

Stanley Okafor

Asaba Memorial Project

Interviewee: Stanley Okafor (SO)

Interviewers: Fraser Ottanelli (FO), Elizabeth Bird (EB)

Interview date: Oct. 12, 2011, University of Ibadan.

EB: So, well this is where we'll officially start and I'll make the official announcement. My name is Elizabeth Bird and I'm here with Dr. Fraser Ottanelli and Ify Uriah. We're here at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. And it is October the 12th, 2011. And I'm interviewing today Dr. Stanley Okafor. If you could please, sir, just say your name and who you are.

SO: Well, my name is Stanley Okafor. Um, I'm from Asaba, the capital city of Delta State. Okay, I am a professor of geography here at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. Um, my specialization is in human geography, particularly political geography, medical geography, regional development, and geographic thought.

EB: Okay, thank you.

SO: That is my area of specialization. I did a lot of teaching and also some publication in those areas. I've had, like I told you earlier, some teaching and research experience in the United States and the UK. And I've spent time also in the University of Heidelberg, University of Heidelberg. In Germany, spent about a year there in 1991. So that's who I am.

EB: Well thanks very much. Now, what we're going to do really is sort of take you back to the place right before the war, how you came to be in Asaba at the time and sort of the background to that.

SO: Well, the um, the war started in 67, if my recollection is correct. You know I finished high school in 1966 which is what they call the high school certificate. You know, after high school you spend two years also in high school to get what then was called higher school certificate and with an A level you would get right into the University. And um so I had completed that in 1966. And um gained admission to the University of Ibadan that same year. Sorry, I finished my HSC in 1965. Then got on to the University of Ibadan in 1966, September.

And the crisis was building up in 1966 January. The tensions were building up. I remember my dad didn't want me to come here [to Ibadan]. You know, I'm Igbo speaking like, I couldn't establish a separate identity we are Asaba people. We belong to the larger group of Igbos and all that. But my name, we are Igbo speaking, and my name is very Igbo, and soon. So, my dad didn't want me to come here. For safety, because of safety concerns. You know, after the coup, and the killing of some Northern leaders and some Western leaders. You know, hostility towards Igbos and all that. He wanted me rather to go to Nsukka. I didn't want to go to Nsukka for any reason. It was Ibadan or nowhere else for me. So we applied, so the forms came and we applied to Nsukka, we applied to Ibadan, and to Lagos. Um, the admission to Nsukka came first. But I didn't show my dad. I hid it. Because I knew if I showed him I'd have to pay the deposit and all that. And that would have committed me. So I hid it, and later on the Ibadan admission came so I showed that to him, so we went ahead to pay the fees and all that. A week after I brought out the Nsukka letter and he said well, it's too late [laughs] you know, and all

that. Anyway, I came here in '66 as an undergraduate. You know, we build up to the crisis in the civil war and all that. So I completed my first year which is like um, sophomore? Second year?

EB: Sophomore is second year in the US.

SO: Yeah, my sophomore. Yeah, so I completed my first year here, it is a three-year degree program. Because I came here with my HSC. If you came in with HSC or A level you did 3 years. If you came in with just O level or school certificate or just high school diploma or something like that, you did four years. You know, preliminary, you did four years. You know, but I came with my HSC so I had, you know, I wrote for the 3 year program. I completed my first year, I was on vacation in Benin, and my father worked and he had gotten a vacation job, he was on vacation in Benin. You know, when the Biafrans overran the Midwest at that time. Okay? And of course it was pandemonium and chaos and all that. And then the federal troops fought back. And I remember that my dad, when the fall of Benin and the Midwest was imminent, fall to the Federal troops, that is. When it was imminent, my father sent the rest of us home to Asaba. And we then came back with him. And he said, no, he did mean me to come back and stay. That I should go back to Asaba. I said but I had a job, I had a job then, you know? A vacation job. Normally you have a long vacation, summer break, you do some kind of internship. I remember I was working in the surveyor general's office, I was applying some of my geographical, basic geographical skills I had acquired from the university from my first year. But he said no, I have to go back. So I stopped by job and went back to Asaba but he stayed on. He was..

EB: He was in Benin.

SO: He was in Benin. He was a civil servant. He was the minister of education, but he was at that point the second to the British council. The British council—I don't know if you know what that is—the British council? So that is where his office was, in the British council, there was a program he was coordinating for the state, for the state or region then, you know, in the British council. So, um. Well, he said that he was going to stay back alone in Benin. And that he had in his briefcase his international passport, his bank papers, all these certificates and all that. And that whereabout it hit, he would take off from there. If they made it in his office he would take off in his car. So, like I said in the paper you must have read. I went back home. And he stayed in Benin. And you know the day that Benin fell, because the troops came from Auchi, you know Auchi, I don't know—okay you do. Have you been to Asaba by road before now?

FO: Yes, from Benin.

EB: From Benin, yes.

