

Felicia Nwandu

Asaba Memorial Project

Interviewee: Felicia Nwandu (FN)

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

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Interview location: Asaba, Nigeria

EB: ...June 28th 2010, we're in Asaba at St. Joseph's church and the lady I'm interviewing her name is, please say your name, please.

FN: My name is Mrs. Felicia Ngozi, n-g-o-zed-i, n-g-o-zed-i, Nwandu, that's the surname, n-w-a-n-d-u.

EB: Thank you. Now I think maybe they told you, what we're trying to do is learn about what happened here in October of 1967 and around that time, so if we could start this, if you could just tell us—were you here in Asaba in October?

FN: Yes, yes, I was in Asaba during the period. In fact what happened in Asaba is a terrible thing. A lot of massacre without us doing anything to them. They just started coming into every home, killing just like that. And unfortunately my dad's house was burnt down. His house was burnt down, he is a police officer. His house was burnt down, and my, his junior brother was killed, his name is Peter Omechuka, o-m-e-c-h-u, Omechuka, ka, k-a, Omechuka, Onyemenan.

EB: Can we take you back just a little bit in time now, when you first were here when you heard that the federal troops were arriving, what kind of, what were people's expectations, what were they thinking at that time?

FN: You see when, when they came at first, they said that people should go and receive them. We thought it was something that, when we go to receive everything we... nobody knew the intention was to come and kill us. So, a lot of people we are dancing to welcome them, they killed them wa-wa-wa-wa-wa-wa (*makes sound of machine gun*). Some, they use the, this a, what do they call it? That digs hole...

EB: The grave?

FN: Caterpillar.

EB: No,

FN: Eh, they dig holes and ask people to be there and immediately they just moved them into the (*makes motion of going into the hole with hands*).

EB: Were you there when, were you there—did you help bury people then?

FN: The thing is that when we saw them we now hid ourselves, I think you understand, so many people that were there were killed. Even people in the village places where they are holding their meetings, their family meetings, they came there, they killed them, nobody escaped. Right in my own village, right in my own village, they were at the meeting and they were killed.

EB: So they had a meeting to discuss what to do?

FN: No, you know, the family we are just discussing their own family affair, what to do in the village. Unknowingly to them the soldiers they are coming. So, they did not even know when they came, and took them unawares. And we are hurt, killed.

EB: The, um, what, which village were you, which village?

FN: Umuaji, I'm from Umuaji.

EB: Here? This Umuji?

FN: Umuji, my village is Obisor family, right here, Obisor family. O-b-i-s-o-r family.

EB: Obisor family, okay.

FN: In Umuaji quarters, Asaba.

EB: Okay, now, what we're very interested in—we have a lot of details about the story, what we really want to know is exactly what you personally witnessed in terms of people being killed or anything like that.

FN: Yes, I witnessed when they killed my brother, that is my father's brother at Umuaji, and they were killed, so, in fact, it was terrible because he was in the ceiling, in the ceiling then, they had to, they shot him there.

EB: They shot him through the ceiling?

FN: Yes, they shot him. Because, I didn't know how they knew that many people were in the ceiling, they killed them.

EB: So the soldiers just came into the house?

FN: They came into the house, killed, and then burnt down the house.

EB: Do you remember when, was this before the big, was this before they took everybody away and killed them in, before they killed them in Ogbe-Osawa?

FN: No, it was the second operation.

EB: Oh, it was the second operation, 1968.

FN: It was the second operation. The second operation. That was the time they killed him. They now, maybe somebody told them that so many are in the ceiling. And even when the, when the people, after the day still, they came and said, "Oh, so they didn't kill, they didn't clear the whole Asaba."

EB: Mhmm, so this was after the troops had left, this was, they came in 1967,

FN: Yes

EB: ...they killed a lot of people.

FN: A lot of people, they, and then they said “so we have been saved.” But during, immediately again they started killing. That was the time, they killed this—my brother—who was in the ceiling, a lot of them.

EB: And your brother’s name was Peter.

FN: Peter Omechuka Onyenemam

EB: At that time, in 1968, when the troops came back, when they killed your brother, we heard that a lot of the troops came and took the people out of the town and took them to St. Patrick’s—is that right?

