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# Charles Ugboko oral history interview by S. Elizabeth Bird and Fraser Ottanelli, December 12, 2009

Charles Ugboko (Interviewee)

S. Elizabeth Bird (Interviewer)

Fraser M. Ottanelli (Interviewer)

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**Elizabeth Bird:** All right, this is Saturday, December 12 [2009], and this is Elizabeth Bird in Lagos, interviewing Charles Ugbok—

**Charles Ugboko:** Ugboko.

EB: Ugboko, sorry. (laughs) Okay. Well, we wanted to cover a sort of chronological kind of story here, in the sense that—first of all, we'd like to start with—if you could talk a little bit about your life before things happened, before the war, before—where you were, who your family members were, just generally, kind of, all of that.

CU: Okay. Actually I was born at Asaba. I had just finished high school, and I was actually waiting to enter into the university when the civil war started. I was teaching—I finished at the high school, and I was teaching the lower classes at the high school as well, while waiting to enter university.

EB: Which high school were you at?

CU: I attended the new government college in Benin City. So, I waited. I was to enter University of Nigeria, Nsukka. But apparently—Nsukka is located in the east, so because of that, the university could not open. The university was closed, so we couldn't start at the university education. So, I was in Asaba, and actually, I was there when—the day, October, when the whole thing started.

EB: Who was—could you describe your family, who was with you at the time?

CU: Well, my—the entire members of my family were there, and because of the entire situation in the country, even my uncles and their families ran back to Asaba. So it was, like, the entire family: my father, my mother, my brothers and sisters, my uncles. We were all there, you know, just watching the situation.

EB: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

CU: Well, I had four brothers at that time, and then a sister. Then my immediate junior was the one we lost in the war, my immediate junior, the one following me; he was also in the high school.

EB: And what was his name?

CU: He was Peter.

EB: Peter. So in the days before, up to, say, October 6 or 7 [1967], what were you hearing? What were people's concerns? Were people worried about hearing the federal troops coming through?

CU: No, we heard that they were coming, and that people were—well, let me put it this way: Many of us were quite naïve, because we had never seen anything like war, so we couldn't really appreciate the seriousness of the whole situation. We knew that soldiers were coming north, and we thought it was actually impossible for a soldier to face the gun to a civilian. I mean, we couldn't imagine why that should happen, since we were not—we were just watching. So, we were quite naïve. And most people in Asaba, they—maybe, because of the level of education of the town as a whole, they didn't think it was possible for such a thing to happen. So, they didn't actually know to run away from the town.

EB: So you weren't afraid of the troops?

CU: No, we were not afraid, I must confess, because we felt they will come and pass by, that actually they had nothing to do with us. And we had no business with them. And we felt it was something: they would come, go to the town, and continue.

EB: So what did happen, then? What happened at the beginning of October?

CU: Well, at the beginning, when they came in, that afternoon, a lot of shooting, shelling, and people were—people became really confused. Some people started running towards Onitsha, towards the bridge, to cross the bridge to Onitsha. Some of us—for example, my family: my father felt the best thing was for all of us to stay inside the house, and that there was no point running to an unknown destination. So we all stayed inside the house, and the shooting was going on throughout—that was on the sixth of October.

Everything was going on, and the soldiers came in. We didn't see them, we just stayed indoors, and we saw some of them running past the house, and we peeked through the window and we saw them, and then we just stayed indoors until the following day. And they started coming to knock at the doors of houses, and people started opening, and started kind of threatening, but we stayed in. Later on, they said everybody should come out of their houses. We saw our neighbors come out, everybody—they said people should go—well, people in our own part of the town, they said we should all come out to an open field.

EB: Where was your house located? Was it near to—it was in Ogbeosowa?

CU: Right inside the town. We were located near—we are not far from the market, so we were really at the center of the town. So, we came out, and they said we should all sit down. We sat down on the bare ground. And then, later on, they decided to separate the men from the women and children. So, they took the women apart, took the children with the women, and then they left us, the men; we were still sitting. And then later on, they said okay, that they were going to march us to somewhere, so they said we should all stand up and file up; we filed up. They said, we should raise our hands; we raised our hands, and we went on. At a certain point, they were beating people, and—but we're quite a good number, and they said—we didn't know where they were taking us to, anyway. But we were still going.

