Dr. Ify Uraih

Asaba Memorial Project

Elizabeth Bird: Good afternoon. This is Elizabeth Bird. Today is October 9, 2009. I'm at the University of South Florida's Tampa Campus Library conducting an oral history with Dr. Ify Uraih for the Asaba Memorial Project. Welcome, Dr. Uraih. If you could please give us your name, spell your name, your place of birth, and your date of birth to start us off?

Ify Uraih: Okay, my name is Ify Uraih, U-r-a-i-h. I was born in Kano in Northern Nigeria on the thirteenth day of May 1952.

EB: Thank you. All right, we'll begin. First of all, could you just tell us a little bit about where you—although you were born in Kano, you were living in Asaba in 1967?

IU: Yes. I was born in Kano, and I grew up there. I did primary school in Kano. And then, normally the tradition in my family was that when you grew old enough to go to the secondary school, you went to the South for secondary school. The purpose was to keep you not too far from your heritage. So we used to spend some time with my grandmother in Asaba so I could learn the language, and then go on holiday to Kano. Because Kano is a northern city and the official language in Kano is Hausa, so in order to make sure we could speak Igbo, my parents ensured we were schooled in the South, but we kept our touch with Kano.

So we left Kano—I left Kano in 1965 when I went to secondary school in Benin, which was capital of the Mid-West State at the time. And then the civil disturbance we had had already when the war started in 19—or when the civil disturbances started in 1966 and the Igbos were being killed in the North. My parents abandoned their houses and came back to Asaba. So, we didn't go to Kano again; we spent our time now between Benin, where we were schooling, and Kano—and Asaba, sorry.

Now, when in 1967, August, the day Biafran soldiers overrun the Mid-West going towards Lagos, school stopped, everything stopped, and then we are to go home to Asaba because that was our home now. that is where we were before the federal troops came in.

EB: Who were the members of your family living in Asaba at that time with you?

IU: Okay, I will give you a little background. My parents had nine of us [children] between 1940 and 1960. I was one of the last. I had three brothers below me—and the rest above me; the rest were my sisters. I had two sisters, and the rest were boys: seven boys and two girls. My mother's—my maternal grandmother was living in Asaba, and then, my eldest brother was in England; he was studying at the time of the war. So, all the rest above me were schooling in the South; my younger brothers were with my parents in the North when the civil war broke out. But now, everybody was home in Asaba.

EB: Were your parents with you in Asaba?

IU: Yes.

EB: Both parents?

IU: Yes, both of them.

EB: Can you talk a little bit about what life in Asaba was like between the time when you came back there as a family, when you were living there, when the civil war had begun, but you didn't … What was happening? What was the feeling? What were the senses, the expectations at that time?

IU: Okay. Asaba, at that time, was a very little town, and you didn't have many indigenes of Asaba living there, because apart from the local government offices, there are really no places to work. And traditionally, people that come from Asaba were civil servants and teachers. Asaba had the greatest number of pensioners, even now in Nigeria, because everybody wanted to work for government, or go to teach at either at a university or at a primary school. Or they are doctors working for hospitals, or engineers and so on. So, nobody stayed at home; everybody was outside living in the big cities of Nigeria. So, when we came back, or when my parents came back—my father did not work for anybody; he was a contractor for the government in the North. He was building houses for the local government and for private individuals. So, when he was first to come home, he tried to set up a business in Asaba. But you can imagine a small town, there was nothing to do. So, we—I was a little boy. In 1967, I was fifteen, and what was happening did not really matter to me because I had parents who would look after me. And it was easy to make new friends in the town, which I did. Everybody thought the war was somewhere else, not with us. And we simply enjoyed ourselves, and were waiting for the war to come and pass and go to the East where it really belonged. That was what I thought.

EB: In the immediate, sort of—say, week or so, or days leading up to October 7, what as the mood? What do you remember? Were people talking about the troops coming, or—?

IU: Yeah, the first time we thought there could be some problem for us was when the troops captured Warri, Benin. Let me explain a little bit about what the Mid-West was at the time, mention a little bit of it. At the level of the Mid-West, the people from Asaba area, what used to be the old Asaba Division, everybody that came from all the towns in the Division was assumed to be from Asaba. So, if you saw somebody from Abo, he said he was an Asaba man. Nobody knew there were other towns around Asaba, all over the country.
So, there was lots of jealousy, envy, and resentment against the people of Asaba, because they occupied all the top civil positions, civil service positions, in the then-Mid-West State. Plus, the premier—what they call governor, now—of the Mid-west Region was from Asaba. So, there was that envy. So, when the troops were on the bridge at Benin, they simply pounced on all the Igbo speaking people in that area and slaughtered them. And these people, the ones that escaped, came back home. My second brother by my parents was living in Warri. Warri is mainly Urhobos; they are not Igbos. And he was a land surveyor. He escaped with his life and

came back home to Asaba. One of my brothers, Gabriel, also was living with him; he came back, also. So, we saw them coming back from those liberated areas and telling stories about how their friends and how their relations from Asaba were killed in those places.

