

December 2009

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

Peter Ojogwu (Interviewee)

Fraser M. Ottanelli (Interviewer)

S. Elizabeth Bird (Interviewer)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/hgstud\\_oh](http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/hgstud_oh)

 Part of the [African Languages and Societies Commons](#), [History Commons](#), [Other Languages, Societies, and Cultures Commons](#), [Race, Ethnicity and post-Colonial Studies Commons](#), and the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

---

## Scholar Commons Citation

Ojogwu, Peter (Interviewee); Ottanelli, Fraser M. (Interviewer); and Bird, S. Elizabeth (Interviewer), "Peter Ojogwu oral history interview by Fraser Ottanelli and S. Elizabeth Bird, December 14, 2009" (2009). *Digital Collection - Holocaust & Genocide Studies Center Oral Histories*. Paper 23.

[http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/hgstud\\_oh/23](http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/hgstud_oh/23)

This Oral History is brought to you for free and open access by the Digital Collection - Holocaust & Genocide Studies Center at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Digital Collection - Holocaust & Genocide Studies Center Oral Histories by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [scholarcommons@usf.edu](mailto:scholarcommons@usf.edu).

# **COPYRIGHT NOTICE**

**This Oral History is copyrighted by the University of South Florida Libraries Oral History Program on behalf of the Board of Trustees of the University of South Florida.**

**Copyright, 2010, University of South Florida.  
All rights, reserved.**

**This oral history may be used for research, instruction, and private study under the provisions of the Fair Use. Fair Use is a provision of the United States Copyright Law (United States Code, Title 17, section 107), which allows limited use of copyrighted materials under certain conditions. Fair Use limits the amount of material that may be used.**

**For all other permissions and requests, contact the UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH FLORIDA LIBRARIES ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM at the University of South Florida, 4202 E. Fowler Avenue, LIB 122, Tampa, FL 33620.**

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

Digital Object Identifier: A34-00023  
Interviewee: Peter Ojogwu (PO)  
Interviewers: Fraser Ottanelli (FO) and S. Elizabeth Bird (EB)  
Interview date: December 14, 2009  
Interview location: Asaba, Delta State, Nigeria  
Transcribed by: Jenica Ibarra  
Transcription date: July 20, 2010 to July 22, 2010  
Audit Edited by: Caitlin Alderson  
Audit Edit date: July 28, 2010 to July 31, 2010  
Final Edit by: Michelle Joy  
Final Edit date: August 19, 2010

**Fraser Ottanelli:** Today is Monday, December 14 [2009]. We are in Asaba, Delta State, [Nigeria], and we're interviewing Mr. Peter Ojogwu. We have also several guests here in the room with us, which will now introduce themselves.

**Man 1:** Ogbueshi (inaudible), from Asaba.

**Emmanuel Ijeh:** Ogbueshi Emma Ijeh, President, Asaba Development Union.

**Benedict (inaudible):** Mr. Benedict (inaudible), a senior official of Asaba Development Union.

**Ify Uraih:** Ify Uraih.<sup>1</sup>

**Peter Okonjo:** Okonjo, Peter, ex-official, ADU.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Ify Uraih was also interviewed for the Asaba Memorial Oral History Project. The DOI for his interview is A34-00003.

<sup>2</sup>Peter Okonjo was also interviewed for the Asaba Memorial Oral History Project. The DOI for his interview is A34-00020.

FO: And Dr. Elizabeth Bird. Welcome, sir. If we could please start out by describing your family, your family members, giving their names, their ages, and what their occupations were—on the eve, of course, of the beginning of the hostilities.

**Peter Ojogwu:** All right. As of that time I was sixteen, family, left alive. Two of my brothers were abroad, out of Asaba. One of them was in the seminary at Ibadan; he was going to learn to be a reverend father; he was also killed that same day. Several of my cousins were here. I was doing my post-secondary studies at St. Patrick's College, Asaba; that is what we used to call (inaudible). It was just about a month before our final exam that those things started.

