

Celestina Isichei-Isamah

Asaba Memorial Project

I: interviewer (Elizabeth Bird)

P: participant (Celestina Isichei-Isamah)

Date: October 10, 2014, Wallington, near London, U.K.

P: I am Celestina Isamah, nee Isichei , I am from Asaba. Married to a very kind nice man named Peter Isamah.

I: Thank you, and today is October the 10th, 2014. Okay, and today we really just want to have a conversation to understand what you remember. The first thing I want to mention to you as I just said was the, um, when we were in Oxford yesterday, doing some research, we had heard before, a long time before, that somebody from Asaba had written a letter to that person's brother in Oxford just a few days after the event. And we didn't know who it was and we wanted to track it down. So we actually um, found in the archives in Oxford, a copy of a letter which was from Celestina. So I wanted to show you this and see if you recognized it.

P: Oh my god, yes I wrote it in 1967 to my brother. A priest studying in Oxford then. I wrote it to him. An airmail paper.

I: Do you remember if you typed it or if you handwrote it?

P: No it was airmail, called airmail. A blue letter, airmail. And you write it and then seal it. Right, it was very difficult at that time, because the soldiers would censor anything written sent out from that part of Nigeria. But I was lucky then, we hadn't gotten married, my husband and I, but then he was, my

I: Fiance?

P: My fiancé. And I wanted to get the message down to my brother, Patrick.

I: So how did you get the letter through?

P: I wrote the letter because, with heavy heart, I told him that I really want to get in touch with my brother Patrick. I couldn't remember the address of my other siblings who were abroad. So he said, he was the postmaster of this town, so he said I should write the letter and he would find a way of posting it. If you posted any letter in Ogwashi-Ukwu, the soldiers would censor it. So he managed to give it to a friend, a soldier friend who was traveling to Lagos, and that was where he posted the letter.

P: So you managed to fish out this letter.

I: Well this is, I think somebody typed it up. (Could you have her read it?) I don't know if you would, that might be very difficult...could you read it aloud?

P: I would like to read it, yes.

I: Somebody had it typewritten and they gave it to an Oxford professor called Marjorie Perham, a woman who was well known in Africa. She then wrote a letter to the Times of London, which was published a few days after

that and she described what you had said in your letter. She didn't name you, she just said that this was happening in Asaba. So it was the first time, really the first time anybody outside Nigeria knew what was happening. So your letter was very important. Unfortunately then the government denied it, but your letter was actually the first-hand eye witness account that came out of the country, so it was...

(participant reads letter to herself in silence)

I: Do you remember it?

P: Yeah, yes. It's not too far from what I wrote in my book.

I: Could you read it?

P: Yes, I can, I can read it.

(participant reads letter out loud)

I: Thank you. Are you ready to talk a little more?

P: Yes.

I: Perhaps you would give us a little more background information about that time. How old were you at the time?

P: 18 or 19.

I: And at that time you were engaged to be married?

P: Yes, we were engaged to be married. I was still at college, and we were to have our wedding after I had finished my training. But, if you remember in my book, I talked about what happened, how I couldn't complete my education, but he helped, my husband Peter helped me, with his cousin and I had to continue, still while the war was still raging, but in a much quieter place, Ibusa, and there I managed to complete my education. Took the exam, and luckily for me, made it.

I: So did you go back to live in Asaba or did you come to, when did you come to Britain?

P: I didn't go back to live in Asaba because when I finished my training, I was posted luckily I was posted to teach near in Ogwashi-Ukwu. So all I did was travel home to visit my mother. And then as things improved, my sister, all of my siblings who were living in Germany then, came home. And we talked about it, and just like I have tears in my eyes now, she thought I had had enough and said that she was going to help us to leave this scene, at least get my husband to study in Germany. So that's how he traveled to Germany, and when we had settled my sister had the four siblings studying in Germany then. Brother Eric, sister Veronica who is a medical doctor, sister Maria, and brother Peter who is a professor who now lives in New Zealand with his wife. So they decided I had enough, I should come out to Germany. So my husband applied to read engineering, so he left and after a year I joined him. In Germany I read German language at the University of Munich, which I included in my book. And after a while I planned to become an interpreter, a bilingual secretary, German-English. So my brother the priest had left and was studying, doing some research here in London, so he told me that German is not a popular language in Nigeria, it is not going to be useful to me, so instead I should do a bilingual secretarial course, so I