I was rather lucky, let me put it this way, because while we were going, there was an officer who stopped us, all of us, and said we should stop. He came out—he came out with one young lady, and the lady was crying and was actually going through—the lady was looking for her father. She was looking for her father, and then said—she started looking at everybody, trying to fish out her father. Then I noticed—I saw the officer; it happened to be my senior, in the high school. So I called his name. He was shocked. So he looked at me, he said, “Charles! What are you doing here?” I say, “Your men are holding me.” He said, “Come out of the line.” I said, “No, I won't come out.” He said,

“No, come, come, come, come.” He came and dragged me out of the line. I said, “Okay, if you want to pick me, let me take my junior brother.”

I looked for my junior brother—he was nowhere to be found—not knowing that, while we were filing up, they took another group the opposite direction, and my junior brother was in that group. So I said, no, that I was not going, except I go with my junior brother. He said, “Okay, come into the vehicle and let us go and look for him.” So we started running around, including that girl who was looking for her father, but we couldn’t find them.

So, the people who were there at—they were all taken to the football field, you know, where we play soccer?

EB: Yeah.

CU: Somewhere. And they started executing them, one by one, and they were put in a mass grave. It was eventually I heard that my brother was executed somewhere else, but I didn’t see him again. And the only luck we had, or my father had, was that very early in the morning that seventh of October, we couldn’t find the youngest when the gun was shooting, when the soldiers came around. So my father had to go out looking for him. That was why he did not join us; otherwise he would have been one of the victims. But my uncles, all of them were killed, four of them.

EB: Was that your father’s brothers?

CU: Yes, my father’s brothers.

EB: What were their names?

CU: One is, uh, Nwaokafor.

EB: I’ve got my—let me get—

CU: N-w-o—N-w-a—

EB: N-w-a—

CU: —a-o-k—

EB: —o-k—

CU: —a-f-o-r.

EB: —o-r. What was the—

CU: One is—

EB: Last name?

CU: Ozili, Ozili, O-z-i-l-i.

EB: O-z-i-l-i. Okay.

CU: One is Adife, A-d-i-f-e. Then Martin.

EB: Martin?

CU: Martin, yes. So, we lost all of them.

EB: All your—mm-hm.

CU: You know, so—

**Fraser Ottanelli:** The events that you were involved in with your brother were on the sixth, then?

CU: Pardon?

FO: Or were they on the seventh?

CU: Who?

FO: The events that you have just described?

CU: Yes.

FO: The ones that involved you and your brother and running into the officer, those were on the sixth or on the seventh? Do you remember?

CU: On the seventh.

FO: On the seventh?

CU: Yes. That was the exact day of the execution. The mass killing took place. That was on the seventh.

EB: How old was your brother when he was killed?

CU: My brother was, uh—at that time, my brother was around fifteen.

EB: Fifteen. Um, so, this happened—this was a separate event from—what we heard about was the parade and the dancing, and this was a different—

CU: A different group. You know, people—the whole event took place in different groups, depending on what part of the town one was. It was not a single event for the whole town, no. Depending on—there are some people who were even not—immediately they left their houses, they were fired. It depends on the location, you know, where one was at that time.

EB: Where was this football field, where—?

CU: It's called Ogbeafor.

EB: Could you spell that?

CU: Ogbeafor, O-g-b-e-a-f-o-r.

EB: Ogbeafor.

CU: Ogbeafor football field.

EB: And so that was near the center of the town.

CU: Yes, not far from the market, not far from the market.

EB: Oh, okay. So that was one area where a lot of people were—

CU: Yes, and if you take—you know, in Nigeria, or in Africa, we have larger families. A family is not necessarily somebody who also has your name; we have what you call the larger family. It might be all descendants of the same great-grandparents. And in my own larger family, great-grandparents, we lost nothing less than forty people, nothing less than forty.

EB: Forty people. All men and boys?

CU: All men and boys.

EB: Yeah, yeah.

CU: Nothing less than forty.

EB: That's incredible.

CU: So it took a lot of time for—I mean, it was something that happened—it took me seven years—

(phone rings)

EB: (on phone) Hello? Good morning? Oh, we're not ready yet, we said twelve o'clock. Um, we'll be there at twelve o'clock; we're still in a meeting. Okay, thank you, bye.

(to CU) Sorry about that.

CU: It's okay.

EB: Um.

CU: So, the experience was that things happened in different parts on the same day.

EB: You know, we heard from another person about a group of people who were killed near the police station.

CU: Yes.

EB: Is that a different—that's different again?

CU: That's a different group.