FO: Could you walk us through, take us through the events, starting when, maybe, the Biafrans came over the river the first time in September on their way to Benin, and then we'll kind of walk our way backwards.

PO: Okay. We were still in school then. I woke up one morning, very early in the morning, maybe around one or two AM, hearing vehicles zooming past, you know, in the night, not knowing exactly what was happening. By the morning, we heard that the Biafrans were already at Benin and had taken over Benin. So, when that transpired we were (inaudible). Later on (inaudible). There was movement back this way, which meant that the Biafrans were being driven away from the area. At that point, we started hearing shells flying past us, you know?

Then, the afternoon of the day before the massacre, planes came over Asaba dropping bombs. So, we knew that something was wrong. Initially, we thought it was just a joke when we were hearing gunshots and all that, because we haven't heard those things before. Those people who had maybe joined the Second World War heard these things and started running. Well, my father said he's not going to run away from his house, and we all agreed with him. We're not running away from our house. Whatever happens, we sit back and we watch. So that was how we were caught here after the Biafrans had crossed and blew up the bridge. Those of us who remained had nowhere to go, except you have to run to the bush. So, that night of October 6, there was firing all over the place.

FO: Did you witness any acts of violence on the sixth?

PO: On the sixth? No, because they were just coming into town, okay? Some spies, you know, dressed as smart men, and all that, you know, we had seen them walking past that we have never seen before. And we are supposed to come out and (inaudible). At that point, that day, there was no violence, because we ran for the inside—inside the town, because at night they couldn't flee into town. And the next day, we were asked to come and receive them—

FO: You went from the school, so you were—?

PO: Yeah, we ran away from the school and back to our homes.

FO: So, you were—

PO: I was already at home, that same day.

FO: Did the school send you home, or your parents came to pick you up?

PO: No, the school dismissed, you know, when they found out that we were in a war situation.

FO: They sent everybody home?

PO: Those who could not go to their own place (inaudible) stay back in town (inaudible). So the next day, the elders of the town who thought it was just one of those things to come and welcome the incoming troops, you know, started going around with guns, coming at people to come and dance and welcome the federal troops. That was how we came out. But, unfortunately, they had their own motives, because when we came out, we got to this tree. Outside there you see a big tree, an iroko tree. Yeah. They wrapped something around it. Those of us who came from my area, that's Umuezei, came to us as a victory. And there, they stopped us, kept us there for another two or three hours under the rain, you know?

At a point, their commander came, who I think—that was Godwin Ally. Colonel Godwin Ally came, and he told us we were to be evacuated from the town, so that

they could comb the town for the Biafrans. So, they said that we should leave the town, so that they could comb the town for Biafran soldiers. Well, we agreed. Where are we going to? They said we are going to go towards Ibusa, which is the next town, about seven miles away from here. So, all of us who were there, we were asked to take this dirt road, this main road, Nnebisi Road, towards Ibusa Junction. At the point, they told the children and the women to separate from the men.

FO: Did you have any sense that there was something strange going on?

PO: No, that was the point that we knew there was something wrong. When they separated the women and the children and left the men alone, we knew that, obviously, we were in trouble.

FO: Who were you with when all of this—were you with some friends, with some family members?

PO: Uh, my family members were there, all six of us who left were there. And other people that we had met on the way joined in the welcoming party.

FO: Who were the six that you were with?

PO: Well, uh, Simon Ojogwu, my immediate elder brother.

FO: Simon?

PO: Simon Ojogwu, who was the same mother, as I said earlier. Uh, Michael Omohan, my cousin, my mother's cousin. Oliver Ojogwu.

**Unidentified Male Voice:** Michael?

PO: Michael Omohan, my cousin. Christopher Mkpayah, my cousin.<sup>3</sup> Oliver Ojogwu, my cousin. And myself, I think that makes it five or six.

FO: Five.

PO: Five. We were all in that group that took towards the street here.

FO: And so, these are the—so, you started—you, uh—

PO: Yes?