So, we knew there was a problem, but we thought it was a problem of our other fellow tribes from Mid-West State. We thought that we were at home with the federal troops, because the ambition of every Asaba person at that time was for the war to be over so that we could go back to Kano and go back to Ibadan and Lagos, where we had homes, and where people were working and schooling before the war. And that was it. So, we thought that when the federal troops came in, they were not a problem—that problem was our neighbors—and that the federal troops would also liberate us from our neighbors, because also, the people from the East, who were the Biafrans, did not also trust Asaba people. We are like bats. We are not from the East and we are not also from the West, but we are Igbos who are living in a bad geographic location, which was the Mid-West. That was the situation at the time.

EB: So, if you could start talking about what happened from the moment when the federal troops entered into Asaba?

IU: The federal troops entered Asaba on the fourth of October. We started hearing the sound of gunshots. Of course we are following their movements from the radio, both on the federal side and on the Biafran side. There was a lot of propaganda at the time, so we really did not know the truth. For example, when Benin was captured, Biafra said it was not true. And the tendencies for us to believe the Biafrans because they were with us. They were all around the streets; they were occupying Asaba. They said it was not true, that it was federal troops. They were just (inaudible), until we heard the gunfire on the fourth of October. Even when we heard the sound of gunfire, we still did not believe that the federal troops were there, until the evening of that fourth of October. My father was inside the house. We live—our house is on a major road, on a major highway. We were outside when we saw the first federal troops. Immediately, they started firing on the house, so we went inside and hid under the bed. They kept firing, so we started shouting, and then they stopped firing and asked us to come out. So we came out with our hands raised in surrender. This was about four o'clock in the evening. They took—everybody in my family was there, except the most senior [brother], who was in England, so it meant my parents and eight of us.

So, they took us to the main road. There was a cattle truck there. They were putting other families in there, saying they would transport them to safety about forty-five kilometers away from Asaba, that they didn't want to walk to (inaudible). When we got there the truck was full, so they said we should wait for the next truck. But no truck came, so they took us from that place and we walked to a secondary school called St. Patrick's College Asaba, on the outskirts of the town. The soldiers were there and there were many civilians. They camped us there for the night of the fourth, the fifth of October, and they were very nice. They gave us food, and they said to us, "Look, the federal troops don't harm people like that. If they wanted to kill us, they would have killed us." So, we were all totally relaxed.

Then, on the morning of the sixth, they told us that they had cleared the town of Biafran

soldiers, that we could now go home. And then they took us in a long line, and we started going home. When we got to the junction leading to my house, my mother said no, that the house was too much on the main road, that we should go to her own mother's house, which was further inside the village. That was where we went. We are just settled down, eating breakfast, when we started hearing the gunshots again. And then we heard singing, and people were telling us to "Please come out," so we went out. The whole streets were full of Asaba people wearing what we call *akwa-ocha*. In fact—I thought the interview was going to be tomorrow; I brought it along with me to show, and I will still bring it. So they were dancing and singing "One Nigeria," and they were being escorted around the town by troops and asking everybody to come out. You see, having been with them since the fourth of October, we believed that these people would not harm us, and everybody came out.

They took us to an open square, and the commander of those troops, a certain Major Ibrahim Taiwo—he's dead now—addressed us. And he said to us that we were hiding Biafran troops in our houses, and that he would kill everybody because we are causing them a lot of harm. So one of the chiefs there responded and told him no, that we are not, that we had always believed in "One Nigeria," and that is why everybody came out here. So, after some time he assured us nothing would happen, but that what he wants to do is to evacuate the whole town, and that we must bring out everybody, that we should dance around the town, bring the people out, and they would escort us out of the town. So, that anybody they would see thereafter, that would be his risk. And we believed him.

So, we started singing and dancing again, and continued on our journey until we got to a particular junction. Then other troops met us and diverted you to an open space like that car-park (motions to large parking lot outside window) and then there they separated the men and the boys from the women and children. And two times I was put among the children; two times a soldier dragged me out and put me with the men. And they took the men away, and took us further away from the route.

And then during this time we are talking with them, people were—excuse me—people were—I cannot do this without crying. We were—
[Transcriber's note: There is a long pause.]

EB: Please, take your time.
[Transcriber's note: Another long pause.]

IU: In the crowd, everybody—there are many people in the crowd who speak all the Nigerian languages. For example, I speak Igbo and I speak Hausa, because I was born in the North, fluently. We were talking to the soldiers and they were telling us, really, that they were going to kill us, but we did not believe until one of them came, a second lieutenant. He said that he—in broken English, in a pidgin English; that was the language of communication of most Nigerians, because people are not educated; some cannot speak good English, so we speak pidgin English, or broken English. And he came to us and he said he was a second lieutenant, and I'm going to speak the way he spoke. He said, "Me, I come from Chad." Chad is on the northeast border of Nigeria, bordering Bormo and Adamawa. Adamawa is also in the northeast part of Nigeria. Chad is another country at the border of Adamawa, and

a lot of migrants come into Nigeria from that area. And because they speak Hausa as a common language, sometimes they blend and become Nigerians, but they are really not Nigerians. He said “But den born me for Adamawa. I hate all Igbos, and you be Igbo. Therefore, you must die.”