EB: So there's the police station, there was the football field—

CU: Yes.

EB: And then there was the, uh—

CU: The dancing group.

EB: The dancing group in the—

CU: Yes.

EB: Ogbeosowa.

CU: Yes. Ogbeosowa, yes.

EB: So this is at least three different—

CU: Yes, and there was even another group at Cable Point, an area we called Cable Point in Asaba. So it was not—it wasn't just one—different groups.

FO: Where were the people, then, that were killed in the football field—where were they buried?

CU: There.

EB: There.

FO: There.

CU: Yes.

FO: And they were—were they left there, so they're still there?

CU: No, they had the mass grave. And they were just pushed in there.

EB: And the people were not able to recover the bodies?

CU: No, because who could? Who could?

EB: Yeah, yeah.

CU: The women couldn't do that.

EB: Yeah.

CU: The women couldn't. And then—it's just not possible. And after that, those who were still, who were lucky to be alive, fled. So it was not a question of anybody coming to identify anybody.

EB: Did anybody ever find your brothers?

CU: No, no. We have not, up to today.

EB: So what happened after you—you said that this officer took you around to—

CU: Yes.

EB: What happened after that?

CU: Then they ventured—then he took us. Then they started appealing to me that, “No, don't worry.” And we went around. We couldn't see my brother; the girl couldn't see her father. And then he took us to an agricultural settlement, just a little bit outside the town. The place is called Anwai, Anwai, A-n-w-a-i, an agricultural settlement. And then he dropped us. And at that agricultural settlement, they had poultry, piggery, all sorts of—and then, they kept some—there were a few workers there, but telling them to be feeding the animals, because they were coming to pick the animals to feed themselves, the soldiers. So they said we should stay with them for the meanwhile. That was where he dropped us and vanished. So I was there now.

One day—it was after about four days or five days—some soldiers had seized some young men and they were cooking for them, so they came to collect some chicken and some, you know, goods for slaughter. So one of them happened to know me, so when he saw me, he said, “What? What are you doing here?” I said, “Well, the soldiers dropped me here, with this girl.” He said, “Ah, even they thought you were already dead.” I said, “Okay, please go back and tell my uncle”—I have an uncle who was then a Catholic priest; he came from Ibadan, so he came to the town. So I told him, I said, “Look, go and tell the priest that I’m still alive, that I’m in this place. He should please come, if it is possible.” So he said, “Okay.” Two days after, the priest came in there one afternoon.

EB: What was his name?

CU: This is an Ugboko. Father Patrick Ugboko.

EB: Father Patrick—oh, this was Father Patrick—

CU: You must have heard the same name, the same person.

EB: Yes, yes.

CU: Father Patrick.

EB: Yes, yeah. He (inaudible)—

CU: My father’s immediate young brother.

EB: Oh, right.

CU: So, he came there and then picked us and took us away from that agricultural center, you know? That was how I came out from there.

EB: So you were there—

CU: And the girl.

EB: Three—two days?

CU: No, I was there about five or six days, six days. About six days.

EB: Do you remember the name of the officer who helped you?

CU: He is called—then he was a major, Idahosa, I-d-a-h-o-s-a. Actually, he's—

EB: I-d-a-h—

CU: —o-s-a. He's even late now.

EB: He's—

CU: He's dead, yes. He eventually got Parkinson disease and then was sick—

EB: Oh, okay.

CU: —for a while, then was dead.

EB: So, five—so then you were picked up, you were taken—where were you taken after that?

CU: He took us to—because Father Patrick set up a refugee camp in St. Brigid's. So, it was from there that he took us to that refugee camp. That was where I was. And then, I was there for about two days, and then I started looking for my father, and the young—my mother, and the younger ones. They told me that my father was in one town behind us called Ibusa, so I had to go through the farm, you know, through the farmlands and trekked for about eight kilometers to get there. That was where I now found my father, my mother, and the younger ones.

EB: That must have been a great moment for you to—

CU: Yeah, because my father thought I was gone. He was even weeping on the—but of course, when he saw me, he couldn't believe it. And then I had to narrate the story to him, what happened. It was an ordeal, I tell you, something that, um—Asaba had been deserted completely. After that, the town was deserted for months. You couldn't even imagine when you get there now that anybody who left during that period—wouldn't imagine that you would find people still living in that place. There was a lot of killing, and a lot of people ran away. The whole place was deserted: no activity of any sort, neither social nor economic activity, no.