SO: Okay, from Benin. You know Auchi road they came in from Benin you know east of the road. And that was the way home to Asaba. And because of that it wasn't safe to go that way. So my dad, most people including my dad went south. Went south, through Sapele, went through bush parts, came out in Aboh and then back home. Just to avoid the troops. Anyway, he didn't arrive the day that Benin fell. Many people did arrive and we were very anxious, you know? That he probably didn't make it. You know, and so all night we were listening to the sound of cars and the sound of them showing up. Because we live in Cable Point, I don't know if you know it, in Asaba town. Cable point, you know it. Well, Cable Point is near the river Niger but there are so many other parts. So, all night we kept vigil, more or less. Each time we heard the sound of a car we thought it was him and

all that. You know, but it wasn't so um, so the next morning his mother, because his mother was still alive at that point. That is my maternal grandmother—said I should walk up town, and find out from his friends, you know, what happened. You know I started a long trek from Cable Point all the way up past where you have Grand Hotel now, past Ogbeogonogo market now, heading up toward St. Patrick's college then. And then suddenly I saw this car coming ahead. Like a car in the safari rally. You know the safari rally?

EB: Yes

SO: You know, mud and everything. He had just changed his car at that point, a Peugeot 404, he had just changed it. So I breathed a sigh of relief, so, you know, I flagged him down to the car and we went back home and to the house. So that was it and we were there until the troops pressed forward, pressed east and east and east trying to go over the Niger and go to Asaba. I remember the night before Asaba fell, my uncles came to my house at Cable Point, and asked my dad, all of us, should run out of town got to the bush and go into hiding. And my dad said to them no, just be polite, stay at home, be polite and nice to the soldiers, you know, and so on, be polite. You know, and entertain them if you need to entertain them, you know, that he wasn't going to go into hiding, and so on and all that. But he thought that soldiers were human beings. I now saw that they are animals, from what I saw, they are just animals. So, anyway, my uncles went into hiding, we stayed—the rest of us, all the family stayed in the house in Cable Point, and um, the night before Asaba fell the state beyond St. Patrick's, I don't know if you saw St. Patrick's college, that was all bush at that time. They were shelling Asaba for close to 24 hours, you know, and we, you know, we stayed on the lee side of our house for protection. Just in case any mortar fell on our house, we stayed on the lee side. And over here mortars whistling across overhead—fooom—and then go explode the other house. One of our neighboring houses took a hit, you know, but we didn't get a hit, our house wasn't affected. You know, but all night—all the time was the Biafrans had gone and blown up the Onitsha end of the bridge. But I didn't really know that, you know, they were soldiers and all. So all night shelling and all that.

Yeah, I suppose that night, too, they had come into town and fanned out into different parts. So we got up in the morning, woke up in the morning, about 6:30, and there were two soldiers, gun toting, in our compound, the neighboring compound, they were everywhere. They said that everybody should go to the police station, apart from the old people like my grandmother and my mother and so on. So, myself, my dad - I was walking behind him the whole way—we thought it was routine, we thought it was a purely routine procedure, you know? And so we are not—we are not duly anxious. We are not duly anxious because we are going to go there—you know? Hear what they're going to say. Maybe try to determine who was who, and then go home. You know, we thought that was it. But then, just about two kilometers down the road from my house we saw two corpses. With their heads blown off. People, white garment church people—I don't know if you've seen them in Nigeria, there are these churches, these syncretic sects that wear white garments and all. But, you know one of them with a bell, the other one with a lantern. Still burning at that time, you know? So that was the first time we got that there was trouble, that it was not what we thought, you know a simple thing you just go there, see what you're going to see and then come back. With their heads blown off. You know, the brain all over the place. Uh, you know so that sent shivers down our spines and all that.

But my dad was ahead of me and I was walking behind, and so we got to the police station and there was a huge crowd, and they said every young person you know? Every young man and woman come to the police station.

So, we got to the police station and I lost sight of my dad and it was a huge crowd, a really, really huge crowd. And then, at the police station they would come around and they would say do you know Mr. X, Mr. B, do you know Dr. this, or Dr. that, and do you know his house? If you take us to his house, you'll be free. You know, they had names they wanted to kill, names of people they wanted to kill in other words, you know, and all that. So then, you know, and once in a while they pick someone from the crowd and they go to the back of the house and you hear gunshots, bum-bum-bum-bum, and the crowd would wail—oh, they've killed Mr. X, oh they've shot Mr. B or something, you know? And so on. But I didn't see my dad at all at that time but I was there. Now um, until about 5 p.m., until about 5 p.m. And at 5 p.m. they said okay, you folks can go. So I walked back to Cable Point and um, many people came from uptown, you know, they went uptown. But, to go back a little bit-- - anyway, so um, but I was told when I got back home, must be closer to 6:00, I was told that apparently my dad had come home with some officer, because the night before they had come in you know he had taken the battery out of his car. You know? Just in case they came and wanted to steal the car. You know, my dad had come home with an officer, he brought a White Horse whisky and attended him, it must have been one of his students at the teacher's college from earlier in his career—you know, one of his former students who was now in the military. So when they saw him leave the crowd, when they saw him leave with this officer they thought oh that is it. Mr. Okafor is free, that he's found a friend, somebody that he knows. And all that, so then we were entertained, we had some brandy—whiskey—that is, White Horse, and um, my grandmother said the guy took the rest of what was left in the bottle—there was quite a lot in the bottle. So my father took the battery back in the car and drove them away. And well, I didn't see all of this happen, but my mum and my grandmum saw this. But I was the last who saw him he was still alive. That was the last my dad was still alive. Because, again, when we came back. When I came back from the crowd, you know, um. We expected that he would come back. He didn't come back. So, about like I said I came back to Cable Point. The rest of the crowd went uptown. We heard, and I think it is in Okocha's narrative as well, we heard that the mammoth crowd that went uptown again was there to dance and to welcome soldiers and all that. To, and to ensure that they didn't do any wreaking havoc on the town. They went and the soldiers came and they said men this way women this way. I don't know if you've heard about—

EB: On yes, yes.