And everybody was warning us, so this—it is possible that we are going to be killed. I looked around and I saw machine guns being mounted all around us. Some of them were also carrying automatic rifles. And then, one of them shouted to the troops in Hausa. He said, “*Kwu diba su gwoma gwoma, ku je chikin chan de chan, kwu yi aiki de su*.” This meant they should take us in tens and go to different places and kill us. The minute he said that, people who heard knew that they meant business. And some people actually at that moment broke loose and tried to run away. My elder brother was holding me by the hand. He was the first person they dragged. They dragged him. He released me and pushed me further into the crowd. While he was arguing with them, those other people would try to run. They started firing, and they shot my brother at the back, and I saw him and he fell down. I saw blood coming out of his body, and he fell down. And then, the rest of us who could not run just fell on top of each other, and they continued shooting and shooting and shooting. After a time that first volley stopped, and then—people were injured -- so I think, believe up to today that they were the people who probably saved the rest of us who survived, because many of them were injured. They stood up and said, “Look at me, shoot me! I didn’t die!” and they [the soldiers] will oblige them and they would shoot and kill them. And they kept on doing that.

I lost count of time. I don’t know how long it took. They kept on shooting at different people. When they stood up, tell them to kill them, they kill. After some time, there was silence, and then I could see the other soldiers. It was getting dark at this time. They were around, and after some time—we didn’t know when they left. I didn’t know when they left. When they finally—I knew they had left when I heard voices and people were asking in Igbo, “Have they left?” and somebody said, “Yes, they have left.” And surprisingly, a lot of people stood up from all the bodies and fled into the bush.
I stood up, also, but I saw a cousin of mine who was lying not too far from me. He was shot on the head, and his finger is broken, and he had a bullet on his knee. And he asked me if I was shot. I said, “No, I don’t feel any pain, so nothing has happened to me.” And my body was covered with blood, but I knew that I was safe, nothing had happened. My father was lying not too far from me. His eyes were open, but he was dead.

My cousin said we should wait till it was dark so that we could go together, and I agreed. You could hear the sound of the injured crying. One man, who heard us talking, he was as old as my father. He had his hand almost severed from his—his hand was almost severed from the rest of his body. And he told me that he had a knife, that I should please help him amputate the hand. I could not do it, and I told him I could not do it. He died later. I knew his children. But later on, he died. So it was at—when it was sufficiently dark, I helped my cousin and we continued. The only place I could think about that was safe was my grandmother’s house, because it was further inside the village. Attempting to go to our house that meant passing major roads, and I was too frightened that we could run into troops again and they would kill us. So we got there, when I got there, we saw already my sister. My mother was not there. We

saw my two sisters and my three younger brothers, and they were asking me what about the rest. I said, “They are all dead.” And we slept there that night.

Very early the next morning, my mother came. Apparently she had gone to our house to see if it was—if we returned there, and she slept there. And of course, some people who had escaped, they had heard the story that we were shot, and she came to the village, where she found us. She told us that people were running away into the bushes, that we should all go. My grandmother, all of us, started going, running to the next village. At that time, I thought everybody was gone. When I got to my village, they told me that my immediate elder brother was still alive.

EB: Was he your—

IU: Was alive. My immediate elder brother—there were five of us who were in there: my father and myself and three brothers. One of them I saw killed; the other one I thought had died also, but they told me they saw him, and he was crying because he thought I was dead. And so I ran to where he was, and I saw him. He had eight bullets in his waist. Fortunately, the man—he ran to his house; he was living with us in Kano—was a nurse, so he was able to treat him. He had some anti-tet [anti-tetanus] in the house, and he gave him some shots. He carried those bullets in his waist. The last of those was removed in 1978, because it was too deep. But fortunately, it did not hit his spine, so he is alive today and is okay.

I saw one of my brothers shot dead. The other one was the oldest living with us. We never saw his corpse. My mother assumed that, because he was a strong twenty-five year old boy—he was a land surveyor. My mother assumed that he had escaped.
I’m sorry.

EB: (murmurs)

IU: My mother assumed that he had escaped and that he probably ran to Biafra, and that when the war was over that he would come back. But that didn’t happen. We never, ever saw his corpse. Many people on the way—many people were killed and their bodies were never found.

On the day we were marching, we saw some people nearby, in the field of the primary school. One of them was my friend. We didn’t know what they were doing there. We saw soldiers, who were singing and passing through. We did not know what they were doing. Several weeks later, when I saw him in the bush, he told me what had happened. They took them from their houses, quite a number of them, and took them to that field. See, he was born in Kano also, like me, so we are playmates when we are growing up. And then his parents were transferred to the West, so just before he finished primary school he had to move with his parents to Ibadan in Western Nigeria, and he started schooling there. So he could speak—in addition to Hausa, he could speak Yoruba very well.