EB: Were a lot of people in this refugee camp?

CU: Yes, there were quite a lot of people, in a small girls' high school. Yes, quite a lot of people. But despite that, people were still not so confident, they were still finding their ways—and they were going back to the farmland, you know, going right into the bush, going to the farm, to sleep in the farm. They felt safer there than in the high school.

EB: What was the name of the girls' high school where you were?

CU: St. Brigid's.

EB: Seven Bridges?

CU: St. Brigid's.

EB: Oh, St. Brigid's. I'm sorry, yes, yeah.

CU: St. Brigid's girls' high school.

EB: So, what was the impact of all of this on your family, or extended family? How did people deal with this, recover?

CU: Well, it was a big trauma for the family, because, um—it was really terrible. For example, one of my uncles' wives—that is number four within my father's—his wife couldn't bear it. He couldn't. She couldn't just—the unfortunate thing was that she was

about seven months or eight months pregnant. So when this happened, it was terrible for her. She gave birth, a baby boy, and in not quite two, three months, she died. Now the family had to take care of the baby and the two elder children, the two other children. And not only that, it created a lot of tension within the family, because you can imagine when you come to your family that has lost about four men, and they're still having children, wives. My father had to carry a lot of responsibilities.

EB: Yeah, there were a lot of widows and a lot of children—

CU: Yeah, because he was the only one left. And he wept every day. He wept every day. He wept every day. And we're carrying all these responsibilities, looking after the brothers' children, and it was terrible. It was terrible. The entire town, you know, it was a kind of—uh, what word would I use for it, a proper word? It is kind of a, um, tragedy for the whole town, because you could see maybe a woman who has only two sons, and the two sons have been killed. And maybe the sons are the breadwinners for her. Some women went crazy. They became crazy, they couldn't just (inaudible) they couldn't bear it. They went crazy. Some lost all their sons, plus husband. You couldn't imagine what it is. They couldn't just—

EB: So did your family go—did they move back into Asaba?

CU: Oh, we had no choice, nowhere else to move. We had to go back, we had to start reconstructing our houses. It took some time anyway, but you know—but apart from that, many—a lot of destruction. Homes were destroyed, burned. We lost most of the things we had. Everything we had, more or less, we lost—everything, including even documents.

EB: Yeah.

CU: So, we moved back, we had no choice. There was nowhere we could go. So, we moved back and started life all over again.

EB: But your father now had all of these other people to take care of.

CU: Yes, yes, it was a lot, sending them to school. Because we—Asaba, we have the tradition of going to school. That was actually one of the factors that brought the envy on the town from our neighboring groups in the same state, in Bendel State, at that time; in Mid-West Region, at that time. So, we couldn't afford not to send our children to school,

even though everything got delayed, because definitely that year, going to school was ruled out. And the following years, throughout the period of the civil war, they couldn't go to school.

EB: Did you eventually go to the University of Nigeria?

CU: Yes, I did. I did.

EB: Now people are talking about what should be done—

CU: Yes.

EB: What should be done, but what do you think—what do you think is the appropriate thing to do?

CU: Well, the—well, it is history that we cannot forget. The closest person to me at that time was my brother. We grew up like twins, you know, and we were always together. It took seven years for me to overcome—you know, just like every night I went to bed, I dreamt both of us going somewhere, and you know, it's—it took, uh—excuse me.

(phone rings)

CU: (on phone) Nnamdi. Yes, please go back. Where are you? Okay, okay, I'll see you, okay.

(to EB) So, it took almost seven years for it to get out of me. You know, it kept on reoccurring and it kept on reoccurring. And in the town as well, the younger generation has to be taught what happened. For example, my second son, I gave him the name of my brother, because, yes, I just—he's—so each time I call him, and each time he keeps on asking me, "How much do you love this brother?" I used to tell him, and he said, "Well, you never show me his photograph." I said, "Because we lost all the photographs." He's been anxious to see what he looks like. So, I'm sure the same has happened in various families. We were thinking of having a monument in memory, because something has—a book has been written; maybe you've seen it?

EB: *Blood on the Niger*, yes.<sup>1</sup>

CU: *Blood on the Niger*, yes; it was Okocha who wrote that book. And they gave the names of people who—as much as he could get, you know. But eventually, there must be something to commemorate—they're not—they shouldn't die for nothing, especially when people were innocent. They were not involved in any way in military activities, and they lost their lives.

