

Martina Osaji

Asaba Memorial Project

Interviewee: Martina Osaji (MO)

Interviewers: Dr. Fraser Ottanelli (FO), Dr. Elisabeth Bird (EB)

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Interview location: Asaba, Delta State, Nigeria

EB: Okay, we're going to start with, just if we could put on record, if you could say your name and your date of birth to start the...

MO: Yes. I am Missus Martina Osaji.

EB: And you live in Asaba?

MO: Yes, I live in Asaba.

EB: Have you always lived in Asaba? Your whole life? Were you born here?

MO: Yes, I've lived here but I've also been out of town. But right now I'm here.

EB: And I understand that you have a position in the state government? Is that correct?

MO: Yes, I'm the permanent secretary at the Delta State government, yes.

EB: Oh, yes. Well, we want to talk, as you know, the point of the interview is to talk about what happened in Asaba in 1967. I wondered if you could start by just, locating where you were at the time, where your family was, and where you were really at the beginning of the war around early 1967.

MO: Actually, I was about 14 years old. I was in class 3 in the secondary school. We had just been transferred from Abo to Asaba here, because of what was happening, we were all at home, my father an education officer, my brothers some of them were out. My brother was in Port Harcourt, just back from England. My sister was in England. And, well here, myself my parents, my sister, and my brother, who were here at Asaba.

EB: So you have a family home here.

MO: We have a family home here. And we are living with relatives from Asaba here.

EB: And you said that your father was in education?

MO: Yes, in fact took after him. Yes. He was the supervisor in charge of teachers and that is what I'm doing now. So...

EB: And how many exactly were in your family? You had your father and your mother, and your brother...

MO: Yes, we are six. Six children. I am the last, actually.

EB: How many girls?

MO: Three girls and three boys.

EB: So um, when you began to hear about, do you remember hearing about the arrival of the Biafrans first of all?

MO: Yes, we heard about it. But at that time nobody knew what was happening we never had any experience like that. You know? The only thing we knew was many of our relations who were in the north or in the western states came back home and met us here. People were running from afar, coming home. When we were already at home.

EB: What were you hearing from them?

MO: Uh, there was a problem. The soldiers, there was this question of secession, and there were Nigerian soldiers and there were the Biafran soldiers. Incidentally, we are not in the army. None of my relations had anything to do with the army so we were just watching. Suddenly we heard there were air raids. Different sounds, blasts. Nobody knew, people were running helter-skelter. Incidentally, my eldest brother senior to me, to me—ran, ran across to the Niger. Then the children who were playing, with the noise there was confusion.

EB: And when was this? Was this with the arrival of the Biafran troops or the Federal troops?

MO: Okay, you see that was where there was a problem. Um, at the point we didn't know was it Biafra or was it the federal troops. About the uh, fourth of October because of the confusion we were running for our dear lives, they said the federal troops were coming. The Biafran soldiers were there. We didn't know who was who. We were running. As a matter of fact we ran into the bush. My father, my sister, and myself. Because my brother had gone to the east—he just ran like that. And then my mother had to go to the east to search for him. So we were left just three of us together —my father, my sister Appolonia, and myself.

EB: So then what did you do?

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MO: We ran into the bush for safety. We didn't know what to do, people were running away—saying they've come and they're out killing. And we ran into the bush. On the fourth, we spent the night there in the bush. Some soldiers would meet you—"are you a friend or a foe? Are you for one Nigeria? Or for Biafra?" There was confusion. We spent the night. And then the following day my father say—wow. If anything happens to him here then nobody would know about him. Nobody would know. He wasn't a soldier, that he would go back home and face whatever. The way these men would come—really wild—they would intimidate you, and if you're lucky cause what—you don't know who is a friend.

EB: Cause you couldn't tell the difference between the federal or the...