FO: You started thinking there was something wrong when they divided you up.

PO: When they divided us up. And when we got to Ogbogonogo Junction—that is the next junction from here, where you have the market—they told the women to take that way, and the men to go on straight. We were getting to (inaudible) now, that's the junction of Ibusa and (inaudible). They told us to branch left onto that street. It was there we saw that soldiers had already lined up the street down there. There was no more fright than—frightening, at that particular moment when we saw all the soldiers armed and waiting for us to come in. So, it was, really, on both sides—

FO: Both sides of the street? And you were walking down the middle?

PO: Yes. So we just knew—we were convinced they were going to kill us; they're not taking us out of town. There was no need for that welcome party we met there. So, the others who came with us met there. I don't know who was leading the soldiers then, but they started talking with them, what they would do, and all that. But, at the point where they were still talking, they opened fire on the elder. So everybody there just—

FO: Did you see any officers?

---

<sup>3</sup>Christopher Mkpayah was also interviewed for the Asaba Memorial Oral History Project. The DOI for his interview is A34-00012.

PO: Obviously, our elders who were leading us met with the officers. Those of us in the group, (inaudible) apart from the people on the side.

FO: Did you see machine guns?

PO: Yes, yes.

FO: So as you entered the square, you saw them?

PO: Yes.

FO: Where were these machine guns? Were they on the ground, were they hidden?

PO: One was located at the back, immediately when you enter the court. Okay? Some had carried ones with chains, you know? And the normal guns they had then. And they started asking who were not Asaba indigenes to please come out. Some people indicated they were not indigenous; they asked them where they are from. If they are from the Benin area and all that, they took you out. But if you were Igbo, or [from] anywhere around here, you are not to move out.

So when they shot at our leader, every other person collapsed on the ground, you know. So, they're firing into everybody there. So, if you were lucky, or unlucky, you were right on the bottom: people fell on you, choked to death, even if you didn't get a gunshot wound, you know? Those of us who were lucky—I would say lucky because our vital parts were sort of obscured from the gunshots—survived it. But those who were not lucky, most of them died. Some run away with their wounds, only to fall in front of them on the way.

FO: How many people do you think—when you looked around, you were clearly surrounded by people, but do you have a sense of how many people were in the square with you?

PO: Well, roughly, one would say five hundred, if not more. Five hundred, if not more.

FO: So, you were packed tight?

PO: Right. We couldn't run anywhere. Some of us had to fall down, you know?

FO: So, the shooting began?

PO: On our arrival at that square.

FO: On arrival at the square.

PO: Yes.

FO: And was this mostly—I don't know if you had a chance to see. Was this mostly coming from machine guns, or also soldiers with their—

PO: Soldiers.

FO: With their—but with their—

PO: Yes, yes, soldiers shooting directly at us. It wasn't—

FO: And what happened to you, at this point?

PO: Well, as I said, I was lucky. When we all collapsed on the ground, some people sort of (gestures) formed a wedge for me here, a wedge for me here, and a wedge on my back. So, only my feet and my hands were out of the area covered by people who had fallen to the ground, got the gunshots. And at a point, maybe some three or so

hours, when it was coming dusk, we thought that there were no more soldiers. I wanted to rest, but I heard that next was—they see somebody alive there, that was when they shot the machine gun that was back there. And that was what kept me in the area. That clearly just scraped the ground and (inaudible). That was the last shot at that place.

FO: How many times were you hit?

PO: Well, like I said, about seven. (indicates) Here, here, here, here. At that time, I had a burn on this hand.

FO: Plus one on the—would you mind showing us the wounds?

PO: Yes.

FO: On your leg?

PO: I don't mind. They're still there, and if you have an x-ray, you could see the shrapnel buried in this one.

FO: You still have—there's still a bullet—

PO: Yes, I still have it.

FO: If you could actually stand up and maybe put your foot on the chair, that way—

PO: This one. See this one like this? It is closed off right there. This is where the bullet went in, okay?