traveled down to gain admission, here in London, where he also advised that since I'm married, being a priest he didn't want us to be separated, so he said my husband should come down and join me here too. So he gained admission here and he started too. It was a rough time, studying and working, studying and working and then we finished, that's how we came to Britain. And after I had qualified as a bilingual secretary, continued to work, and then in fact my brother is my mentor, the priest, then he also suggested a bilingual secretary course, as a secretary I may not find something in means of livelihood. So since my initial training was a teacher, I should go back to university and do a degree course. So, again, I applied to the university and I was given a place, and I read English there. And the humanities. So, that's the short story of my life. And then when we finished we went back to Nigeria. I got employed somewhere, I was teaching in Lagos and after a while, we were looking into a place called Jos, in Plateau State, and I did my Masters there and registered to do my PhD. And then there was this coup again, and I thought, oh no, not another war, I think I've had enough. So that's how we came back to Britain, and my husband got admission to further his education, and I decided I'll also come out of this place called Nigeria. I'd had enough of ups and downs.

I: To go back to your family, and I know you've written about this in your book, but I wanted to kind of go on the record in talking about your family in Asaba at the time. You were living there with your, could you mention the names of the family members and...

P: My mother, my father, my younger brother Osi, my brother's wife. You see, it was just me, my mother and my father. I was at college, a boarding school. My brother Osi was at college, too. My brother Emma, was a register of a high court somewhere else, in another town. So when the disturbances started, and the killing started, people had to come back. It was just mom and dad who were in Asaba, so we all started running home.

I: So where were you in college at the time?

P: I was at Ubiaja, which I wrote in my book. I wrote in the beginning how we were asked to welcome the commander.

I: And Osi was at SPC [St. Patrick's College].

P: He was at SPC doing his A-levels, then.

I: Your father's name was...

P: Francis.

I: And your mother?

P: My mother's name was Flora.

I: We talked in Asaba to Martina Osaji...

P: Yes, Martina is my cousin. She was quite young when these things happened. And they ran across to Onitsha. They were lucky to run across to Onitsha. The younger sister, who is Apollonia, she may be able to give more first hand information. She now lives in Houston, in the U.S.A. And one of the priests, a priest friend of my brother, was at Issele-Uku Parish. So he took her, or she ran to him, or he came to Asaba and took her. I think she might have found her way to Issele-Uku, that's where she was.

I: So Leo Isichei was a brother to your father.

P: A cousin to my father. They share the same grandfather.

I: If we go back to, and again, I know you've written this in your book but we'd like to have it on tape. If you can go back and start telling the story of when the troops first came in, and then what happened after that.

P: You mean at Asaba?

I: At Asaba, yes.

P: When I came down from Ubiaja, it was something I had never experienced. People on cars, walking around, moving around, and I was told they were Biafran soldiers. I've heard a hint of it at Ubiaja. But when I came down to Asaba, I saw this and things were very difficult. I was wondering, what are these people doing here? But from my recollection, they didn't stay long. My father was in sympathy with those people who were killed and those people who were rushing, relocating back to their home town. And many people were coming from everywhere. As the disturbances got stiffer and tougher where they live, everybody decided to relocate to where they thought would be safer. So people were coming from Sapele, Warri, Benin, all these towns, cities that are not Igbo speaking. So that was what happened. And I said in that letter, rumors, you know during the war you hear all sorts of things. And these federal troops are approaching, and they are now at Ore, but the fact is that everybody knew they were approaching Asaba. Asaba being the last town at the Niger. What separates Asaba from Onitsha is the Niger bridge. So when people who have had various experiences from other parts of Nigeria that is people from Asaba, heard the gunshots, knew what was happening, they decided Asaba wasn't safe, and they decided to cross the Niger. But we never had any experience, so we thought Asaba would be safe. My father in particular thought, oh, living in this castle, big walled house, nothing will happen. And I don't know whether he was naïve or he thought that when the soldiers arrive all we have to say is that we support their cause. But they didn't look at that. In hindsight now, I know maybe I should have taken my younger brother and run as far away from Asaba as I could but, it didn't happen.