So, when he was on that line, what they were doing was they lined them up. The person at the head of the line, they would tell him to dig a grave. He would dig a grave and they push him

inside and shoot him and take the next person to cover the grave, dig his own grave, and shoot him. There were two men ahead of him, when suddenly a Yoruba man, who was a soldier, came and recognized him. He happened to have been their houseboy. So he quickly spoke to him in Yoruba, and told the soldier that this man is not an Asaba man, this man is a Yoruba man, and that he knows him. And they took him away and took him to safety, and asked him to run into the bush.

Now, there was a second person; today he's a pastor; he lives in Asaba *[Nicholas Azeh, also interviewed for the project].*

There was another person who was in that queue, but he was at the end of the queue. So, when it
was getting to his turn, one of the soldiers—he didn't know him, but maybe he was one of those who didn't like what his colleagues were doing. He came to him and slapped him, slapped him, held him and dragged him from the line, and said, "You come here," and took him around the corner and then said to him, "Disappear (inaudible) run!" He ran and he [the solider] fired his gun to the sky, to make as if he shot him. That was how he escaped. Today he's working; he's in Sokoto, where he's a trader. Sokoto is in Northwest Nigeria, it's also (inaudible).

EB: What is his name?

IU: Chuks Efedua. I have all that documented; I will give you a copy tomorrow. I wrote all their names down. And in Ogbe-Osowa, where people were killed similarly, so many people escaped. But some of them cannot come here because they cannot afford it, either because they could not continue their education because their parents were killed, and they were not as lucky as I was to have continued. One of them is Christopher Mkpayah. He's a friend of mine; he lives in Lagos, and he says that one day he'll be able to tell his own story. *[Mr. Mkpayah was later interviewed in Lagos*].

So, we lived on in the bush until about two weeks before we were told it was safe to come out. So we came out from the bush. And then, it was not safe to go back to Benin, where I was schooling, because people of Benin were very hostile. My mother was not sure if I went back to Benin whether my life was safe. It was even dangerous trying to enter transportation to leave the area. So, we stayed the rest of the year without going to school. And then in January, when things had settled down in (inaudible) and we started—I started schooling in the local school in Asaba, and it was safe enough to leave the area and I went to school in Lagos. Yeah.

EB: This is a difficult question, but you mentioned that your oldest brother—you never found a trace of him. Your brother that you saw shot, was he buried there? How was—?

IU: Yeah, I missed that. I missed that, sorry. When my mother had ensured that we had escaped, she went to look for their bodies, and she saw my father's body. She borrowed a wheelbarrow from somebody and took my father's body and went to bury him. And then, she came back and saw my brother, because my brother's body was separate from the rest, and

also took him and went to bury him. So, we know where they are buried. It's the second, the older brother, that we never saw again.

EB: When your father and your brother were shot, was that near the square? Was that Ogbe-Osowa?

IU: Yeah.

EB: So, this was with the large number of other people who were shot at the same time.

IU: Yeah.

EB: And it was a heap of bodies, that high, (indicates height) all over the place. My mother searched for my brother in that heap, because she was not alone. Other women came, because it was only women that were safe to come. At that time, my mother was forty-nine years old, at the time. So, she felt quite comfortable moving around the town searching for the bodies of her children and her husband. She moved around the bodies a little bit, with other women searching for their own dead, but they didn't find Paul. We had several months after, and some woman told us that she saw Paul. She saw the body of Paul far away from that place, and she and some other people buried him somewhere around there with other corpses. So, there are two possibilities. One possibility was that he was part of the people that jumped out after the volley of bullets, and ran away and maybe ran into soldiers later on and they shot him. Or maybe he was injured, and fell down somewhere and died. But they didn't say where he was buried. They just said that was Paul.

EB: There were a large number of people who were not claimed by family, who were buried in—

IU: Mass graves.
EB: Mass graves. Were you aware of that? Did you see that, the burials?

IU: I couldn't have seen the burials. I only saw the bodies, when I was making my escape, because it was too dangerous for any man to be seen around. But the soldiers themselves were frightened that, one, people could find out that they killed people, and they themselves started recruiting the men they could find, and some captured prisoners. I must say, not all the men were killed. Some soldiers protected some people. And the strange thing was that, in our house that we ran away from, all the people that lived in that area were taken to our house and guarded by soldiers until everything cooled down.

But we ran away. We didn't return to our house, because we felt it was on the main road, and we went to my grandmother's house. So, those people that were protected by soldiers were recruited to go and dig graves for the mass burial. When your team came to Asaba, I took them to the spot where this thing happened, and I told the story. Some of the people around there also told them, showed them the points where they were buried. We met, actually, one of the people who participated in the burial.And we showed them the spots where they buried those people en masse. There were some other bodies that were not found. Some people

were taken to the banks of the River Niger and shot in there, but one of them escaped. They had two methods. One, they could tell you to jump in, and as you are jumping, they would shoot you and the person would die there. The other way, they would just line you up, shoot you, and push you inside. But this guy was a huge fellow, about six [feet] six [inches]. And they asked him to jump in, and he was a very good swimmer. He jumped in, and they didn't see him again. He (inaudible) far away and swam all the way to Biafra. And he joined the army there, and came back after the Civil War to tell the story. I have it documented; I'll give it to you. But unfortunately, he's dead now, so he cannot tell the story. So, there are several cases of those kinds of escapes..