SO: And just lined them up with machine guns and shot them—you know, and killed. You know, and killed them.

EB: So all of this happened on the same day, on October 7th.

SO: There was the mass killing one day and subsequently house-to-house. That is when I escaped.

EB: When you went with your father to the police station that was the same day that the—

SO: That the mass killing took place. That is correct. That is the same day as the mass killing took place. And um, you know, so I had that crowd that went up town, they had that fate. I had one of my in-laws, and old man, Papa Isichei, I don't know if you know him. You know, he is late now. He is the father of my uncle's wife. So, my in-laws, I mean he was in that crowd but corpses fell on him so they thought he was dead. You know, that is how some people got. There were so many people, you know, so many people in the crowd that were shot and people fell on them, corpses, bodies fell on them, but he wasn't hit. But corpses fell on him. So he remained

there until the middle of the night when the soldiers had disappeared and he crawled out. Thus far and was safe. And so what—that is where the mass killing took place. It didn't take place on the Cable Point. And all that. But all night we were waiting for my dad to come back again. We were—it's like *déjà vu* all over again like what happened when we were waiting for him to come back from Benin.

So we um, again, at the sound of any car we are thinking it is him coming back. Pull the blind a little bit and it wasn't him, maybe a military jeep or something. Okay, on and on til morning and in the morning he didn't show up. So, in the morning my maternal grandmother—my paternal grandmother—asked my mum to go and find out. And my mom walked like two kilometers down and saw his body. I don't know if you know Udobe's house, if you mention this I'm taking you through all of it. I don't know if you know Udobe's house, you know how Adobe, that is where they found my father's body. You know, and um, then he was, my mom and his mother dug a shallow grave and put it there. We didn't take the body out I'm sure my brothers must have told you, that you talked with them, because they are now buried at my brother's house. We then exhumed it, we did the traditional burial ceremonies. Then we took the body from that and this is like '86. And we buried it at our brother's.

EB: So he was buried just there where he died?

SO: Oh yes, he was there, you see, at that point it was not safe for males. I couldn't help anybody I couldn't come out because that morning when we discovered my dad's body, that my dad was dead, killed, you know um, again soldiers were all over the place. In the morning, as we woke up. And my mum had just come back, helped on both sides, so we knew tragedy had struck. You know, and of course my sisters were wailing and all that. But my dad's mum was very philosophical and very stoic in her reaction to the whole episode, you know. Very strong. You know, very strong and all that. And she held her nerves. But my sisters, my little ones, were hysterical. Absolutely hysterical. And we were trying to contain them and suddenly this soldier, huge guy, and another one just burst in from the neighboring compound. Because they had shot somebody there. I think I put that in my narrative. They had shot somebody there and asked some guys to go dump him in the river because our house is not far from the river Niger. And they crashed into our compound and I had my little sister on my shoulder, trying to console her. And he said you, you know, follow me to the river. You know, and of course we forgot my dad is dead momentarily, and everybody started begging—"oh please"—my sister grabbed him on the floor by his feet. He was drinking his Star beer, half empty, I don't know if you've seen the Star bottle here, where he was drinking from. I was begging everybody was begging him please spare him we just lost our dad, and so on. I think he was incensed by the begging, he threw away the bottle of beer, you know, and then cocked the gun. At that point I don't know what courage came to me. I put by sister down, and I say "okay, let's go." You know, let's go to Niger. He wanted to shoot me there so he wouldn't have the problem of somebody carrying my body because there was nobody around. Anyway, so I don't know what my mum told him in Hausa, because my mom, you know, spoke Hausa pretty well. And but I, you know, so he gave up. You know, and then he was given I don't know 30 pounds or something like that. I don't know, some money. Either 30 or 60 pounds, and he did advise that I should not be seen by any soldier. Because, they have, and my little brother then was about 6, and he wanted to make sure that they hide them and that we not be seen—that if his boys saw us we were going to be killed. Shot on sight. That they have instructions, and he said this, to kill any male above 5 years old. Five years and above. That they have that instruction to kill any male 5 years and above. So I went into the ceiling. That is where I stayed for two weeks. Again all of that is in the narrative I gave you. You