So this, people ran away, but we stayed, and the bridge was broken. When it dawned on us that we are not safe in my father's compound, to run away, where would we go to? And we didn't know to what extent the soldiers had infiltrated Asaba. And we heard the Niger bridge had been broken. To us, the only place to be safe was to run across the Niger, and then after you cross the Niger, maybe to go further inside. But it was too late for us to do so. So we are stuck.

I: What did your father do, what was his occupation?

P: He retired as an inspector of schools in the East. He came down to Asaba, as I wrote in my book, money was difficult, having all these children abroad. He applied to teach at SPC, so that was what he was doing after his retirement, he got some money from the land and property he owned, and also from teaching at SPC.

I: Can you talk a little bit about what happened to your brother, Osi?

P: Osi and I were very, very close. Like I wrote in my book. Each time I think of him, tears roll down my eyes because he was such a young boy, full of life. We were like friends, not like siblings. He followed me on, I said, Osi, let's run away. He agreed, I will run away. But we run to my grand aunt's hut, this little house, and it had shook. It wasn't as solid as my father's house. And we were afraid the ceiling would cave in, so we had to go

back to my father's house. And when we got there, when I think back now, the sound of the shell bomb was deafening. And there was nothing we could do.

And my father, when one of my uncles, distant uncles came, I didn't even know that one of my great aunts died in another quarter in Asaba, and had been brought down because, according to the custom, she had to be brought down to my place to be buried. And she was brought down, and it was the duty of the young men to dig the grave and bury her. So one of my uncles now came, my father wasn't around. He had gone to meet the head Asagba of Asaba, the ruler of Asaba to inquire about what should be done to make the Nigerian soldiers happy with the Asaba people, because rumor had it that people are being dragged out of their homes and shot at gun point. My father wasn't there, so uncle Beachi now came to our house and said, he wanted to see my Dad. And my mom told him that my dad had gone into town to see the Asagba, not knowing that that the Asagba had also run away from Asaba. So he said that we should hide, because the first rumor we heard was that they were raping young girls, women. And my brother said, Sis, I will not live to see anybody rape you, better hide. So I hide I thought, hiding under my mother's bed will be a safe place for me. There were so many rooms in my father's house, even in the backyard, there were so many places, looking back, we could have hidden, but for some reason I thought, under the bed was the safest place. So when I heard that, oh, they are killing men, because he said, I've come to tell your dad that the soldiers are killing men. My mom said, how could you know they are killing men? Because seeing him, how could they be killing men and you are here. So he said, all those who came to bury Aunt, were all shot dead at the gravesite.

My mom said, what? So I rushed out from under the bed and pulled my brother to under my mother's bed. And Callistus his friend, who couldn't go back to his parents, rushed under the bed. I can still see the picture in front of me, rushed under the bed with my brother Osi. And we thought, oh, they are safe. My brother's wife hid her husband in another room, because we heard men are not safe, only women. So we came out. And then this, showering of bullets started pouring in. Shooting right from the main gate. There are three gates in my father's house. Right from the main gate from the driveway. To see soldiers shooting. I opened one of the blinds and one bullet just almost hit me, flew through the curtain, pierced the curtain, and I had to duck. And it went through. We were in a state of panic. We were besieged. The house was walled around, there was no way to run out, so we thought, oh if we say One Nigeria, if they can hear us, they were leave us. So there we were and these people rushed into the house. Past the lounge, came into the dining section. Oh, God - they were shooting, shooting, and we thought they were going to kill us. You know, panic made my brother and his friend rush out. Oh, they said, you are Biafran soldiers. We pleaded, my brother's wife, my sister in law who could speak fluent Hausa spoke to them in Hausa. I don't know if they were drunk or under the influence of drugs, looking back know, knowing what I know...they forced us, asked us to leave the house. We left the house and Callistus and Osi, they were running in front, and there was this dance group that was organized. Somewhere.

They were asked to dance and welcome the soldiers, because nobody, they said that was what was happening in previous towns they had taken over. So a few women courageously organized themselves into dance group, they were passing through my compound, the front gate, and we thought, oh we'll be safe. I joined the group. My mom and my brother's wife joined. The soldiers dragged my brother out, first of all, Callistus was dragged out and shot here, and he fell. Then Osi tried to mingle amongst the women who were dancing. They pulled him out. A few yards from my father's house, and he was shot down, shot. And I fell on him. I fell, thinking that he will wake up. Shook him, no. I cried and I got up and the next soldier I saw, I said you have to kill me. He hit me with the butt of the gun and a woman came to me and said, my dear daughter, we don't know how long this will last. Let's go. And that's how I found myself joining them. And they took us to this big open place under this big tree. And the heavens opened, and it poured down. After a while the soldiers would come to the crowd and look at somebody and say, you, I saw you at the warfront, come out here. And next you hear, that person was shot. So they think. Young boys, old men, out of, I can't even tell why they did that to our people.

