killed in Asaba.

EB: What do you think was the impact, the effect, on the town of Asaba, that these terrible things happened? What—how did the—how did it change the town to have these things happen?

SO: I don't follow you.

EB: What was—what impact on Asaba did this massacre have, in the long term?

SO: Well, the best people the town had were all killed. It was just like (inaudible). As a matter of fact, I was very happy that the town became a capital city again. You know about Asaba? Asaba was the first place that, uh—

FO: The white man.

²Leonard Nwanonyei Okogwu was one of Asaba's chiefs. His eldest son, Leonard Ezenweani Okogwu, is also a chief, as well as being a diplomat; his daughter Maryam Okogwu Babangida was First Lady of Nigeria from 1985 to 1993.

SO: The white men came.

EB: Yes, mm-hm, yeah.

SO: I wrote about the coming of the first white people in the journal (inaudible). I wrote about it.

EB: In what journal?

SO: Huh?

EB: Where did you write this?

SO: It's in the library, Journal of (inaudible). I got that story when I was at the London School of Economics; it was put down there. I wrote it, you see, but some people have been writing something they don't know. So, Asaba was the first place that the Royal Niger Company took as their headquarters. After 1800, that is ninety-one [1891], 1900, after 1899—before the, uh—and then it was during that time that the name Asaba was known as the capital of, uh—³

FO: Nigeria.

SO: The capital of Nigeria. That was the first capital. Now, when the later government came, they made Asaba again capital of, uh, Delta—

EB: Delta State.

SO: Delta State. Asaba (inaudible).

EB: So Asaba has survived, in spite of everything?

³In 1900, the colony of Southern Nigeria was formed from territory held by the Niger Coast Protectorate (chartered in 1891) and the Royal Niger Company (chartered in 1886). Asaba was the colonial capital.

SO: Well, we have survived. But what I didn't like was that somebody like myself—people have not been compensated. I was treated—I was refused permission. Now—I was dismissed, imprisoned, tortured, without any care.

EB: When were you imprisoned? When were you in prison?

SO: After the civil war, after the soldiers had left here, I was called back to Benin, to Benin to work. But somebody—some people decided to say that I wrote a letter denouncing what the soldiers did in Asaba. For that, I was taken as—I was suspected (inaudible).

EB: Who did you write the letter to?

SO: I wrote the letter to somebody who was inquiring about my nephew. But the original I wrote—the letter has not been posted. Where there's a copy of it, I (inaudible) the army. It was done by somebody from my office, who was the head of (inaudible). It was because of that that I was arrested, tortured, and I was in the maximum security prison without any trial.

EB: This was immediately after the civil war? Or after the soldiers—this was when you were in Benin during the civil war?

SO: This was at the beginning of the war. It was—the civil war was over here, but was still in—

EB: But still.

SO: —Eastern region.

EB: So you moved—you had moved from Asaba to Benin, and that's when you wrote the letter?

SO: Yes.

EB: Who were you trying to contact? Who was the letter addressed to?

SO: He was a teacher. Somebody who was—an Irish man, who was a teacher in St. Patrick's school [St. Patrick's College, Asaba]. He wrote a letter asking for—

Unidentified Man: Informations.

SO: Uh, information about my, uh—so I wrote back to say that the person he was looking for was still inside Biafra, but then I started to say about the people who were killed. It was because of that that they said that I was a Biafra—that I was just working as a Biafran (inaudible).

EB: So a copy of the letter was given to somebody in the military, in the army?

SO: Yes, from my office. But the original had not been posted. The original was filed in my house.

EB: So who do you think gave the copy of the letter to them?

SO: Somebody put next to me in the office. They called Mrs. (inaudible), what do you call it? Mrs., uh—I forgot now the name.

EB: That's okay, it's okay; somebody would. So the army did not want people to know—

SO: (inaudible). She was (inaudible). But what happened was that when I was called back, they changed their dismissal, gave me money. I used my money to go on—to go to the East on a Christian pilgrimage, Catholic pilgrimage. When I came back, I met her. And few days [after] I met her, she went there, I heard she died. I don't know whether that was suicide or just sudden death. This was about 1985 or so.