MO: Yes, there in the bush. So, my father felt that it was safer for him to go home. And then on the 6th, we came back home. And we were able to get to our house and spend the night there. And on the 7th of October, the black day more or less, we had had our breakfast just there, at one point you would see three soldiers would come—who are those here? My father would come. I am their father. They say who are you—are you a soldier? He said no I'm not a soldier, I'm an education officer. He tried to show them who he was. Some would come, remove everything, and then go. Another set, they would come like that. We didn't know who was who. And there was no—I mean, that was our first experience our first encounter. We had heard stories about war but we had never really heard anything like that.

EB: So, when these people came did they seem organized in any way or were they just groups arriving?

MO: They would have been organized but for us when we see them, you know, we were expecting, my father would say if you take me to anywhere I will be able to explain. But I'm not a soldier. I think perhaps you are looking for the soldiers. He wasn't a soldier—he was a public, a civil servant. So he would always have explained, he would try to speak to them in the language they understand, but they were not for that.

EB: So they weren't interested in what he had to say.

MO: No, that um, on that day they now came out, because again we had heard stories that they were looking for young girls. And my sister, my elder sister was quite bigger than me. And these were the people the young girls they would want to rape. And she would always hide, and she would dress in a way as if she's not a young girl. In case they want to...cause they could pick anybody from what we heard.

EB: How old was your sister?

MO: Uh, she had just finished the secondary school so she could be about, maybe eighteen or nineteen. She was quite young though.

EB: And her name was Apollonia?

MO: Apollonia. But she is in the US at the moment. I was quite small. So when they came in, this group that came in now, big, fierce-looking, with a gun, you know. They never came without the gun and that could frighten anybody. And they wouldn't allow you to talk. And so they came and said "all of you come out." We came out. My father had his trousers and then had a polo shirt, and um, he had his rosary, he is a Catholic. We are staunch Catholics. He is a very strong Christian. So he had his rosary, he was praying, you know, and then they asked all of us to come out, my father came out we all came together. And he said you this way—he is a man. And then, you this way. So, while he came out, from up on the side some of his relations came also so they were driven out. From all corners, so he met his relations. My own uncles, and oh, I was quite glad, I was, oh good, my father is not alone. And then they took us, it is not like they just let us go they followed us and then they followed him. And they followed him and three of his relations. And we went.

EB: So you went off and they went off in another direction.

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MO: Yes. Not too far. We had gone just. We couldn't imagine what was happening. But you couldn't look back because they were after you. You couldn't, there was no time. And as we were going there were people, more people. You know? So my father had gone the other way. They now took us, but at that point, my sister said what could be happening? The gunshots? Could they have been killed? Or what? There was fear. We were not too sure of what was happening. Then they took us, to Ogbe-Osawa square, that is the point in this town where they took us where there was so many women, but we met so many of our relations. In fact, when we met they said Marti where is your daddy? I said, I don't know where my daddy is they took my daddy the other way I don't know. Then we were all in tears, we didn't really know what was happening. His relations say, where is your daddy? I say I don't know. It was drizzling. We were all there milling around, you know, until -- we stay there for hours, hours. Then, at that point they say the women this way, the men this way. Some young boys, very small, joined the mothers you know? And then they took us to the Maternity. The women who were there. And as we were leaving, we looked behind, we saw, we heard the sound—bum-bum-bum-bum-bum [makes a gun with her fingers and points it around]. Kept all of us there, and we were, until late in the night we were released. And where our house was at that point was in Logo (inaudible). So we had to leave there. And we looked for, we had to go to our relation's place, our auntie's, somewhere, and we managed to get there. And when we got there the news had gone, people who had passed, they had seen our father and the others, they were shot, they had seen them lying there. So it dawned on us that, you know, what about the others? While we were going we were meeting corpses on the road—and we were all afraid. We had never had it. And we, I mean we couldn't imagine it, because my father, my relations were not soldiers, and we thought really that nothing would happen to them as civilians. We're not soldiers, fortunately. So, following there we managed to get down towards where, you know, the sight was terrible. Sight was terrible. What could we do? At that point, we had the news that the people, those people who were asked to go they were shot, and we knew that people in other places in the town that-- was the central place, but my fathers and the others they had been shot by our house.

