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# Peter Okonjo oral history interview by S. Elizabeth Bird and Fraser Ottanelli, December 14, 2009

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**S. Elizabeth Bird:** Good morning, this is Monday, December 14 [2009]. We are in Asaba, Delta State, Nigeria, and I am conducting an interview with Mr. Peter Okonjo. Also, in the room we have several guests, and I will just introduce each in turn.

**Emmanuel Ijeh:** Hi, my name is Ogbueshi Emmanuel Ijeh, the President General of Asaba Development Union.

**Benedict Okonkwo:** My name is Benedict Okonkwo. I'm an ex-official of Asaba Development Union.

**Ify Uriah:** I'm Ify Uriah.

**Guest 4:** Ogbueshi (inaudible).

EB: Thank you.

**Fraser Ottanelli:** And Fraser Ottanelli.

EB: Oh, I was ready to run that way, yes. (laughs)

All right. Well, we wanted to start today by talking a little bit about your life before the war, before the things that happened in October 1967: your family, how you were living, and who your family were.

**Peter Okonjo:** Before the civil war?

EB: Yes.

PO: I was—more or less, I was a toddler. I was a boy between the age of sixteen and seventeen. I was living with my family, with my family and the extended family.

EB: Here in Asaba?

PO: Here in Asaba.

EB: Could you just describe the members of your family, the names and ages of family that were living with you?

PO: Okay. I lived with my brothers and sisters, amongst whom were then Edith Okonjo, a sister; Nnamdi Okonjo, a brother; Emeka Okonta, a cousin; (inaudible), a cousin; (inaudible), a cousin; (inaudible), a cousin; Kanayo Okonta, a cousin—just to name a few. See, I have a large family, extended family.

EB: Yes, yes. And your father and mother were there also?

PO: Yes.

EB: What was your father's profession?

PO: My father worked with the Asaba—at the council. Then it was called AUDC, Asaba Urban Development—

Unidentified Man: Council.

PO: Council.

EB: And he had always lived in Asaba?

PO: We all lived in Asaba.

EB: So, thinking back to the days in early October, October of 1967, before things happened, when did you first start to hear about the—that the federal troops were soon to be arriving?

PO: Initially, before the real war, there was this northern pogrom, where the Igbos in the northern part of the country were brutally murdered. And in an attempt to get things under control—first it started with the army. There was a sort of mutiny in the army, of which, as of that time, one of our brothers, [Patrick Chukwuma Kaduna] Nzeogwu, led a coup in an attempt to cleanse the entire country because there was corruption at the highest level among the leaders; that is, the politicians. So actually, within the army, there was a plan to eliminate those at the top hierarchy of governors, and they started by eliminating Ahmadu Bello and the rest of them.

So, at this stage, it appeared that—it looked one-sided. Some people were assigned to do a certain job, but somewhere along the line, it was not properly done. So it appeared that the northerners got annoyed and started killing the Igbos. So, the Igbos, they now fled to the different states, or regions. And one of the major, Odumegwu Ojukwu, he was in the army. He thought—he felt his people were unjustly massacred in the north, so he tried to see if there could be any settlement within the rank and file in the army. But that didn't work, so these people organized and said if the Igbos could be massacred in the north without any explanation, then maybe they'll secede, go their own way, maybe form their own country. So Ojukwu, as a soldier, he took it upon himself to make sure that the area he came from should secede from the entire Nigerian state.

So, this thing dragged on. Then, [Yakubu] Gowon was the Head of State. They went to seek remittance in Aburi, and at Aburi, they agreed on certain terms. But it appeared when Gowon got home, his people now told him, “No, this can't happen, you cannot concede. You should not allow the east to secede and then have it their own way.” So, that was the—that was the import of the civil war. When the conditions given by a certain portion of the country who wanted to secede, when the entire Nigerian state could

not concede to the demands and conditions, then the military now said, “We should go out and crush the easterners,” and that is the Igbos.

EB: Yeah, I know.

PO: They should be crushed.

FO: What are your recollections of this period, you as a young boy?