EB: Yeah, it's a terrible, terrible thing.

CU: People who had never seen a gun in their lives, they were killed. That is why we believe something should be done, maybe a monument or something that should be kept for people. And it becomes a reminder, because history is often a repetition of itself. After the First World War, people thought there would not be war anymore in the world. The Second World War took place. We are not praying for the Third World War, but who knows? So, there must be something that will remind people, "Oh, this happened." And they will ask questions, "Why did it happen? Why is it that they didn't run away?" So, maybe there is something in that manner that comes up again, they will remember, "Oh, remember that cenotaph. We have to run."

EB: Yeah, all right. That's a good point.

CU: They will have to run.

EB: Yeah. One quick—to back up, a quick question. Your father's name was?

CU: My father's name was, again, Charles, Nwanze—Nwanze Ugboko. I'm actually Charles Junior.

EB: What did he do, what was his profession?

CU: My father was an architectural draftsman, you know, the people who design houses and—

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

EB: Yes, yes, yes.

CU: This is what he was doing then.

EB: Did he—had he worked in Asaba? Had he always lived in Asaba, or was he—

CU: Well, he lived in Jos, in the north. Just after that, he joined Shell, which was Shell-D'Arcy; they were the people who first discovered oil in Nigeria in the late fifties [1950s]. But then he relocated to Asaba, finally, and started practicing there. And he was there for over fifty years before this happened.

EB: So, in the years before the war, your family was just—was living in Asaba—

CU: Yes, yes, yes.

EB: And happy every day.

CU: Yes. Oh, we were very happy there, very happy. We were very happy. I mean, virtually the entire family lived there, and from there we were going to high school—we went to boarding schools. So, I had to go to Benin, where I was in the boarding school. Also, my brother was in a boarding school. This was what was happening then.

EB: (to FO) Okay, well, do you have other questions?

FO: No.

CU: So, this is the situation. I'm sure, when you get to Asaba, you will get more reports from various people who were at various points.

EB: We would like to talk to more women as well, because—

CU: Oh, yes, yes, yes.

EB: —so many of the women were the ones who were left.

CU: Yes, yes.

EB: And, uh—

FO: I have one quick question.

CU: Yes.

FO: What do you think about the idea of actually reopening the mass grave and giving a proper burial to whatever's left in there? Do you think that would be a good idea?

CU: No, no, it's taken too long. It's taken too long. You see, when you look at it—how many years now? It's almost—more than forty years?

EB: Forty years, more than forty years.

CU: Who are you going to? Our people don't believe in just burying people; they want to see whom they're burying. You know, they want to see whom they're burying. That is why we have the tradition: normally, before we bury somebody, we lie the person in state and we open the casket.

EB: Oh.

FO: I see.

CU: To see that there is actually the right person. If it doesn't go that way, they don't believe in that. So, it is not worth it. And then when you look at this, many, many of the women at that time who were maybe thirty years are now seventy. Those who were above thirty, possibly many of them are dead. So, if you are opening for the grandchildren, it doesn't mean much to them.

EB: Well, that's interesting, because we've have very different people disagree about this. Some people think that it seems very important, and you—

CU: No, no, it's not. No, no. Well, I don't know.

FO: Probably the main advantage, assuming there is an advantage—and assuming there is anything left, because in this climate, of course, decomposition is—

CU: Yes.

FO: But if there's any attempt to conceal or negate that this ever happened—you know, once you find forensic evidence, it becomes, in and of itself—the bodies, or the remains, speak for themselves. But that's something the community will have to decide.

CU: Mmm.

EB: Because there are people that deny that this happened, or say that it didn't.

CU: No, it happened. Nobody can deny that, nobody.

EB: We know, but there are people still who say that they don't think it was a big thing, and that's—

CU: No. Oh, it was a big thing.

EB: Oh, yeah, we believe that.

CU: It was a big thing. It was a big thing.

EB: I think, as Fraser said, the suggestion is perhaps that the evidence of the burials would prove, definitively, that this happened. But, uh—

FO: But it is a—

CU: Except if, for example, you go to where—you want to identify really whether the bodies are there, yes?

EB: Uh-huh.

CU: But what I'm thinking, because of the length of time, I think that the decomposition would have—

EB: Yeah, that's—

CU: Huh?

EB: Well, it's—

FO: That's an interesting—

CU: Yes.

FO: It's a question we need to ask.

CU: Yes. The decomposition would have been too much.

*End of interview*