EB: In your own personal view, why do you think this happened? What sparked it? What happened to make the troops do what they did?

IU: From what I know and from what they told us, first of all, the setup at the time was the Western Igbos dominated the Civil Service. Not our fault, but because we—in that area, we came in touch with the British much earlier—and the missionaries—much earlier than the rest of the Mid-West. Our people had the opportunity to have gone to school. Many of us are the third generation of educated people, whereas in the west part of the Mid-West State, even my generation had not started going to school. They were still—they stop at the primary school level and then retreat.

So, that resentment was there, because right from the twenties [1920s], people from Asaba had been going to the Civil Service. They dominated the prison service, the post offices, the judiciary, the medical field, Ministry of Works. All the engineers and doctors and PermSecs [Permanent Secretaries], everybody was from that area. So, that resentment was there. And, as a matter of fact, when the troops were moving into Asaba, they had a long list of people they should look for and kill, because the whole idea was that since they had abandoned—seen the federal troops came and liberated areas—Benin, Warri, Sapele, Ughelli and the rest—that if those people don't come back again, they would automatically be in charge of the ministry. So, that could be one.

Then, the second thing was that when the Biafrans took over and the federal government, the federal troops were advancing, there were some people from the other parts of the Mid-West who were living in Asaba, mostly artisans, because they didn't go to university and the rest of it. They had small businesses, like welding and carpenters and so on. The Biafrans actually took some of those ones and killed them. Some of them escaped, because Asaba people hid some of them. They escaped back to Warri and the rest of it.

So, their brothers in the federal army were also seeking to revenge. They said that it was Asaba people that gave their brothers away to be killed. So, it was also like revenge. That was also a possibility.

EB: So, it wasn't really that they thought that people in Asaba were actively collaborating with Biafra, it was more revenge?

IU: A third reason was the Niger Bridge was blown up, because if the Niger Bridge was

not blown up, maybe what happened in Asaba may not have happened, because they would have passed and gone to Onitsha. But when the Niger Bridge was blown up, they had to set up camp in Asaba. The resentment and the frustration took over.

EB:The bridge was blown up by the federal troops?

IU: No, by the Biafrans.

EB: —or the Biafrans? By the Biafrans, oh.

IU: By the Biafrans. They were running away, so what to do was to blow up the bridge to prevent the federal troops from coming.

EB: Or they might have just gone straight through.

IU: Yeah.

Charles Massucci: So, I understand when the troops originally arrived, did they arrive in a convoy with vehicles? And can you estimate how many federal troops arrived on the fourth and fifth?

IU: What I can say is, by the time we were taken out of our house, the whole street was full with armored cars and army trucks, and then a lot of soldiers on the road. There could have been over a thousand of them. And vehicles—the lowest [number] could not have been less than fifteen. There were many of them on foot. And then they had armored tanks all over. So, that was what I can remember.
CM: Okay. And your village—they fired at your house**.** Were the bullets striking your home, or were they shooting over the top of your home?

IU: Up to today, there are still the bullet marks. It has not been removed, even on the windows. That's the original from my house. It's still there. The way it was fired at is there. Nobody has touched them.

CM: So, the bullets were fired**.** They obviously caused fear, correct?

IU: Yes. Directly at the house. Immediately, they saw—they actually saw us. We were sitting on the verandah upstairs; it's a story building. When we saw troops on foot—we were hearing firing all along, and we didn't—we thought that these guns were not near us yet, so we were sitting on the verandah. And all of a sudden, we saw somebody who was different from the normal Biafran soldiers we see. We knew immediately that this was a Hausa man. And he saw us at the same time we saw him, and he turned and started shooting. So we—myself, my two sisters, and my brother—we all ran back into the house. And they faced the house, and the bullets were piercing everywhere. The size I don't know. It has not changed, especially the ones that pierced through the glass
windows. They're still there.

CM: And after the shooting, they afforded you the opportunity to surrender?

IU: Yes. We were shouting at the top of our voices. We were shouting, “One Nigeria! One Nigeria! One Nigeria!” Then they stopped, and shouted back that we should come out. So my father said we should all go out, because my father believed a lot in One Nigeria, having lived—he went to Kano when he was twenty, in 1929. He went to Kano, and he did not leave Kano until 1966, when the civil disturbances started. So, he had lived most of his life in Kano, and that was where he had all of his children. And he had a lot of people—he had friends from Kano, because they knew him. He was—let me tell you a little bit about my father.