PO: Okay, let me come back to what actually happened in Asaba here. I was trying to give you an overview. Actually, when the war started, the federal troops, in an attempt to enter Asaba, they had a strong resistance, but from the River Niger. But before that time, we know Asaba is very close to eastern part of Nigeria; that is, Onitsha and the rest. And because we're all Igbos, they came here, they had an easy ride. They went as far as to Ore, wanting to go as far as to Lagos. But because they had a ragtag army, they could not go further, so the federal troops were able to force them back. They retreated and went back to the east. And as they were going back to the east, the bridge here was blown off, it was blown off. So when the federal troops came in, the people told them the stories that when the Biafrans were here, the Asaba people harbored them because they have that affiliation as Igbo-speaking. So, with that annoyance, they decided to kill every surviving male.

So my—where I witnessed it was at—when they came, as a boy, we were hearing the sound of the bullets. So we were attracted. We didn't know the severity. We just thought it was a dance. We surged forward to see who was playing the music. We didn't know that thing would kill, until we started hearing shells dropping in several areas. So—

EB: Could we just—back, just for a second: about what date was this? Was this—?

PO: If I remember vividly—

EB: When you first heard—

PO: This was before the—this was some few days before the real massacre at the particular spot.

EB: So maybe around October 3 or—

PO: (inaudible) October.

EB: Yeah.

PO: So, we all—they asked us to come and dance; that is, proclaiming one Nigeria, that everything is calm. So we thought, “We are one.” So we all came out, all the males and females, we came out. We started from the police station here, so we all got out. We're dancing, one Nigeria. But unfortunately, as we got closer to this post office here—very close to this Grand Hotel—we saw corpses littering the whole place there. Already they had started killing, but nobody knew. But we were still in procession, we were dancing. So, as we're dancing down this road, corpses littered the whole place.

EB: What were you thinking at this time? When you saw the corpses and you were all walking here, you're dancing, what thoughts were going through your—?

PO: No, there was the impression that everything is calm, that those who were killed were those who harbored the Biafran soldiers; some of them were soldiers. Now that we've come out to dance and welcome them, we're all part and parcel of one Nigeria. So we raised up our hands and said, “One Nigeria, one Nigeria.” But the soldiers, they were guiding us, so we thought everything is calm—until we now got to this particular spot. And you know then, as children—most children were there with their mothers. But some of us, like me, I didn't go there with my mother; my mother went elsewhere. So, like I told you, we were inquisitive; we wanted to know what was happening. So by the time we went to that dancing spot, where many people were massacred, I was alone there.

But something occurred to me; when we got there, the atmosphere changed. And women who came with their sons were removing their skirts and blouses to disguise—so that their male children—by the time they wear it, they no longer become—they are no longer men, but women. So when I saw this scenario going on, I now felt something is wrong. If these women can disguise their children, and my mother is not here, what do I do? And I looked at the whole place: there is nowhere for escape. So, I was just praying, hoping on God to do his miracle.

Then, all of a sudden, gunshots. (makes sound effect). People were falling. So when people fell, I fell with them. At this state there was a sort of lacuna: no gunshots again. So it was by that time—in short, I cannot describe how I left the place, but it was after about two (inaudible), and I knew that I was able to mingle away, and escaped. So, when

we escaped, where we were after the escape, they were now telling us that many people were killed at that particular time. I was there when the shooting went, but I don't know how I left the place. But I later found my place (inaudible). That was how I escaped.

EB: When they opened fire, had you seen the machine guns? Did you—were the machine guns visible around? What were people expecting?

PO: Yes. They set the machine guns. When they opened fire, people were falling, some out of fright and fear, before even the bullets could come. Some of us fell, and some who fell were felled by the bullet. But those of us—because of the sound of the gun, the fear, we just fell, even though you are not—the bullet didn't touch you. And that was how some people were saved; many people were saved, and some were shot. By the time you fall, the bullet would now pierce through somebody, the person would fall upon you, and you would remain there.

EB: So you had to come out from under—

PO: From—yes, when at least—after some time, they were not shooting again. That was when some of us were able to crawl out.

FO: And the soldiers had left the square at this point.

PO: What'd you say?

FO: The soldiers had left the square—

PO: No, they didn't leave. They were still there; they didn't leave. It appeared they were backing us, making some other plan. People were crying, so they did—maybe they didn't want to face us. They felt guilty about the action. So they rested a little, thinking that everybody that fell on the ground was a dead person.