know I went to the ceiling for two weeks. You know, because there were house killings for two weeks. You know, house to house killing, it is like mopping up operation. That is what they were doing and all. They were going from house to house. You know, and killing people, shooting into the ceilings and, that didn't happen at our house. But I wouldn't take chances. So I stayed at the wall and between the um, what do you call this thing? You know, thin planks they use for the ceiling. You know, um, tie rod. Yes, between the tie rod and the wall. Between the tie rod and the wall there were gaps, you know so I was peeping to see their location and know how to position myself. Just in case they fired up there. But they did not shoot into our ceiling so you know I was there for two weeks. We pottied there and wash cloth and they brought water for me to clean up and all that. They brought food that is where I ate. They took some cushions and put them on the rod so that was my bed. You know, I was there for two weeks and then the killing stopped. Or died down because, you know, it happened periodically—each time they tried to go to the east a similar group would come to town and take it out on the people. Because after I had left Asaba even my grandmother, everybody, were brought into St. Patrick's college. You know I don't know if you were told that story you know where they tried to go to Onitsha and then Asaba reverses, and they would come back to town and take it out on the townfolk and all that. So I was there for two weeks, you know, I was in the ceiling for two weeks.

FO: Can I ask you, a , I'm sorry, a question—

SO: Yes.

FO: Going back to the 7th, when you and your father went to the police station and your father left...

SO: Disappeared, yes.

FO: Right—what happened to you at the police station?

SO: No, we didn't—yeah, go ahead.

FO: How did you get from the police station to—

SO: Back home.

FO: Back home.

SO: Yeah.

FO: How were you—how were you spared there?

SO: No, no, no. You see, I was a young fellow. I mean I was 20 when I came in here. I say I'm a graduate. So I was 20 I was like 20+ after my first year. And um, you know, they were looking for big civil servants partly because Asaba—Asaba as you may have been told—Asaba was exposed to westernization pretty early. I don't know if you've been told that.

EB: We have.

SO: Pretty early. So in the regional government then we had permanent secretaries, you know, we had many medical doctors and all that. So, that time in the crowd when they said show me Dr. this, Mr. this, Mr. that, these are top names of Asaba folks. So...

EB: Do you remember any of the specific names they were asking?

SO: Sorry, if I may conclude this one...

EB: Sorry, yes.

SO: So if we were there I really wasn't a target I was a student, but what they did was, because you know because we were wearing shoes, I'm from a middle-class home so because you were wearing shoes on your feet they say oh you are wearing shoes you are a soldier. You know, they look at your feet you know. If you wear shoes your feet show it. You know, they say if you are wearing shoes you must be a soldier, you know, you are wearing boots. So what we then did um, we were, we would wear flip-flops we would wear. And we would kick the dust so your feet are dirty. And all that. So they wouldn't say you must have been wearing boots a lot that is why your feet are the way your feet are. You know? And so I really wasn't a target. People like us we weren't targets in the crowd. They were looking for known Asaba names. Like I remember one, they were asking for the Ofilis. They were top-notch Asabans, I remember that vividly, show us Ofili's house. I cannot remember the name but he was second to the government, he was the top—he was the top government secretary there. You know, big top civil servants they were asking for. So they dispersed and I walked back to town. Walked back to cable point to my home. So I wasn't a target really in terms of fishing me out of the crowd. But if someone saw your feet, they would say your feet are like this because you wear boots. You've been in the bush for two weeks or something, you're wearing boots. They would say they are bush soldiers and then they would kill you and it would count. So I hoped that answers your question.

EB: Did you see a lot of people being shot outside the police station?

SO: No, no. They were still in the back. I wish we were in Asaba because that building is still there. It was a bit run-down now. But I remember vividly, every time I pass it on the way home I look at that place. And I was wondering how it has come with the blood, but the road has been expanded so it goes through the grounds of the police station. But I still remember the blood, you know? If they come and pick somebody they would take them to the back of the building. And but you hear the crack of the gun and people would wail, they would say oh they've killed Mr. Whatever, they've killed Mr. B, they've killed Mr. X, they've killed Mr. Y or something.

EB: Did you get a sense of when they were asking for names—were they officers? Were they reading names or did they just know the names?

SO: They knew the names they were looking for. I don't think they had any paper. But they were told, you know, who. But I believe that part of it is envy because you have to be happy that the Asaba people are in key positions. But these are people in the Midwest who have key positions, you know permanent secretaries, medical doctors, senior medical officers, and so on. Chief medical officers and so on. But you hear—you know I hear the names. Um, who knows Ofili's house—if you show us you will be free. And who knows Asinge's house, if you show us you will be free. You know, and all that—so um...

EB: So you have no way of knowing how your father died.

SO: No, I mean he was shot in the chest or something but you know, he was shot in the chest—very close range. So we don't know at what point he parted with the car. Or was he was the car taken somewhere in the barracks area and he was killed there or was the car taken somewhere and he was driven to that point and pushed out of the car and shot? We don't know. We didn't know, we saw the body with bullet wounds. I didn't see the body. You know to go out and clean the body it was my mother and my dad's mum who cleaned the body up and just buried him in a very shallow grave.

EB: But these men that he went away with in the car were people he had known previously?