EB: Do you know why she gave the letter to the soldiers, to the military?

SO: Eh?

EB: Do you know why she gave that letter—

SO: She was refu—I was refused promotion and I couldn't go up, so she was stagnant.

EB: Oh, I see, yeah.

Unidentified Man: (inaudible)

SO: They were pushing me away, and she succeeded. She pushed me, she went up, she became a Permanent Secretary. And what happened was that when she left, somebody took her own position. But her promotion to Permanent Secretary was repealed by the new military government that took over, so she had no place to go. All we heard was that she died.

EB: So what was very clear was the military did not want people to know what had happened in Asaba?

SO: Eh?

EB: They saw your letter, which described what happened, and they wanted to suppress it; they did not want the information to be known.

SO: Yes.

EB: Yeah. So they took you, and they put you in prison. What did they do to you?

SO: The man who tortured me and (inaudible) me is still in Warri today as a retired colonel.

EB: What is his name?

SO: (inaudible)

EB: Can you spell that? (inaudible)

SO: He was (inaudible).

Unidentified Male Voice: (inaudible)

EB: (inaudible)?

SO: (inaudible)

EB: That's the last name?

SO: Yes.

EB: Surname? (inaudible) He was a captain in the military?

FO: A colonel.

SO: He was then, what you call it? The first before major.

Unidentified Man: Captain?

SO: No.

Unidentified Man: (inaudible)

EB: Lieutenant?

SO: It was—lieutenant. He was a lieutenant, yes, yes.

EB: And so he was the one who tortured you?

SO: Yes. He put me in the—he wanted me to confess that I was helping the Biafran government. He tortured me. He put me in a solitary cell in a house full of mosquitoes, so that before the end of one week, the walls of the room were all smeared with my blood. There was a time he took me out, gave me a shovel and a digger, took me out to dig my grave. He said, “You must say something.” I said, “I don’t know about—I have nothing to do with Biafra.” So he—a doctor there who saw me gave me a letter so that I would be taken to a bigger hospital. He refused. The doctor later forced him to take me to hospital. I was taken with four armed men to the hospital. When I got there, I was examined, sent back. He refused to give me the diet that the doctor had prescribed for me.

EB: Did he beat you?

SO: Yes. He beat me. He tortured my male organ. He did all sorts of stuff.

EB: And you never said you were a Biafran agent, or anything?

SO: No, I was never there. I do not know about that.

EB: So how long were you in prison?

SO: Well, I don’t remember now because all of these things, they’re all gone. The prison was the—that’s the maximum security prison, Kirikiri, in Lagos.

EB: In Lagos?

SO: Yes.

EB: So, you went back from Benin—you were taken from Benin to Lagos?

SO: I was taken from the—beaten by the army, thrown into one of the four trucks that were carrying prisoners of war to Lagos. It was when—after that beating, I think that was the time they learned that—the rumor went ’round that I had been killed. I was put down for—what you call it?—for treason trial. When I came back, I tried to find out what happened with my treason trial, and the word was simply that they knew (inaudible)

had written that that (inaudible) had been overtaken by (inaudible), which means that they had calculated that I had died, because by that time, I had been gazetted as dismissed. Some of my friends who came from America to look for me were told by that same woman that I had been dismissed with ignominy.

EB: That must have been very painful for you, to know all of these things.

SO: Huh?

EB: All these things that were said about you. It must have been very painful for you.

SO: Oh, yes, up till now, up till now, because the government—I have not told my school that I was taken as a (inaudible). I have not told my school.

EB: So—

Unidentified Man: You do remember that your school sent for you when you were doing your hundred years.

SO: Huh?

Unidentified Man: The school sent for you.

EB: The London School of Economics?

Unidentified Man: London School of Economics. They wrote to us here that he should come, nearly a hundred years.

EB: Nearly a hundred years.

Unidentified Man: A centenarian.

EB: Yes.

Unidentified Man: But he didn't go. Do you remember?

SO: Oh, yes. That was—I am still hearing from them, they are still writing me.

Unidentified Man: (inaudible)

EB: Oh, yeah.