FN: Eh, the ones in St. Patrick’s, a lot were in St. Patricks, not—it was the women and children. We are taken there. It was the men, mostly, they cleared.

EB: Yeah.

FN: Even like some, like in Obiaju like in the village they call Obiaju the old men (whistles).

EB: Everybody.

FN: In this, so they rendered so many people fatherless. A lot of homes, we are rendered fatherless, no father to carry on with getting the training of the children. When they just noticed you are a boy—they shot you. So, so many disguised their little younger ones they had disguised themselves as women. And even when they see that you are younger, they would forcibly take you as their wife. That is if you don’t want, they kill you.

EB: Yeah, so they did kill some women, too.

FN: That is, people who refused to, to move along with them as their wives.

EB: Yeah, hm. What happened to the women who were forcibly taken by the soldiers?

FN: The ones taken by the soldiers stayed with the soldiers.

EB: Hm.

FN: M-hmm.

EB: Did any of them come back to Asaba afterwards?

FN: Well, some came back, that is who, they, because they were afraid—they didn’t know what would happen to them, so they go along with them. But then after they didn’t stay, so many of them came back.

EB: Some had children, some would have had children with the soldiers?

FN: No, no.

EB: No? No children, oh. Um, so you were here all the time, when the big, when the mass killing with the mass grave in October 7th 1967 you were here but you didn't see it, is that correct?

FN: The mass killing? I did not see it with my two eyes, but immediately we ran back, we saw where they dig the grave and they cover them. So at that time, when it was that particular time, we normally come to this St. Joseph, we make mass, we go there where they put them, where they buried them. They will now say mass, the whole Asaba, everybody, we come there, we say mass. So, they even shot at them, back there, where we have the river Niger, they shot them, put them there, so that is it. And a lot were killed leaving them underground, so when you come and say it is your brother or your father and then you carry them, but if you did not meet them that they have carried them, to put them, where they buried them, just took them there and buried them.

Even my father, whom his house was burnt down, I looked for him because our house was burnt down so in relation, as I was searching, searching searching so I got to see this, my father's old, eh, because he is a police officer, but this is when he was in junior rank, but the one in senior rank his house was burnt. So he couldn't get out. The relation of my father, I got this. In his album, so this is my Dad.

EB: This is your father?

FN: Yeah. That is my father, when they burnt down his house.

EB: That must have been terrible, you had nothing left?

FN: Nothing, the whole property, every damn thing was burnt down to ashes, the house was burnt down to ashes.

EB: Mhmm.

FN: And he ran away. I think you understand, he ran away and that was why he was saved.

EB: Yeah.

FN: And when they came to look for him, because he was um, the officer in charge of this police station here, yes he was the master. M-hmm. So when they now came they couldn't see him. Uh huh, so that is how he was saved.

EB: He was saved, yes.

FN: He escaped death.

EB: How many, how many—at that time how old were you in 1967?

FN: I was um, I am a grown up because I was in secondary school, I was in secondary school. I was in class three in the secondary school at that time.

EB: And how many brothers and sisters did you have, there was Peter, and did you have other brothers and sisters?

FN: Yes, my father had eleven children.

EB: Eleven, yeah.

FN: Eleven, yes.

EB: And all of them—Peter was the only one who died of all of those...

FN: Peter was my, was my father's junior brother.

EB: Oh, Peter was not your brother he was your father's brother.

FN: Brother, yes.

EB: Okay so, yes.

FO: He's an uncle.

EB: He's an uncle, yes. But you, all you—

FN: But Peter and my father, they have the same father and the same mother.

EB: Yes, full brothers.

FN: The same father the same mother.

EB: So all your own brothers and sisters everybody survived, everybody escaped?

FN: Everybody escaped because they just dressed themselves like women, so, we all ran out into the bush before they could know that, before they could look back in the bush we had crossed.

EB: So everybody dressed as women you all went into the bush...

FN: Yes.

EB: With your mother?

FN: With my mother, yeah.

EB: And your father?

FN: No, my father ran because he was there so we told him they are already killing, killing people from house to house, they were killing people from house to house, house to house.

EB: Now, we know, we understand that when the troops came in as you say that they were killing everybody, killing people.

FN: Yes, killing people.