EB: So they weren't shot at Ogbe-Osawa .

MO: No, they were not shot at Ogbe-Osawa. Yes, they were not there. But my other relations, they were there—they would say ah, Marti where is your daddy? In tears, I didn't know what. By the following morning we knew that those ones were equally shot. They themselves.

EB: Do you remember, when you saw the people who had been shot, do you have any idea of how many were killed there?

MO: [whispers] There were many. There were many in my own family, because I am Mrs. Osaji like I said, but my maiden name is Isichei, so we had more than just one family, more than just 40, we had uncles there was no family along that street, not one family that escaped it. And you see, this village was civil servants, those who had retired, those who were working, they were all home. They came home. If there is any problem anywhere, home you run to for safety. So they were all at home, except for the few who ran out. And they were, not that they were sure that there was safety but they just ran out.

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We thought that coming home you could explain yourself, if anybody comes and they take you to anywhere you would be able to explain. They would say, yes, this man, cause it was known he was an education officer of repute people knew him. But, not for that period.

EB: What was your home village?

MO: Umuagi.

EB: Umuagi. And that was where many civil servants lived?

MO: Yes, people who had worked and who had come home. And because of the war many of them had come home. Not all of them were really residents there, at that point. But some came from the north, some came from the west, some came from the east, you know? They all came home.

EB: What was your father's name?

MO: Leo.

EB: Leo...

MO: Leo Samuel Isichei , yes.

EB: Could you maybe talk about him a little bit? What kind of man was he?

MO: Um, he was a Catholic to the core. A very good Catholic. When the missionaries came in here in the 1890s, he was amongst the first people who were converted, and he was a teacher. Although he wasn't a graduate, but you know then primary 6 or grade 2 teacher that was quite high. So he was the only one of them that, a man, that was allowed to teach in a convent school there. A convent school that was for girls, run by the Lady of Apostle Missionaries, the reverend sisters, so he was quite at home with the reverend sisters. You know, he was very good, he was a teacher in the convent schools before he went into the government school. And he had traveled to so many places in the West then, outside the Delta. Gone to Auchi, gone to Ibillo, gone to Afuze, so he had so many friends and his name, they knew him as a teacher. They would call him [speaking in Igbo], that is a teacher. That is very good, and he taught so many people.

EB: What was he like as a father to you?

MO: Oh, he was more than a father. He was a darling father, you know. We looked up to him so much. He was everything to us, and he wanted to bring his children up to make sure that they had education. My mother wasn't educated, but she was quite close and she knew what to do. Um, so he was a teacher, he grew through the ranks before he became an education officer.

EB: Were you able to bury your father?

MO: Yes. [sighs] Yes. That was the most we could do at that time. We had to organize to get, you know, they didn't allow us to get near where the corpses were. But then, the reverend fathers had started coming, a few chaplains, with the soldiers. Um, one or two of them, perhaps one of them who knew my father as a teacher then, were able to help us. My sister, and one father Ogboko of blessed memory, one of those who was around,

he was a rector, in the seminary, in this town. He was around, so we managed to carry him. But, we couldn't give him a befitting burial but what we wanted was to make sure that he was interred in his own compound, not there. We were just lucky, because the other two who were with him, none of the relations were there. And it was a very big risk then. You could be shot there. But there was one man who helped us. And then we were able to carry him and dug a grave. You know, with the fear, we are having a shallow grave because you had, you didn't have to spend so much time. But we got him buried in his own compound. So at least that gave us some joy. That we know where he was there interred.

EB: That must have been a terrible thing for you and your sister to try to do.

MO: It was, it was terrible. It is only now I'm trying to get over it. I mean it was a traumatic experience. From 67-70 I mean I wasn't myself. Anytime that thought came into my mind, and any time I saw in my mind the people at Oge-Osawa, the people who were walking down. Walking on top of corpses running up and down. You know, it was just with prayers and the grace of God that we have gotten—that we are trying to get over it.