SO: Yes. Everything.

FO: Oh, yeah.

SO: They still communicate with me. I think one came last week. That is for this Christmas. (inaudible)

EB: Did you—when did you leave Lagos, leave the prison and come back—you came back to Asaba, or you went—?

SO: I couldn't remember. I left—when I was in prison, I remembered the name of this officer; he was in charge of Lagos garrison. He came to this prison, they opened the door, he said, "Where is Okocha?" I came out. He said, "How—why?" I said, "Well, have I done anything against them?" He said, "No, you come out, you must go home. You have not done anything." I said, "Look, I have no clothes to wear; these are the clothes I've been wearing since I was detained. I have no money." So, he put hand in his pocket, get some money, gave me to travel back to Benin. So it was when I came to Benin that I started to hear more that, uh—I had been in prison. It was painful—but when I told you that I had (inaudible).

EB: Were you able to take up your career again, then, after all this was over?

SO: No, no. Since then—what do you call it? They said, uh—what is it? What was the gazette notice that counts are dismissed; is it discharged? No. They said I never would.

EB: Retired? Retired?

SO: Retired, please. They said I retired. And then put down that that meant—that that council, the first one that said dismissed, retired. But when I'm retired, I have nothing else to do. But what happened really was that they looked for somebody to work here; that is, the Christian Council of Nigeria, because Nigerian government did not do anything for the people here, and the Christian Council had a little project. And I was put down as the officer in charge of the project. I did it for just a few months. And the money finished, and that was the end of it.

EB: You've been retired ever since?

SO: I've been retired ever since.

EB: Yeah. (to FO) Have you got anything you'd like to ask?

FO: No, I'm fine. (inaudible) beautiful photograph.

EB: Good, good. Is there anything else you wanted to tell us, anything that you think is important for us to know?

SO: The young man who I described as was in Biafra, he is a professor in Wisconsin University, USA.

EB: Yeah. University of Wisconsin.

SO: Wisconsin.

EB: Yes.

SO: He has been there for over ten years now. He had a family. His wife is—I think his wife is—

Unidentified Man: He doesn't know (inaudible).

EB: Oh.

SO: Hmm?

FO: Yes.

EB: You were in London in that—photograph of you in London in 1949.

SO: In 1949?

EB: Yeah. That's a beautiful photo.

SO: What photograph is that?

Unidentified Man: When you were in London.

SO: No, no, I don't see; tell me.

Unidentified Man: You are wearing a suit.

SO: Huh?

Unidentified Man: You are wearing a suit, you are alone.

SO: Oh.

Unidentified Man: But there is one (inaudible).

SO: (inaudible)

FO: I'll set it right here so I can take it with me.

Unidentified Man: Okay (inaudible).

EB: The man in—your young man in Wisconsin, he is your nephew?

SO: Yes, he was the one that said he was in Biafra.

EB: He left during the war to go to Biafra?

SO: Yes, yes. He came out; he went to Nsukka.

EB: What was his name?

Unidentified Man: (inaudible)

SO: Augustine.

Ify Uraih: Augustine. Emma's brother.

EB: Oh, Emma's brother, yes. Augustine.

Unidentified Man: He is the one is U.S. now, in Washington.

EB: Yes, that's Emma.

Unidentified Man: As (inaudible).

SO: Huh?

Unidentified Man: Augustine, that is the (inaudible). He's a doctor.

EB: Augustine is in Wisconsin?

Unidentified Man: Augustine is a doctor.

EB: Yes, yes, yes, yes.

Unidentified Man: He's a doctor, a married doctor. (inaudible).

SO: Yes.

Unidentified Man: (inaudible)

SO: He's in Wisconsin.

EB: Yes.

SO: As I remember, there are about four. The junior one, the most junior one, (inaudible), is in Chicago.

Unidentified Man: Benedict.

SO: He's in Chicago. And the other man is in Maryland. What you call it?

EB: That's Emma, Emmanuel. Emma.

SO: (inaudible) (laughs) One of them returned (inaudible) was in Maryland.

EB: Well, thank you. Thank you very much for talking with us.

SO: It's appreciated sometimes.

End of interview