SO: That's right --he probably knew them. Like I said there was a suspicion that one of them was a former student of his. When he was teaching, when he was a tutor in the teacher's college. In Abraka, what is now Delta State University. We lived there for six years so I remember that. That particular officer was a student in that school where my dad was teaching. So it is said that he knew my father so he thought that car was safe and free, he has found somebody he knows, and on and on. And they came to the house with the White Horse—I remember—with the White Horse brand whiskey, you know? And all that and they took away the leftover. And put him back in the car and drove him off and that was it. And later they recovered the car from an officer, all the way in Lagos. Because there was widespread looting. That time they were . And then when I was walking back to the house you see trailers carrying radiograms. At that time you didn't have electronic things, radio things. I don't know if you remember radiograms.

EB: Yes, yes.

SO: You know, radiograms, electric cookers, refrigerators, they were looting all the trailers. You know of course they stole cars, they stole dismantled car engines. You know, that they put onto the thing. Beds, mattresses, you know they were looting trailers so.

EB: With all this looting that was happening—do you think, I mean you probably couldn't tell exactly but do you think was it soldiers doing this kind of on their own or were they ordered...

SO: Soldiers, but that is the point. That is the point. Clearly, I don't think a soldier will take a refrigerator or a gas cooker or a radiogram—it must be from higher up. And then maybe the crumbs will go down to the other ranks. Clearly I think it was coordinated from the top. And the top was fully complicit. Because the car, my father's car which we recovered in Lagos was an officer, he was an officer who eventually became a governor. I'm told, you know, I didn't try to confirm this. He became a military governor or something.

EB: How did you find it again?

SO: You know, that is an interesting story like I said my father had just changed his car from what was a Peugeot 403 to a 404, that was the latest model of Peugeot, a French car. A new brand that had just come out. And it was this color, really—it was an army green color. You know, that was part of it. And my little brother took a pin and scratched his name on the fender. You know, my father's name is B.N. Okafor, and so he scratched his name B.N.O. And he got a beating for it—for defacing the new car. He got some spanking. For you know scratching a new car with you know—and all that. You know that is how we found it. That is how we

found it. They had changed the color of course, and they had put a new number—an army number. And they went there and saw it, what this little boy had scribbled. They saw my dad's name. So that is how we got the car. We got it back eventually, you know. They didn't argue about it they knew exactly what happened. They knew even though there was an army number and an army color, and so on.

EB: Now after the two weeks that you spent—

SO: In the ceiling?

EB: In the ceiling, yes, what happened after that?

SO: After that, after the ceiling—waiting for—the killings had died down. When the house-to-house had calmed down. The Red Cross arranged for me to come back to school. I had lost a term here, you know, we were running terms then. Terms, not semesters like we have now. So the Red Cross arranged for me to come to Ibadan, but it was a two-stage trip. First of all to get out of Asaba to Benin. Which is easy, I went to Benin and I stayed in the house of the vicar in charge of St. Matthew's Anglican church. I remember that. I stayed there, but it was difficult to make the arrangements for the Benin-Ibadan trip. You know, so I was there for another 10 days or more. You know, 10 days or more in the vicar's house, you know guest room or something. So again they arranged a trip and got back to Ibadan—I had lost a term. I had lost then and my professors were saying—“Look, you can't cope you're not going to pass.” I said—“look, but I have no choice, I just pay the fees and I had better...” So I struggled. You know? And I managed to pass and go on to my final year after that and you know. But I remember that because I was used to getting my money every month.

You would go to the post office and get your monthly allowance. And all that—but I mean everything was cut off and so I said you know, since the fees are in there I had better use them up. And all the while I'm thinking of how to finance my final year in the university and so on. And so I um, I go back to Ibadan and I managed but I got to Christmas break and I had to write all my professors if they would allow me to stay with them so that I could read over the Christmas period and try to catch up a little bit. They said look it is too much work, and I said look I have no choice I just have to.

EB: How did your mother manage after your father was killed? She had other children did she have to...

SO: Well, yes. I'm from a polygamous family. You know, but um my father, my mother managed she did okay. But there was so much destruction there. You know, people didn't get their jobs back quickly and settle down. You know. But somehow they just carried on and managed. And you know my mother's junior brother who is my maternal uncle, got his job back and was you know—spreading the resources very thin. You know, and managed and so on. So um, that is what happened so I finished my studies and decided to work for at least a year before pursuing my—because my education had no interruption right from primary school to secondary school to high school to my HSC to university. But I decided to work for a year because my elder brother, the one you saw in Asaba, he was caught up in Biafra he was working for Shell at that time. So there was nobody around on this side so I had to work for a year, you know, to help the family. You know, so I was sending money to my mother, paying school fees for the younger ones, you know, sending money to my—because my father's junior brother was also killed, he was a police officer. I was sending money to the wife to support her and so on.

So when my brother, when the war ended in 70' and my brother got back his job, you know, then I came back to school.

EB: You said, what—what was your father's full name?

SO: Ben—Benedict Nna Okafor. B. N. Okafor. Later on, I don't know, in some sense of nationalism he threw away the Benedict. So he would be called N. Okafor instead of Ben Okafor. He forgot about Ben but all along he was B. N. Okafor. Benedict N. Okafor.

EB: And you said his brother was also killed after?

SO: Yes, yes. A police officer.