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But, the joy is that there is a legacy he has left behind. And that is me, and that is my brothers. Because I would say yes, that is why I don't want to forget him. The 7th of October is a special day for me. In fact, if you go to town, to my church every 7th of October I offer remembrance mass, I say he can't be forgotten. I am not asking for anything but to say that my father can't be forgotten. That he was killed he wasn't a soldier, so there is no question—he wasn't interested in politics. He was only thinking about his work his family, you know. So the thought of it, it has happened, we survived it, we are victims, but I have that joy that we buried him and that I am here alive. If the dead say, he would say yes. I didn't enjoy much of him, just 14 years, you know, I didn't know him. When I went to the university he wasn't there. Whenever I had a big celebration, graduation or marriage, I cry, I say wow, my father would have been here. But for the fact that he died during the war, not just natural death, but the fact that he was killed when he wasn't a soldier. Yes, it was a war, but then he wasn't a soldier, he wasn't on any side. And perhaps if he had a gun he could have faced them, but he had no gun. He was helpless. It was not worth challenging. He was just like a sheep led to be slaughtered, that is the way I see it.

EB: You said he was with two of your relatives when he was killed and they were with him at that time?

MO: Yes, Mr. Biachi in fact he is the father of the reverend father. The reverend father was about two years old then. The mother ran away with him to the east. The father ran from the east and came back to Asaba. You know because they came out from the opposite direction, when my father was being taken away they came out, you know, so all of you go this way, and they all went that way.

EB: Do you know how old your father was when he died?

MO: Yeah, he was about 57. He was born in 1910. About 57 years.

EB: What happened then after you had, you buried your father, what happened then? You didn't have your mother with you.

MO: Yeah, I didn't have my mother with me. Now, I told you my father had taught in so many places. And there was one reverend father, who was his student, somewhere in Auchi, side, he remembered. Then the news they killed that they killed that. So he heard that. So we were coming now, so that they take some people. In fact I lived with him, he took care of me. My sister who had just finished secondary school, she was given a teaching job—and she now took care of me. I was taken out of Asaba, I had to leave Asaba. You know? We left our house. Because by then the soldiers had occupied the place.

EB: Did the soldiers destroy things?

MO: They didn't destroy, but there were gunshots. They didn't burn the house down because there was no resistance. I think if somebody had said they had seen someone who was trying to protect...but it was all open, the doors were open so they could go in and you know, it was after so many weeks, you know? But we couldn't stay in there. We left, the two of us. There was nobody—my mother was in the east. We didn't know where she was. There was no contact. In fact, it was in 1970 they came back.

EB: And how did you find her again?

MO: Ah. It was an experience. Because she was worried she didn't know where her children were—and we were here. So I was in school then. And they say the war had ended—I was in the higher school then. They say the war had ended. So, I have to come to the house. There was no more war. I mean, you know, the, it was on the other side. She now came back with her load, crying, shouting, yelling. You know? [sighs] It was hell.

EB: Did she know then that your father had been killed?

MO: Yes, the news filtered from here down there. She was worried. We heard she was alive but we didn't know what was happening. So we're all praying, praying that one day the war would come to an end and we would all be reunited.

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And then one day the war came to an end and she now came back with my brother. And my eldest brother. He had just came back from the east. He had just came back from England in 1966, and just went for an assignment in Port Harcourt, and he got caught up. But he came back then, and he came back and he continued, and he then went to Lagos with his work there.

EB: What was the condition of your home when you came back and your mother came?

MO: Oh...everything was scattered, they had made away with all the things. There was nothing there. We just had the four walls. There was nothing there. They had looted the things, the ceilings you saw gunshots. No, you know, there was really nothing there. But the fact that there was a roof—it was leaking—but there was a roof. The fact that the house was standing there, that was good.

EB: How did your mother manage? When she came back?