When he got to Kano to seek his fortune, he was lucky in 1938 to have got a tailoring contract to make uniforms for troops for the Nigerian army—the Nigerian Continental, the colonial army. They were getting ready to go to the Second World War in Burma.
That was where the Nigerian Continental served. He was the one that made the uniforms for them, so he made a lot of money doing that. And then, after the war, he decided to begin to build houses. So, he had a lot of Hausa friends. He was, most of the time, in the city. The setting at the time in Kano was, if you are not from Kano, you lived in a particular area of town they call Sabon Gari. So, everybody who was a stranger lived there.“Stranger” meant non-indigenous. We are Nigerian, but we are not from Kano. So, he lived in that place. In that area, you had Igbos, you had Hausas, some Hausa people who were not from Kano. You had Yorubas, you had people from all parts of the country. And what it meant was that the only language we could speak was Hausa and Pidgin English, because we had to communicate amongst ourselves. That was the situation. Everybody was everybody’s friend. It was a small Nigeria living in the place. So, it was difficult for him to believe that Nigeria would one day go the way it did. He was an ardent supporter of One Nigeria. Even when Biafra was declared, he did not
believe in it, and he told us that this thing will pass, that Ojukwu—the rebel leader at the time—wanted to disintegrate the country, that we must remain in Asaba, that he’s tired of running. He’s not going to run again. This is his hometown, he has come home, so we must stay here. And he believed that federal troops will actually not harm us. But it did not happen.

And incidentally, last year—every year I go for medicals in BUPA, in London [BUPA is a private British health care organization based in London.] September last year, I went to do my medicals. I was talking to the doctor, and she was very interested in what I had written, because when I filled those forms and [it] asked what my father died of, I never mentioned to anybody that he was killed. I said he died in an accident. The doctor asked me what kind of accident, and I told her he was killed. And then she was very interested, and started probing to know what happened. She was listening, and then the next thing she said to me was, “Was General Gowon a good man?” General Gowon was the head of state at the time [of the civil war]. So, I told her, “Yes, I think he was a good man.” She said, “Why do you think so?” I said, “Despite all that happened, why do I think so? Because of the way he ended the war. Everybody thought that at the end of the war, that all of the East was going to be massacred, but he managed it somehow. The people of the East did not suffer the kind of damage the Asaba people suffered.” That was what I told her.

And I was surprised at the next thing she told me, that her next patient was General [Yakubu] Gowon. So when I finished the examination, I went outside, and at the reception I met General Gowon. The two of us, we are sitting, that was the first time in my life I met him. He saw me and he knew I was Nigerian, and he asked me who I was. I said, "There is no way you can know me, but I know you." He said I should tell my name, and I told him. And he said, "Oh, where are you from?" I told him Asaba. So, he said, "You must know Chief Philip Asiodu." I said, "Yes, I know him." And we sat there talking about the Civil War. I told him that I lost my father and two of my brothers there, and I was also a victim. I managed to escape. And then, he apologized to me personally. He had done it before, to Asaba. And then he said to me that the act was perpetrated by one of his rebel commanders, and he mentioned Murtala Mohammed. He was the rebel commander, and he did it. He [Gowon] was very sorry about it, and he reprimanded him about it. That was Gowon, and he told me last year in September in London [England]. I've been in touch with him since then. I say this with no bitterness in my heart. My wish has always been that the world should know what happened. The promise I made to myself was that I must use every opportunity to tell people about what happened. The memory of that should not die. That was my promise, and that was why I knew I must come here today.

EB: We're very grateful that you did. We really appreciate it. And we know that it's a very hard thing; no matter how many times you talk about it, it's a hard thing each time.

IU: Yeah, but talking about it also helps me to forget. It's not easy to see your brother shot at, and he was the closest of my brothers to me. I believe he saved my life, also.

EB: Were your mother and your sisters present when that happened?

IU: No, no, no. They were taken away. The men and the women were separated, and the women and children were taken away before they started shooting. So, they didn't know what was going to happen, because they told them that they were going use us to work. They are going to give us work, some physical labor somewhere. They took them away to some maternity that was not too far from the place while they went and shot at us.

CM: Do you have an estimate of how many men started off in this group, at the time of the shooting?

IU: We could not have been less than two thousand.

CM: Two thousand?

IU: Two thousand, yeah. We could not have been. There have been many accounts, you know. I was young at the time, and I was not as detailed as I am now. I did not believe that we were going to be killed. So, all I can see is a huge crowd of people. I try to say they are two thousand. have a feeling that the records of the people which Emma [Okocha] has are not complete, because for one reason or the other, people are still afraid to talk. Many people who lost their families will not even say; they don't want to admit. Even in my house, for many years my mother refused to believe that Paul had died. If you asked her, she would not even give

you Paul's name as dead, because she never saw Paul's corpse. If you don't see somebody's body, you don't believe the person is dead.

I also have a cousin, who was quite close to me. We were all born in Kano, too. He was killed, along with his father and his eldest brother, who was a [University of] Glasgow trained medical doctor. He was the chief medical officer at the general hospital in Asaba at the time. His name was Eugene Akwule. He was the apple of his mother's eyes, because what happened at the time was if you had a doctor, they called you *Nne Doctor*, which means "Mother of Doctor." So, they used to call her—Eugene's mother—*Nne Doctor*. She never believed that Eugene died. And it went into her head, and every man she saw was Eugene. Until she died, that was the way she was. So, those kind of records where you had people who did not want to accept that the members of their family had died, it's difficult to actually write them. I believe that there are a lot more people that died, and weren't, in my heart, on the list that Emma had in *Blood on the Niger*.