EB: Do you—did you get any impression of who or what started, who ordered—was there somebody who ordered the shooting? What was happening immediately before they opened fire?

PO: Actually, it was when we left the scene. We asked—we said—they now said because the Biafran soldiers—we harbored them here. There was instruction as they were leaving Lagos that when you get to Asaba, the gateway to Onitsha, any male child there is a Biafran soldier. And that informed the action, because during this shooting, no woman was touched. They brought women to one side, just left only males.

EB: But did you see anybody, an officer? Did you see anybody give an order, or anything that actually started the shooting? Was there somebody who said something or—do you know? Could you see anything happening or was it just completely unexpected?

PO: As of that time, as a boy, all I knew was they started shooting. But you know soldiers, you don't just shoot. There must be an order: if not on the spot, before they got to the spot there was an order that, when you get to some place, finish them.

EB: So afterwards—you said you don't remember how you got away, but where did you go to?

PO: It was a miracle. I wouldn't—I can't be able to describe. All I knew was that I found myself out of that scene.

EB: And where did you—where were you next?

PO: I went to a safe place, the Ogbe-Eke. We have a square, Ogbe-Eke Square. That was where some of us who escaped gathered.

EB: Where is that? How close is that to the city?

PO: It's about—about 500 yards from the city.

EB: And you went there. Were there other people gathering there, too?

PO: Yes.

EB: And then what did you do? Did you leave Asaba?

PO: When we got there, after sharing our experience, we had—everybody had to run to the bush, because we now felt the town was no longer safe for anybody. And while we were there, we were still hearing gunshots.

EB: So this was in the evening of that day, late in the day?

PO: All afternoon.

EB: So you left, you went to the bush—

PO: We went to the neighboring towns, like Achalla.

EB: Who were you with at that time?

PO: Who I went there with?

EB: Mm-hm.

PO: No, we just ran to the bush. You meet people going into farmlands, where we took refuge.

EB: And how long did you stay outside of the town, in the farm?

PO: Uh, in short, I would say months.

EB: Months?

PO: Months.

EB: Did you know at that time where your family was, your other—the rest of your family?

PO: We later located our families in different locations, so we had to join up again. Some went across the Niger; that is, to the eastern part of the state, of the country.

EB: So when you came back to Asaba after being in the bush for a couple of months, what did you find when you returned?

PO: We found a lot of burnt houses, nothing to find in such homes, everything razed to the ground. First of all, they would raze and they would loot, and then put fire.

EB: Was your own house burnt?

PO: Everything. Complete.

EB: Where was your mother and father at this time?

PO: They all went to the east. They ran to the east.

EB: So there was nothing—you didn't go to the east?

PO: I didn't go to the east.

EB: You came back to Asaba.

PO: I came back.

EB: So where did you live after you returned?

PO: When I returned, that was around 1969. My uncle, who was working in Sapele at the time of the war, now was in Aboh, so he asked us to come to Aboh, at least to get rehabilitated. So I now went to Aboh. Then the war has not ended, though, because the war ended in 1970. That was sixty-nine [1969].

EB: Many people we've been talking to have mentioned that there was—

(to someone else) What? Oh.

(to PO) Many people we've talked to mentioned that there was a second set of killings in March of 1968, when the troops came into Asaba again. And people have told us that many people moved out of Asaba to St. Patrick's College.

PO: I remember, yes.

EB: Do you remember that?

PO: As of that time we—there was something we called first operation and second operation.

EB: Yes.

PO: Yes. We had something like that. At this stage, people were moved from town here to SPC, where they were camped. But some of us who had relations outside—if you have relations, you have to move out of Asaba, because it wasn't safe for male children to remain in Asaba. They were raping women, raping girls.

EB: So, in the second operation, you left again and went—

PO: By second operation—by second operation, I was still in the bush. I came back around sixty-nine [1969]. I didn't stay long in Asaba here. I had to join my uncle, who was in Aboh, so that I would be free from molestation.

EB: Yeah. Several people have mentioned this about assaults and rapes on girls and women. Is that something that happened a lot?

PO: Yes.

EB: In both operation one and operation two?

PO: That wasn't until—they would come around—they want to—even when the person is somebody's wife, they don't care. They want to have any woman they feel like.

EB: So this happened a lot, to many women.