EB: In the same...

SO: Well again we didn't see the body of that one so how could we know. You know I mean he was not around so he was killed.

EB: But he was killed in Asaba.

SO: Yes, in Asaba. They were all in Asaba.

EB: What was his name?

SO: Chuemeka Okafor. Chuemeka Okafor.

EB: Did you lose any others from your family that you know of?

SO: Of course, yes. We lost one Sunday Okafor. The same Okafor family. There is hardly anybody that didn't lose somebody in Asaba. There was hardly anybody who didn't lose somebody. Your friends, your relations, and so on.

EB: What, as it were moving toward the long-term effects, what do you think was the impact on the town of Asaba from this event. What do you think was, what do you think happened.

SO: Well, put it this way, I think the way the way Asaba rebounded after this tragedy is amazing really and really remarkable and confounding to some I would say to some degree. But I trace it back to the fact that we had education, we had jobs, we had certificates, we are not traders. So we are not traders and all that so once you have your certificate and all that the dust settles and you come out and get your job. And I think that is what helped Asaba. You have civil servants, medical doctors, economists and all that. So you know, we are not like traders and if they burned your business down you are gone—no, we are mostly safe. So we bounced back we are mostly civil servants it is only now that people like him [points to Ify Uriah] people are going into business. Otherwise previously in Asaba you have a civil servant or UAC [United Africa Company], or in a bank, you know, paid employment. And that is why Asaba has this tradition of people going back home after retirement. That is a very strong tradition in my place upon retirement. And I was wondering why and one of my colleagues here at the university suggested a reason for that I found very plausible. We are not businessmen, we don't have

investment in Lagos and all that. So you want to be a civil servant in Lagos your mission is to have your house and train your children at home. And as soon as you retire you head home.

You don't have property in Lagos, business in Lagos, or something in Lagos to keep you back or Port Harcourt, or Kano, or whatever. So that is why it built up because we were mostly in paid employment, mostly. Now that is changing, yes.

EB: Thinking sort of as an academic, what do you think was the significance or the importance of the Asaba massacres for the development of the war and the outcome. What—do you think it had any role in where things went from there?

SO: No, probably not. And, like I said in that little write-up but I don't know if I said that, and you know the Nigerian government and the military were lucky that we didn't have global television at that time. You know, so they didn't see, the atrocities were not beamed to the world because that could have changed the course of that war. It could have changed the outcome of that war. I have no doubt about that. You know, I mean they may have atrocities elsewhere but if they saw what happened—the global community—saw what happened in Asaba, the sympathy would have swung on the other side, to the other side really. And I have no doubt in my mind that that would have in all probability affected the outcome of that war. You know and all that because I mean the scale of killing was unimaginable, the scale of the kind of inhumanity you know that was, that one witnessed. You know, it would have pricked the conscience of the global community, of the international community. It would. And like I said that would definitely have affected the outcome of the war. But also more important—but it is important that you are doing this kind of thing. And at least different people are writing their own accounts of what happened, you know. And my own narrative is what I saw. You know, because I was part of it but I couldn't have seen everything. You know, so it was different. So by the time you hear from different people then you have a more complete picture of what happened. Because, um, I think this kind of work is important for the proper interpretation of what happened in Asaba. Talking about national unity talking about reconciliation and all that. You cannot reconcile when these wounds are still festering. They are still festering. And like I said if not for you folks doing this now I said upon retirement I will open that thing up. When I'm retired and I don't have too many commitments elsewhere then I'll have more time. Because I mean the magnitude of the atrocity was so much that you don't just throw it under the carpet. I mean you just don't sweep it under the carpet. The world has to know what happens. Nigeria needs to know what happened. I don't know whether many Nigerians are fully cognizant of what happened, I mean the scale of it. Because Asaba is a small community. It is big now, much bigger now since. So when you kill 1,000-2,000 people that killed a huge amount. It is huge.

EB: That is a huge percentage of the—

SO: Of course, yes. That is a huge amount you know and so on. It is not just the absolute numbers but the proportion. And you know the proportion—how big is the community? How many of them did you massacre? Did you slaughter? And all that.

EB: What do you think—what is your estimation of what the—of the size of the community back then?

SO: It must have been something like 20-odd thousand. 20+ thousand. When you kill 2 to 3,000, that's a lot. That is an awful lot you know?

EB: And you think as many as 2-3 thousand did die?

SO: I'm very sure of that. I'm very sure, yes. Because when I saw the list in Okocha [Okocha's book], the list is incomplete because my father's name is not there. It's not there. And I said it in my write-up, clearly it is an incomplete list. And you don't blame him anyway because you have to do this kind of work you know if you really want to compile a comprehensive list of who and who were killed. So many people I know who died. Even in my family the 3 people who died were not there on that list. You know? One of our neighbors was killed at Cable Point, a very painful case, the eldest child of the parents, just got back from England. When to read law there just put all they had together. Sent him to read law just came back. And started a very you know, lucrative practice in Benin, and he was killed in Asaba. You know.

EB: And what was his name?