EB: Eugene, you said, was your cousin? How was the relationship? Was he the son of your mother's brother, or—what was he?

IU: Let me explain again how it happens. My mother comes from the same family—okay. My mother is second cousin to Eugene's father.

EB: Oh.

IU: You know? And we all were born in Kano. So, Gregory, who is the boy I am talking about, is one year older than me. He was born in 1951. Eugene, who was the medical doctor, was born in 1940, so he is the oldest of the sons of my mother's cousin. Both Eugene and Gregory were killed, along with their father.

EB: I think the tape's almost running out, so can we just pause for a moment while I change the tape?

IU: Okay.

Pause in recording

EB: Okay, if you could just start again?

IU: Yeah. I never talked about it. I kept it all buried in my heart. When I went to school in Lagos and the war had ended, and as young boys, I was talking about the Civil War with a group of Yoruba friends, or classmates, and I told the story. And one of them, whose father was a magistrate, looked me in the eyes and said that I was a liar, that it could never have happened. I took a knife, and I almost killed him. I was going to be expelled from my school, a Catholic school, because his mother wanted to ensure that I was thrown out of the school, thought the principal brought in some ex-Biafran soldiers to kill their children. You know?

But fortunately for me, the principal was a Catholic reverend father, and he happened to have known a little bit about what happened. So, he somehow managed to solve the problem, and he talked to me. I didn't talk about it again until Emma wrote his book and he was going to launch it, and he asked for my help. So, I had to come and talk about it. That was the first time. Then the second time was the Oputa Panel. At Emma's launch, it was carried by only one television station, and it was—I ensured it was carried, because I was working for a company where I was in charge of marketing. So, I enlisted those television people to make sure it was aired, but it was carried as a news item. So, the substance of the story did not make any meaning to people who saw me on air, and they carefully edited the story, so it was very brief. It was limited to the launch of the book. So, if you really wanted to know what happened, you have to go and buy the book.

But at the Oputa Panel, again, through Emma Okocha, they called me to come and give evidence. So, I traveled from Lagos to Enugu. Before then, something happened, and everybody thought that I would not be able to go. A week from the time, in the middle of the night, about twenty armed robbers broke into my house. Most of them were even from the North. They stabbed me. I had to—I was operated on. But they didn't hurt my family. Somehow, I survived again. And with a bandage on me, I went to the Oputa Panel and I told the story. It lasted for a little over an hour, and it was well-documented and aired on all the television stations in Nigeria. It even was shown abroad; at least, my brothers in the UK saw it. That was the second time, and that was the only time that I remember that a lot of people called me after. This is the third time I'm talking about it.

EB: Do you think the robbery in your home was connected to that?

IU: At first I thought so, but now I don't, because if it was connected, they would have made sure I was killed.

EB: Just briefly going back to the time after you left your home. You came back to Asaba and you went to school. How long did you remain in Asaba before you left for Lagos?

IU: I stayed in Asaba—I didn't go to school from October to December. Then in January, we started school, all of us. My immediate elder sister was one year ahead of me in secondary school. My eldest sister was in university already, so she didn't go to school. And after the war, she didn't go to school anymore; she started teaching. After the war, she went to Germany to continue her education.

So, I went to the local school until about April of 1968 Biafran troops infiltrated the Mid-West at a place called Ogwashi-Uku, and then school stopped in Asaba, because everybody in Asaba, again, was located?? to that primary school. I think they were cautious of what had happened before. So, no killing in Asaba this time; the killing was in Ishiagu, a town near Asaba where the Biafran troops came in from. In that situation, they even took the chief of the town and buried him alive, and they killed a lot of people. But the Ishiagu people are not like other people. They don't have an Emma Okocha, so nobody's talking about it. But they also have mass graves in the place. It's about thirty minutes' drive from Asaba.

So, again, for one month we didn't go to school. We were in that camp that was over in town. A lot of people at the time fled. They didn't believe them this time. They didn't go to the camp. They found their way to some places and went to Biafra. One of them was Christopher Mkpayah, the guy who I said could not come. But he never believed them again. Once they said they were taking us to the camp, he fled into the bush and found his way to Biafra.

So, when that ended, I went to—there was no school in Asaba anymore. I went to a place about twenty kilometers away from Asaba to continue schooling. It was not good enough, so my mother took me from there and sent me to Lagos in 1969. So, I continued and finished, and from there I went to university.

EB: What was life like for your family in the immediate months after this happened?