PO: Yes, especially young girls.

EB: What do you think was the impact—how did this all change Asaba as a community? What was the impact of these events?

PO: Well, to some extent we suffered the impact of the war. But it appeared after the war maybe those old buildings we had then, in an attempt to rebuild, we now have more modern buildings. But all the same, in terms of socialization, maybe it opened up our degree of socialization.

EB: In what way? Could you explain that?

PO: And in terms of development, like I said earlier. Back then, some people had thatch houses, but after those houses were burnt, when we now want to rebuild, you build a more modern design, unlike in the past.

EB: How were people able to rebuild if they had lost everything? Did people have resources?

PO: No, government then had a way of trying to rehabilitate, though it didn't go around to everybody. But I remember then we heard of this organization called Caritas. During the war they were bringing food items. The council, people in the missions, like the churches. So immediately after the war, people were asked to go and register whose houses were burnt. They registered and they gave them token building material. It wasn't enough. Some people didn't even care to go through all those hurdles. Those, who their children are outside Asaba and well to do, they didn't bother. On their own they had to start from scratch to put up a new building.

EB: I just wanted to ask you a little about what you think should be done about remembering, memorializing this, these massacres. What do you think is the appropriate thing to do next?

PO: Before I say that, before now, the Head of State then, Gowon, General Gowon, he was in Asaba. He actually apologized. But our people thought we should be paid reparation for all the damages. They killed the Igbo intellectuals and the upcoming ones. So we thought that the Nigerian government would have done that before now; but nothing has been done. Nothing has been done. Like the question you ask, actually, people will think when we start giving out names of those who were massacred during the war, it may bring us sad memories. But it's part of history; we need them. And if there's anything anybody can do to appease the entire community for what transpired during the war, I think it is worthwhile doing. We suffered a lot, on no just cause.

EB: Did you lose close family members: cousins, uncles, brothers? Did anybody die in your family?

PO: Actually, I would say I am lucky. In my family, nobody died during that war, but maybe after the war.

EB: After the war, as a result of the war or—?

PO: No. Natural death.

EB: Natural death, okay.

PO: Natural death.

EB: Thank you. Fraser?

FO: Is there anything that we have not asked that you think—that you would like to say?

PO: What I want to say is—like my last statement, at least, about reparation. We should be compensated, entire community, at least by putting something, a nice edifice to show that—we call that war, but genocide—to show that something—that people were actually murdered, for no just cause. It's supposed to be soldier to soldier, but they descended on

civilian population. They were not killing soldiers here. They didn't meet any Biafrans here, but they just met the entire Asaba community. And they made sure—a total elimination of everybody that got on ground, especially the males.

EB: Thank you very much. Does anybody else want to ask anything? Did you want to ask him anything? No?

EI: I recall (inaudible) away from the northern (inaudible).

EB: Let me put you under the microphone.

EI: Those of us who were outside, or were fortunate to be outside of Asaba when this incident happened, we're also tied to it, because other people were (inaudible) an Igbo man. On the corner where (inaudible) the church, they want to eliminate the Igbos. So, those of us who were outside Asaba were from the—a sort of rehabilitation organization. That is how you come about this Asaba Development Union. Then we have our son, (inaudible), late now. And our brother, [Philip] Asiodu was in power; he was working then with Gowon. I hope he got out to Ibadan, the University of Ibadan (inaudible). Our parents are no longer happy. They eliminated our brothers; our homes were all set on fire. We have no choice but to form a small organization. And Caritas came to our aid, also.

We decided that we're mostly (inaudible), because our brother, Asiodu, was working with Gowon. So we made an arrangement—I was the secretary, then, of that organization—that we must touch Dodan Barracks, come what may, because the risk was that any fair man must be more than a fair man, as an Igbo man. So we took the risk. We organized ourselves and we got clearance from Asiodu, our own brother, who give us the permit to see Gowon at the Dodan Barracks. We succeeded in getting to Gowon in Dodan Barracks, and we complained bitterly about Asaba as a town, 'cause they were virtually removing everything. St. Patrick's books were used in roasting rabbits and roasting yams. We did not talk about our parents, because our parents have all fled to the East and the whole place was deserted. In fact, (inaudible) came to Ibadan (inaudible) and described Asaba as a ghost town because there was nobody in Asaba, other than the bold women that you can find in Asaba along the streets, some looking for their children. Others have escaped to the neighboring town.