SO: Richard Omoko. Barrister Richard Omoko. O-m-o-k-o. We were neighbors in Cable Point. We were related, too. We were from the same part of Umuagi, Asaba itself. Very painful because the only child of the parents. And they put all they had together, sent him to England for a law degree, he came back to start his practice—hadn't gotten married, and he was killed. But fortunately I will say now, he had put—he had put a girl in the family way. Before this happened. So that is what the parents held onto after he had passed on. But the parents are late now. But I remember each time I went to them I would see Richard's mother strapped with that baby at the back.

Because that was all they had. Only child, only grandchild. I don't know where the girl is now but both parents are gone. You know, and so on. So I think this kind of work is good to know exactly what happened, you know, hearing from those who had experience there, as much as possible—so we can have a proper interpretation of what happened. Because official accounts gloss over a lot of things. They give the impression oh that federal troops—that is why I put "liberate" in quotes in my title—that they came to liberate Asaba. You know, and all that. So I think it is very useful from that point of view.

EB: Well thank you.

SO: And also it tells us a lot about the character of Nigerian military. And the character of Nigerian leadership. You know, at that time, which I suppose is spilling over into now, you know. Because some people that current narratives about Nigeria regard as heroes are in my vision villains.

EB: This would include...

SO: I don't know that I want to mention names. But let me say this. Murtala Mohammed was in charge of the command there. You know, and so on. Bagabangida was there. Bagabangida married a daughter of somebody who was killed in Asaba. Oh who else was there—Okogwu, you know the father-in-law, the father-in-law was killed by soldiers. So Bagabangida was there, Mohammed was in charge of the operation. And they said, the man who spared me, he said they had instructions from the top to kill every male five years and above. So you know that means they must be complacent in the whole thing. In my view—it is very important that these

things are known. And now they are heroes. But to me and to some of us in Asaba they are villains of the highest order. In my view.

EB: Do you have any more questions?

FO: Um, could you talk a little more about kind of your historical perspective on these events? Your perspective on what happened and how this can be a lesson—or, what lessons can we draw from this experience? How can this be useful? Um, to know more about. I mean in addition to reconstructing the record and expounding the record. Is there something that we can learn from this experience?

SO: Well, that is a probably—I think this question requires a lot more thought. I really haven't given thought to this dimension. Um...of the issue. And um...

FO: It is an open-ended question.

SO: Yes, I know. You know, maybe if I have more time to reflect I can tell you via email but immediately—

EB: Yes, of course.

SO: I have your email and your cards. But immediately where he's talking lessons I don't know whether—there clearly are historical lessons you can learn from this and um...[pause] – but again one has to situate whatever lessons one derives from this one has to situate it within the character of the Nigerian state. We are a multi-national state, okay? Multinationalist. Different ethnicities, different religious groups, and all that. So these cleavages, these cleavages are still there. Okay, you know. And Nigeria as a country has carried on as a part of them. But I think the coup of 66' brought it to the fore, because of the apparent one-sidedness of the killings. Which I'm sure you are aware of. That northern leaders were killed and apparently Igbo leaders were spared. Osadebay from Asaba leaders were not killed and Zik from the east was not killed and Okbara was not killed, and so on. You know, so we lived with these cleavages up to that point and that, you know that coup brought things to the fore. And, but again, the original design of the coup failed. Which I'm sure you are aware of, with Nzeogwu. Those who were supposed to eliminate all of the leadership spared the ones who were not killed, okay? But at that point the coup had been taken over by the command, by the bosses in Lagos. The high command in Lagos and so on.

You know, but I didn't know whether, like I said this killing, this pattern of killing brought the cleavages to the fore and of course the north reacted with that pogrom and they reacted with that vengeance to fight the war. So quite frankly, you know, the war was a war of vengeance in spite of whatever official interpretation given to it. To keep Nigeria one y force. You know, and so on. But clearly they were taking vengeance. And I had an interview like this who was a General in Asaba during the war. He wasn't a general then he was a Captain—a Major? A Captain or something. But I got an interview with him about four or five weeks ago. He was doing a book. It was his memoirs and so on. And so um, and he said that clearly most of the northern elements in military saw this as a vengeance. That Igbos killed them first and so they had to kill Igbos. Of course in the case of the Midwest, Midwest that became Bendel state and then then now Delta and Edo states. You know, the invasion of the Midwest by Biafra was facilitated by military officers of Igbo extraction, I'm sure you are aware of that. And unfortunately every prominent Igbo person, prominent western Igbo person, whether in military or in