FO: And it's still in there, right?

PO: It's still in there. The scattered wounds were removed during the war, after the war. The one that is here, they said if they remove it, I will be worse off, so better leave it in. Now, you see this (inaudible) here. I was doing karate in those days, so this place had a very intricate muscle. I was shot here and the bullet was (inaudible). And that one here, the same as the last (inaudible).

FO: Yes. Thank you.

**Elizabeth Bird:** Do you remember the shots hitting you? Do you know if—did you feel the shots go in?

PO: Uh, I would say the one I really felt was this, you know? Because I remember trying to count up to ten to see whether those gunshots missed, if any of those gunshots missed. I was confessing my sins, you know. I didn't (inaudible), maybe I wasn't seriously hurt. I kind of forgot, you know? As people were shouting that they were injured, they asked them to get up (inaudible).

FO: What happened to those who—

PO: They got up, and they shot them.

FO: They shot them, so—

PO: In fact, if they thought you had a very serious wound right there (inaudible). I'm still alive. They asked me to stand up.

FO: So you didn't?

PO: I didn't.

FO: So, what happened next?

PO: Well, we were there until it was, uh, night, you know?

FO: Till about several hours.

PO: Yes, several hours after. It was night when we started to get up. I wasn't hearing voices anymore around, so I knew the soldiers had gone. That was when I was lucky to find out that my cousin was not hit by any bullet, so—

FO: Was this your cousin, your, uh—

PO: Yeah. So, we had to go to the grandmother's house that night.

FO: So, you got out from under the bodies?

PO: Yes.

FO: And did you crawl out of the square? Did you—were you able to limp out, or—

PO: I was just limping. I met him and—

FO: In the square, or outside?

PO: Yeah, in the square. I was taken to my grandmother's house that night. So, I was at my grandmother's house throughout the night screaming. Initially, I didn't feel the pains, until I asked for something to eat. Then the pain started. Everybody was scared that the soldiers would come there because of the noise I was making.

FO: Did you have a sense, at this point, what had happened to your relatives, your family members that were with you?

PO: Well, I had no idea. I just felt my situation would be their situation, you know? But when I got home the next day and nobody came after me from that same place, I knew.

FO: You did not see them when they were brought down?

PO: No.

FO: So, what happened when you got home? You were clearly in pain.

PO: Yes. The following morning, my mother was leaving the house going to look for us, you know, and saw me on the way. Couldn't recognize me, you know, her mind was off, you know. I walked past her, and she didn't even recognize me. I walked home. My father was a retired nursing superintendant, so he had some drugs at home to treat my wounds. My father took care of my wounds all at home, except for this one that I had to go to the, uh—what do you call it now? At that particular time, we had a camp in St. Patrick's College. The soldiers had a camp there, and they had a doctor there. So, the Reverend Father decided to take me to see the doctor there. This one wound on the head could be very bad for me. So, he took me to see the doctor. The doctor probed and saw that my skull was not broken, and gave me some antibiotics and all that, and I went back home.

FO: Now, your father had stayed home?

PO: Yes.

FO: And your grandfather? They had not gone to the march?

PO: No, they didn't go, they just left them with the women, you know? To walk—some of them walked home, when they got to Ogbogonogo Junction.

FO: How old was your father?

PO: Nineteen sixty-seven, that would be, seventy-one, or sixty-nine, or seventy—  
sixty-seven, seventy-one.

FO: Was he retired, was he working?

PO: He was retired.

FO: What did he do before retirement?

PO: Like I said, he was a retired nursing superintendant. That was the next person  
to the doctor (inaudible) in the hospital.

FO: And so, with your wounds, you were taken to see a military doctor? This is—

PO: Yeah, some days later.

FO: You were not afraid to go into a—

PO: Well, when you're on the point of life and death, you know? This type of wound  
on your head, you know, you had better take the risk of getting treatment  
(inaudible) could be worse after.