IU: It was—let me put it this way. It's difficult for me to say that it was difficult. As a little boy, I didn't know the responsibilities of adults. My mother was feeling the pains. At every opportunity for us, it was time to play. You don't even understand why you are not going to school. So, I didn't have the responsibility; it was my mother's responsibility, and the older of my siblings. My sister was the only one who had finished secondary school, who was struggling with my mother to make sure that we had some education. But I knew that things had changed. One, my father had died, so we didn't have too many friends coming to our house anymore. As I was saying, in Nigeria at the time, my father was quite well-to-do. We were comfortable. We had stewards; we had a driver who was taking us to school. That didn't happen anymore. We didn't have a family car anymore, so we walked to school. We walked anywhere we went to. But it didn't matter to us, because we were children, and we just could make friends easily and go to play football or table tennis or something. But we knew that life had changed, because there were less friends coming to the house to ask for favors. I could hear my mother complain all the time about their former friends not wanting to help when finances were very tight. So, things changed a little bit in that direction.

EB: After you left for Lagos, did you go back to Asaba?

IU: Yes, of course, like always when we were on holiday. Instead of going to Kano, then we went home. Asaba became our home, because every relation became closer. It was now every man for himself, so the only family I had was my mother. Anytime it was holiday time, I traveled to Asaba. I was in a boardinghouse in Lagos.

EB: You mentioned that the house today still has—

IU: The scars of war, yes.

EB: Do you have family still living there? Do you use the house?

IU: No, I have my own house now. Yeah. My mother was living there until she died in March this year. She died at ninety-one, in March. My oldest brother, who has retired, is

living there also. He's the only one that lives there; his wife had died ten years ago. He's sixty-nine now; he was born in 1940. He's retired, and he lives there.

EB: And that was the brother who was not there.

IU: Yes, he was in England at the time. He studied at the University of Reading.

CM: During the speeches today, they spoke about excavation. Do you have an opinion of the importance of an excavation being conducted?

IU: Yeah. I think it is important, because it is important to know, for those families who are still in denial that these are the people, these are the bones, these are the remains of your relations. It's also important to give them a proper burial, because where I come from, you are not properly buried until certain rites are performed. Those people who were buried in mass graves were not properly buried. To that extent, I think it's important for the excavation, for the remains to be identified, and for them to be properly buried.

EB: Do you think people in Asaba generally feel that way, that they would like to see this happen?

IU: Yes, some do, but I can tell you that some others want to forget. For example, when we were asked to come and give evidence at the Oputa Panel, there is a chief, a very important chief. He is just like Asiodu. He was a survivor of the massacre. He was a top civil servant; in fact, he was the head of the Civil Service of Bendel State—you know, when the name was changed from Mid-West to Bendel State.He was the head of the Civil Service: well-educated, head of the Civil Service. He escaped the massacre. He was part of those that they had the list they wanted to kill. They didn't want them to come back to Benin. But after the war, he went back; he got his position back, and he rose to become the head of the Civil Service. He had gunshot wounds in his back, and just survived. He was asked to give testimony. He refused, because he wants to forget. And he says that he doesn't want to give testimony against the people that made him what he was. And his relations were killed. So, that's a situation.

EB: What would you like to see for some kind of permanent memorial? Would you like to see a physical memorial in Asaba, or something else?

IU: I would like to see a properly built cenotaph[5] at the place where they were buried with, if possible, the names of all the people that were identified, for posterity. And I still believe that if that is done, many years from now, people will go to Asaba to look at it and remember that this was the place where Asaba people were killed, and a lot of people buried there.

EB: Is there anything else you would like to tell us, or anything we haven't really talked about that you think is important?

IU: For me, it is important that the memory of those people is kept. We have, for a long

time, tried to hide the truth. We should not let the truth die. In other parts of the world with this sort of truth commission, in other parts of Africa like South Africa, Rwanda, people talk about it openly. It helps you to reconcile. It helps you to get it behind you. No matter how you say you forgive—and I truly forgive—but you never forget. It's difficult to forget. It ensures a lesson for the future. It ensures that these kind of things never happen again, because so many people in Nigeria do not still believe, or do not know, that such things have happened. And the truth about it is that it happens again and again. In recent times, it has happened in a place called Odi, during the civil unrest in Bayelsa State, where federal troops were sent to the place and they massacred even the women. They were buried in the water. It happened again in a place called Zaki-Biam in Benue State, again, during the civil unrest after 1999.[i] And incidentally, that was the village of one of the top military commanders, who is now retired, a certain Victor Malu, and they killed his uncle. They were in there, and they slaughtered hundreds of people.

Nobody's talking about it, because the government does not want people to talk about these things. And if we don't talk about it openly and ask questions and get the people involved to account for what they have done, it will happen again and again. And my greatest wish is that it should be talked about, so that it doesn't happen again.

EB: Thank you. Thank you very much.

IU: Thank you.

End of interview

[i] The Odi massacre took place on November 21, 1999. A nearby gang killed several police officers, and in retaliation, the Nigerian president ordered the military to attack Odi's civilian population. The Zaki-Biam massacre occurred on October 22, 2001. A week before the massacre, nineteen soldiers were killed in the area; the military retaliated by attacking Zaki-Biam and five nearby villages.