the civil service or whatever says if they ask you where you're from you say from Asaba. Because there is no other town. Because even then they'll ask for details and say oh where exactly. You say oh I'm from Ogwashi, I'm from Ibusa .. So they came in, all of the officers that facilitated the invasion, were Asaba officers. You know, from Asaba. They were not, Nwankwo, Nwawo, they were not Asaba people at all. In fact, a military career was an anathema in our place. I don't know if you were told that. I mean the curse, the curse you threw at somebody was to say, with apologies [to researchers], that the soldier would screw your mom. He would report you to the highest of the authorities. It was like an insult of grievous order. I mean so that shows you how Asaba would place the military. So it wasn't a good thing but the pride of Asaba was in Asaba families where you were—oh, you were the mother of a lawyer. You're the mother of an engineer. You're the mother of a doctor. You know, you're the mother of a banker. You know, that's, that's the pride and they feel very arrogant about that. But say soldier and...and so on. So all of those guys were not Asaba folks. You know, and the historical lesson. Quite frankly I don't know what the historical lesson is. We are a plural, very plural. But the divisions are still there. You know, and I don't know quite frankly if we have learned from that episode. In the light of what is happening now which you are aware of. Boko haram, post-election violence. And on and on. I don't really know if any lessons have been learned. Because again, these things didn't happen at a grass-roots level. You know, they just don't erupt from the ground. People use them. So like I said the officers they said kill people—males five and above. I mean I tell people you go to the motorpark, you go to the marketplace, the Yoruba man, the Igbo man, the Hausa man they relate very well. You know? But then some leader will come and recruit them. And they start fighting each other. And I think that is what happened back then, because the leaders of the army were strong northern men. So it was just vengeance. You know, go to Igboland and just deal with this force. You know it is a vengeance mission and so on. And so I think the things that happen—because you see the things that are happening in Jos, you know joint taskforce and the dubious role of the military. Because you know the militaristic side, the military is behind some of the killings that are taking place. You know, and so on and so forth.

EB: One, I mean one argument might be—and we have heard this occasionally that if you start telling the story of Asaba the effect of that will be to inflame ethnic tension. Do you believe that?

SO: I don't believe in that. No, no. It is like truth commission that is about Africa. And some of us need that kind of truth commission. I hope they'll do that in Asaba or in some communities. It is good, you know, it is good to open up the wounds once and for all. Okay? Yeah. You don't cover up and think it is going to—no. No, it's not. No I don't think it is going to inflame passions. I'm more hurt that—that book where I wrote, that chapter was taken out of, Gowon was at that conference at the university at our conference center.

And again the official narrative, you know glossy picture, wonderful military. And so on and so forth. And that is more hurtful—you know—than admitting what happened, that you butchered our people, that you massacred our people. Admit it. Admit it, you know? And be sorry about it. You know and so on. I don't think it is going to inflame passions. Yeah, it's, when you hide it—there are mass graves there—when you don't recognize mass graves, that should be a memorial for those things. You know. And all that, you know, and I think people hurt more when they realize that these things are there and people think they don't exist that they think this didn't happen. Because that is basically what the official narrative is doing. You know, trying to cover up and say there is no big deal and so on. I think that is more hurtful than opening it up now you know and people, um, and

people fully acknowledging the full scale of what happened. People knowing the scale of what happened. You know and so on, so.

EB: Well thank you. You—

FO: It's good.

EB: Yes. Thank you very much.

SO: Yeah, thanks. I'm happy about this and um, it's really. In another year or two I'll be back home in Asaba. I hope you'll come back. I can, you know, I can—we can, I can reenact my personal experience of what happened.

EB: Yeah, I would like to see that.

SO: We'll start from my house, I can tell you the next neighbor's house, where they killed a man and dumped him in the river and walked across into my compound and wanted to shoot me and all that. And show you where my mom was walking from where she was being held and we knew that my dad must have been dead. You know, and take you through the path. How we walked from my house to the police station and the building where, you know, we were massed.

FO: The police station is the one right by the courts, right?

SO: That is correct, right.

FO: So it is not far from the Grand Hotel.

SO: No, it's not. It is not at all. There is just a road between it and the Grand Hotel, really. But the building in front of which they amassed us is the front building, past the Grand Hotel, past the court, but there is still the building. I see it passing by I look at it. But now, you know, because the road has been dualized, not a dual carriage, it was just a two-lane road at that time, it is even in the grounds of the police quarters. I mean because it looks small now when I'm looking at it where could they have taken that mammoth car, but um—

EB: It is one of the few buildings that is still there from the civil war.

SO: I know it well it is still there. Still it is there. Next time if you come, next time I'll probably be back home.

EB: Well, we're probably going to be coming back in the spring sometime, March or April, because what we're doing is um—

SO: Yeah, I will be in Asaba a lot in that time.

EB: Well maybe we'll—

SO: I'll be in Asaba a lot at that time. So actually, I can reenact and tell you what happened. But I want—they showed you the mass graves?

EB: Oh yes.

SO: That is what I want, yes.

EB: We've seen a lot of the places where things happened and we're.

FO: We actually went and got the GPS coordinates of—

SO: Yes, and I will show you the house of this lawyer, the parent's house, who was killed, and all that. The house, the neighbor's house, and all that. You know, who.

EB: Yeah.

SO: I'll show you the spot where we saw the two white garment church people with their heads blown off lying flat on their backs. You know? One would have a bell in their hand. The other one with a lantern. It was still burning that morning when we were trekking up, you know? And all that.

FO: But we'll be back. This is our third trip.

SO: Yeah that's right. He told me last year. I just had commitments I was away to Ghana. And a few things I just couldn't make it.

EB: Should we turn it off?

SO: I was supposed to have come to Lagos but it just was not possible. So I was sending that chapter.

EB: Yes, it was very good to read and I said we cited that in the article.