MO: Ah, support. Standard family. You know? At least she saw us, she mourned the husband, but she saw us. She had to ask us what happened but we couldn't say much. We just said, relax. You know, prayers, extended

family's homes. You know, people coming to cheer her up. And then, she had heard this neighbor, that one, that one, that one, that one, that one. It was too much.

EB: Yeah.

MO: So, that is that.

EB: You, describe the soldiers. You said they came they were big...that they were violent. Could you talk a little bit more about how they behaved in a general sense? Were there any of them who were not brutal? What was the general kind of behavior for the soldiers?

MO: They were quite brutal. Because, they would come with their guns. You know? Move this way. Where is this? And that is frightening enough. Because, you don't know anything they could release the bullets. But they didn't release it while they were there. But the way that they would push you—do this, do this. They carried the radio, they had come and taken so many things. They come, they would take, they would carry—they were really brutal. They were brutal.

EB: We heard that, from some people that a lot of young girls were raped and...

MO: Yeah. Yes, we heard that, but fortunately for us we were not, you know, we were lucky, because people came and they took us. The reverend father, the reverend in blessed memory, he was my father's boy when my father was a teacher in his own place outside Delta. And now I do the state, and he took us out. He took us out, you know? And then the missions came in, the reverend fathers came in as chaplains. So they had tried to put some children together even in St. Patrick's. You know? Kept them there. So we were lucky we were taken out. You know? And then I had to start school somewhere.

EB: Fraser, would you like to ask anything?

FO: Um, no, the last question is the one about violence against women.

MO: The violence, there is no doubt about it. That is an experience I would not want to repeat at all.

EB: Were you aware of many, any women who were killed?

MO: Oh yeah, and there were stray bullets. Stray bullets. Like, a, Chuck, I think the mother was killed. Had three kids. There were others, you know I can't remember them all you know? There were others of my relations, my father's relations, they were men. But there were some other women who lost their lives. There were many. In fact actually families would have to give out the names.

EB: But you said you thought as many as forty of your extended family?

MO: Yes, but when you talk about the whole village, you know, 100+. In the five villages, so there were more than that. There should be more than 1,000.

EB: You think there were as many as 1,000.

MO: Yeah, there were quite many. You know, I might not be very accurate, you know. That is why there is need for study so that we get names and the number, the actual number.

EB: Yes, we would, what do you think now—do you think that, you mentioned that it was very important for you to remember your father. Do you think that, what do you think is the important thing to do now in terms of remembering everything. Is it appropriate to...

MO: Yeah, I want people to know because not many people know what happened.

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Even my own children now, I tell them the story. It is history. And, um, I think there is need for them to know that at a certain time this happened and these were the victims, these were the survivors. Just them knowing, that is my interest. That is my interest, because there is nothing you can do to replace my father. There is nothing, no amount of compensation. I would rather have my father and my other relations. But I want the world, I want people to know that this is what happened on the 7th of October, that people were massacred. People were killed, civilians, who were not soldiers. They should be there. We read history books, so we should also have history books of what happened here for generations. That is the only way we can remember them. For me, I'm not interested in anything than other maybe having a museum, something to show. So people will go, and say what happened? We will have the history there.

EB: Yes, that is...

MO: Otherwise, the tragedy will be closer. If there is no way you remember them.

EB: That is of course our goal this time, making the museum, telling the story. Around the war, and having people...

MO: Yes, tell the story, because if you just allow it it is gone. And that's it. And being a survivor, a victim. I feel like I haven't done what I'm expected to do. Because God knows why I had to survive. For me to have a story to tell. And that is why I'm telling you now.

EB: So we learn about your father through you.

MO: Yes, yes, that is right.

EB: Thank you.

MO: I have his picture, I forgot, I just came from the office I have his picture. I forgot but if you phone me at the office I'll get you his picture, I have his picture. A picture he took with us.

EB: That would be really good. One of the things we like to see, we would like to be able to

FO: I'm going to turn this off now.

EB: —is, we know that...

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