FO: Were you hidden when you were in the house, when you came back? Were you  
afraid that they would come and—

PO: Yes, I was hidden in the sense that I had the room that was locked up, only me  
being there. All the other men had run out of town. Only women around, you know?  
There was an incident that the soldiers came to raid the house one day, and collect  
the women, you know? I had to, with my wounds, (inaudible) and my head wounds,  
I had to jump the fence and run away to the grandmother's house again and wait for

my parents to start looking for the wounded man that they didn't know again. I had to come to the grandmother's house to find (inaudible), you know?

FO: To hide.

PO: Yeah.

FO: And so, you went to see the doctor, he gave you antibiotics, and then what happened after that? You went back home?

PO: We came back home. My father continued treating and tending wounds.

FO: And you always—you did not leave Asaba, then?

PO: Uh, there was a time—there was a second infiltration of Biafrans, you know? We were removed from town to a camp at SPC, St. Patrick's College. We were there, most of the houses were burnt; my father's house was burnt. We were there for about a month, and seen some people die in the camp. But I decided to take a ride in the truck that used to bring food items for the soldiers, because I still had my sister in Lagos. Her husband was teaching in (inaudible); they were living there. I just took a trailer that came through bringing food to the soldiers. I took it right there.

FO: You went to Lagos?

PO: I went to Lagos.

FO: And how long were you in Lagos for?

PO: Well, I was there throughout the rest of the war, throughout the rest of the war, until about 1969, when there was a bomb, a bomb in Lagos. So, at that point, I said (inaudible) I didn't think there will be fighting there. So I came back to Ubuluku, which is just about thirteen miles away from here. So, I stayed there from sixty-nine [1969] to 1970, went back again to Lagos to stay with my sister until the war ended.

FO: How did your family—who stayed behind, of course—deal with this terrible loss? I mean, what was the reaction? How did they deal with—

PO: Well, you see everybody around you mourning one person or another, it comes—let us say that it's not just you, you know? It's not just you. So, maybe they didn't feel the loss as much as they would have felt it if it were to be just one family. Everybody—women had to go and bury people in that place where they shot at us. Women had to dig graves to bury the people there, because there were no men in town.

FO: Were the bodies of your relatives ever found?

PO: Uh, the one in the seminary ran towards—

FO: That would be Simon?

PO: Yes. Ran towards—in front of this place. He was going to be my sister's husband. Their family house there collapsed in front of her. So, he was one of the people we also buried there (inaudible). The rest of them, nobody went out to find them. If not that this person fell in front of her, the last place, nobody would have known who he was.

FO: So the others were buried there in the street—

PO: Buried along the route.

EB: Were all these five you named—they were all—they all died?

PO: No. Apart from Christopher, who survived the gunshots and ran out of Asaba; he is still alive.

FO: Christopher Mkpayah?

IU: Mkpayah.

FO: Yeah. And so, all the others were buried on the side—

PO: Most of them (inaudible).

FO: So what happened to you after the war? How did this tragedy affect you and your family?

PO: Well, I was in Lagos. I hadn't finished my schooling, higher school. I decided to—at least, I started to express an interest in entering university. In 1970, I passed entrance into University of (inaudible). So I went to (inaudible) to study and I did electronics (inaudible).

FO: Electronics?

PO: Yeah.

EB: Is that what you do today? Is that your profession today, are you working?

PO: Well, I've left work for some time, you know. I need to (inaudible). (laughs)

FO: Um, what are your thoughts about—should this event be memorialized, and if so, how do you think it should be? What would be the most appropriate way to memorialize it?

PO: Well, I belong to a club that has been thinking of doing something along that line, because a town losing so many people in one day, something then should be done to remember people who lost their lives, and what happened to the town. So, we've

been thinking of building a monument by that place where we were shot, in remembrance of what we've gone through.

FO: How did it affect the town, when you think of the long run? How did—what was the impact on Asaba?