EB: But then, after that, people agreed to come together and go for the greeting, the dance. Why do you think people agreed to do that? Because they knew there was a lot of killing...

FN: No, at that time, when they were coming in a forced place, they thought that to welcome them, as they say let us welcome, that it will be okay when they welcome. That, because we didn't know they came to kill, but if Asaba had known they had come to kill, well, nobody would appear, everybody would run away.

So we all thought that when we would come there is to show them that we welcome them and that we love peace.

EB: Yeah. How was that decided? Who decided to do that?

FN: Well, um, you know I cannot say who said we should do that. But people were saying as the troops came in, we didn't know their intention, so they said maybe we will welcome them. So people were dancing, they said that everybody should come out to welcome the troops. So we all came, people came out to welcome. It was when people who were in that area now went and they started killing them, that is, oh, we all said eh—so we are in trouble. So we now run.

EB: So you knew to get out. You knew to leave.

FN: So that is how we left.

EB: When you came back to Asaba after, what did you find here?

FN: We have no home to enter. No house to enter. Our house was burnt down. Everything. In fact when we went we had to be tying, you know the bags they put rice and beans, that is what we tied, because there was no clothes, there was nothing for us to hide our nakedness.

EB: That must have been a terrible shock to come back and find this.

FN: In fact, we suffered. We suffered. If we had money to buy salt, means later we saw some Christian organizations, they give us salt. That salt, if you want your soup to have this you just put your finger in the salt like this (*swirls finger*) and then put it in your soup so that you can get that taste. We suffered. A lot of children were shocked, you know, people were dying just like that. So, we ate rat, lizard, all these things we brought so that people would use it as meat. There was no money to buy it. In fact, Asaba suffered a lot.

EB: Do you think Asaba is still suffering because of what happened?

FN: So many people, so many people were still suffering. It was just of recent we were able to manage since, you know that since the war, it was just of recent, not more than three months ago, we were able to manage and rebuild the place. My father's house that was burnt down, it was, it was just of recent that we were able to rebuild, but it is not the way it was.

EB: So that was forty years later?

FN: No, it was just three months ago we were able. You can only remember since then. And a lot of stress, a lot of stress. A lot of stress. No money to train the children, no money to—you know—to live the normal life. So a lot of suffering. Many people are still on it.

EB: What do you think should be done now, um, people say that it is important to remember to tell the story. How do you think this story should be told and what should we do?

FN: Well, if really you want to help as I have said now, at least make, as I say, there are some children whom their parents—what I mean by parents I mean their mother, is not able to bring them up. The children, no money to go to the university. A lot of people have the brain but there is no money to bring them up. As I said in Asaba there are people who are still suffering. Whom their relations who are not able—it is when you finish your own that you can help someone else. I think you understand me.

EB: Yes.

FN: So they don't have people to help them. But those that have nobody to help them are still suffering. They have not got opportunity to go to the university, and some males have no work. Have no work.

EB: Yeah.

FN: Now. So but if you were able to help it would be okay.

EB: We'll do what we can but we can't do miracles.

FN: Yes, I know, I know. To help. For example, help the poor, who are suffering. There are some children who, due to suffering and uh stress they now, you know, getting into what we don't love.

So what we want, if you people are able to help, it would be okay I would like it. And I don't mind following you through so that you can pick my own number and so that we can be discussing. A lot of us who are suffering, we have our children who have been praying how to get to where you are outside the country. Because the problem, if you want people to help if you want people to help you, they won't be able to help you. They will not even want to hear that you want to go over there to be like them. I think you understand me. But if we see an organization who would be able to help us we need it.

EB: I understand, we can't do...

FN: We need it. We need it. I respond to the organization tell the organization this is our problem so that they will be able to help us. Through you people, yes, at least I have my own children that I'm suffering too.

EB: How many children do you have?

FN: I have seven of them.

EB: How old are they?

FN: I have one at the Polytechnica, and the last, you know the last one, is less than two years now. But I have struggled all the time because I have worked I retired Prime Minister of Labor, I retired as a civil servant. But

how to make move for these children to go out and, I don't know how. Nobody to help. So that is it, if I can get any help through you I can get very very happy.

EB: Thank you. Well,

FN: At least I know I have a friend over there. So that I can see and be chatting together.