Gowon felt Asaba was badly treated, and he gave us an audience and asked us to come with some relief materials, which we did. We came to Asaba boldly, because it was as if we had nothing, but we had no place to hide. It's either you die there or you die here, so we decided to die. We came back and saw the situation. It was very, very—nothing to

write home about. You cannot find some homes; they've already set fires on some of the homes. I managed to mount up strength and complain, go and get instruction that (inaudible) about to remove the police barrack to Ibusa, all the things to Ibusa. In fact, they wanted to condemn Asaba as a town. (inaudible) our own intervention. Gowon did not sign it. Gowon also gave instruction. Then, it was (inaudible) that was here. Then he sympathized us and allowed suddenly to make an announcement.

People started coming back from their hiding to come to Asaba, but nobody would believe that anybody can live in Asaba again. So we managed to come to Asaba, get them some relief materials, some clothing, which we got out from friends and relations all about Ibadan (inaudible), and off we went. The saddest part of it is some of us who came to Asaba could not even meet our own parents: they were all gone; they'd all crossed to the Biafran area. (inaudible) In the process, I had lost my immediate senior brother, who started with the northern killing. They were from Kano, he ran down to Ibadan here; he decided not to run anymore, and he was gunned down in the front of (inaudible). So, when we saw these things, we had to go back again. In fact, I have to give thanks to Caritas International, for they came out and started supplying material, building material, to some of the houses. Some started pitching, putting some of the things that were inside the houses.

What can we do? That, no doubt, I would say, set Asaba back, because if you get through the names of people they killed, our personalities that they killed, you would shed tears. Well, yeah, again, (inaudible). But the government tried to erase it from the histories is why we are saying no. Asaba should be—it's the only town that so far—I mean, you can claim (inaudible) Asaba. The only next town again close to Asaba was a town called Ishiagu, where they said—the government ordered that no male child should be left in that town, and declared that no male was left in that town. So Asaba, miraculously—people were surprised to see Asaba existed, because there's no home in Asaba that did not suffer this Biafran war. We suffered it. That's what I want to add.

And by our nature, we are very accommodating. We cut back and started licking our wounds and start coming back to see what we can do to come back. The fires (inaudible) they cannot find their children again. Education: you know, we believe in education, we train our children. St. Patrick's: again, we were able to rehabilitate the place. If you go there, you will find our books we got from Americans; they sent us books, were donating books to rehabilitate the library, because the library was virtually vandalized. And all this talk about these girls at secondary schools, where you find these vandals were camping our women and making mess of our women. But the place is not—if you come to Asaba, you must shed tears. That's (inaudible) Asaba.

But here we are today, and thank God you people are coming to take stories, take histories of what has happened. If it gets to this point, to where this thing happened—

people think—they are coming to forget. They are building houses all around the place now. You can't even know something had happened. And after which, (inaudible), the youth development organization I'm talking about, the Asaba Rehabilitation Association, decided to build inside the town we're talking about. But the government was in power there; they refuse that—to continue to recall sad moment. And they did not encourage us. In fact, they were governing in fear. It was the military regime and nobody (inaudible).

But now here we are again, face to face again. Now, there's no time (inaudible) until we complete the cenotaph and remember. If Nigerians are able to build something for the Nigerian people who were killed during the war—I want to make us not to build a cenotaph to remember our brothers. We have a (inaudible) record, which I would love you to (inaudible). That record named all the people killed. It was a record, a playing record.

IU: In the form of music.

EI: Yes. Anytime they play that record, people start shedding tears because they mentioned names of some family, people that were killed in cold bloodedness. So that was (inaudible). And we pray that maybe one day, a messiah will come to wipe the tears of some families. Some families have come out of—and have very encouraging children. They are able to pick up and develop their own family. So, that's what I say about the war. The war did not favor us at all. We did the fighting. We can say the Asaba people did the fighting. We are talking of Biafran; it is Asaba people that did the fighting. We did the fighting, we did the suffering. I'm not sure the Igbo man suffered what the Asaba people suffered.

EB: Thank you.

FO: Thank you very much.

*End of interview*