PO: Well, it was—I would say it has changed our political leanings and everything. Because in the past, everybody around Asaba used to say he's from Asaba. Whenever you find him, if he's Igbo-speaking, you tell him—if you ask him, "Where are you from?" He'll say, "I'm from Asaba." But today, everybody knows where everybody's from, you know? Because if you say then you are from Asaba, you were also killed like an Asaba person. At that point in the war time, nobody here really was an Asaba person, apart from the really indigenous. And so, we suffered the greatest loss of lives, of civilians, during the war in this area.

Our political leanings have changed in the sense that you have to make new alliances, 'cause if the next time anything like that happens, you know, we cannot just be isolated. Right now, still, we are selected if we just say we are Asaba people. So we have to seek alliances, (inaudible) seek alliances with your neighbors, and have something going that could give you a footing to negotiate politically.

EB: Let me just ask you, some of the people—we've done several interviews, and some of the people we've talked to described another killing that happened the day before the massacre in Ogbeosowa. They said there was a large group of people who were killed near the football field, and they—

PO: That was Sunday. That was Sunday—

EB: Other people said the football—

PO: In the morning of October 7, any male found outside was shot at.

FO: Your recollection is it was the seventh?

PO: Yes, because that day, we were coming out, one of our cousins (inaudible). His place is just behind my own house. As we were coming out, we found him and his friend, one of my classmates in SPC, St. Patrick's College, who could not go, who was caught up in Asaba here. He was staying with him. The two of them were shot down in front of his father's house.

FO: This would have been?

PO: That would have been early morning, or late at night, of October 6.

EB: The sixth?

FO: The sixth.

PO: Yeah.

EB: The day before the dance?

PO: Yeah.

EB: Yes.

FO: I guess the two killing places would have been the football field and the police station?

PO: Yeah, we heard some people were also shot at by St. Joseph's Maternity Ward—what you now call St. Joseph's Hospital—along this route, too. And so we heard some people were asked to dig their own graves and were shot in them. Some men were also taken to the riverbank and shot into the river. But I can only tell you exactly what happened in my own situation. These were things we heard in the town.

FO: Is there anything that we have not asked that you would like to add?

PO: Uh, I don't think—I don't think so. It was such a terrible time in my life (inaudible). What I think happened that day (inaudible).

EB: How does it—how do you feel, in terms of—as a human being, how do you feel about what happened? Do you feel bitter, do you feel angry? How have you come to terms with it?

PO: Let me tell you something that happened during this war period. There was this late General Murtala [Muhammed], who once had a fleet of men here. He was the one that escorted the troops coming towards Asaba, got shot at Ogwashi-Uku, and he went to (inaudible) before (inaudible) took over, to take them to Asaba. During the coup—that was February 1976—Murtala was killed, and I shed tears. Yet, he was the person, if he had been there, that would have been commanding the troops—commanding us to be massacred. So I won't say it's bitterness. I won't say—it depends on how you reflect on it at a particular time. Otherwise, I must have been crying for somebody that was instrumental to what I suffered during the war. So, (inaudible) it depends on how you try to heal it.

FO: And how do you think you tried to heal it? How did you deal with this?

PO: I've lost all sense of bitterness. I just took it as something that happened because I was there at that particular time, and since God brought me out of it, God knows best, you know? That's the way I looked at it. Apart from the losses around that, life continues. Life continues.

FO: Anybody like to ask any questions?

EI: You know, apart from myself—you see, I wasn't anywhere near Asaba when this war was going on. I was in Biafra, because I was working there. So, when the war started, I was there with my family, and I continued there until the war ended. And when it ended, I came back to Asaba on the seventeenth of January. And when I came, I discovered that my two uncles had been killed. And then, two of my junior brothers, (inaudible) and (inaudible), they were also killed. And they told where

they buried them, they showed it to me. And then, my own father's house was burned down. So, after seeing all this, I pray to God at night, some of us who were on the outside are still alive. (inaudible) I can't say exactly, because I wasn't here when it was happening. (inaudible).

FO: Thank you very much for sharing your story with us.

EI: You're welcome.

***End of interview***