I: Did you get any sense that somebody was ordering that to happen or was it soldiers just acting...

P: I was just confused, I didn't know why they did that, because I had never experienced anything of that nature. And I tell you one thing, when I see wars raging, in other parts of the world now, I just start reliving what I had experienced. And sometimes I just shut my eyes and I turn the TV off, because it's like it's happening again to me. It was a terrible experience.

I: When the women, many women told us about the women being separated from the men and the women were taken. Did you go to the maternity hospital?

P: Yes, my mum, my nephew, my brother's wife. We all went to St. Joseph's Maternity Hospital. Small maternity that was established by the nuns, and there we're all, you know, cramped in. You hardly could move your...and nobody bothered. And we could hear another bout of rain pouring. And maybe, I don't know whether god didn't want us to hear the cries of people who were being shot, and then he sent down the rain to prevent us...and all the people, the men that came with us, I lost my brother Emma there, and many people who were killed. I think after they have finished killing everybody that was left at Ogbe-Osawa, they all decided, we should go to a safer place. They should have left us at St. Joseph's, because at least there was a corrugated iron sheet on the roof, but they took us about two miles from where we were to this, I call it ... I described it clearly in my book. Where you have water, it comes from both sides, all open sides. And there we were. Why were we there? My mother, my poor mother, carried my nephew, was still hoping that my brother and my father would be released and they would come back to look for us, and then they were killed. At that point, we didn't know they had been massacred. It was only when...I was anxious to go and look for them. I was anxious to look for them, but I couldn't go. It was only when my brother the priest, the godfather came to look for his mother at the camp that we felt confident enough to join him with the escort he had, to go out and look for my father.

I: So that was a few days after?

P: A few days after.

I: And you found your father?

P: We didn't find my father, we looked at various camps and didn't find him, but we found the body of my brother. That's where I saw this huge heap of bodies. And I just concluded, my father is dead.

I: And this is after the killing at Ogbe-Osawa.

P: Yes. I concluded my father is dead. I didn't see his body, but I saw that of my brother. So we decided to go back to my mother. And we were thinking, what shall we tell our mother, that we saw another son of hers killed? And we concocted this story that he ran away. And by the time we came in, information had gotten to my mum that someone saw my father at this village called Achalla, so someone had to chase him down. And we went down to Achalla, and met my Dad, who then told us what happened after we had left. How a handful of soldiers had brought out a gun and started killing people. One of them said, oh this will take a long time, let's get a machine gun. And some people were brave enough, run away and they were shot. When I got to the spot, you could see dead bodies, and indication that some people were trying to escape. Told us what happened and he was of the opinion that my brother escaped too, but I had seen with my eyes that my brother didn't escape, and I wanted him to live with that impression at least, that my brother escaped, and I never told my mother, too.

I: How did your mother find out about what had happened?

P: Well, he never came back.

I: Yeah, so she knew...

P: There were so many people that believed their children ran away, and at the end of the war they'll come ...well, one year, two years, three years, four years, you can't see your son, so, he's dead.

I: Did your mother come back to Asaba and start again?

P: My mother, yes my mother came back to Asaba, and there was an incident that I didn't include in my book. When living in Ogwashi-Ukwu, when I had now gotten married, I used to visit Asaba every weekend, to be with my mom, to take some foodstuffs to her, before the time came when my father came from his hiding place to Asaba. One occasion I came home, and there was this sort of uneasy atmosphere in Asaba near my father's house, and I was wondering what is going on? I had to ask, and I was told that the highest female chief in Asaba was murdered. The Omu, Mgboshie Okolie, was murdered. That the soldiers had tried to kill her by shooting her and they couldn't, so they set her house ablaze and they killed her. Omu's house was kind of a sacred place that people ran to, and she was believed to be very powerful. And that was where we were when we came back, my mom, my brother's wife and my nephew, were when we came back from Achala, after going to seek my dad. So we stayed there for about a week before my mum said, we have to get used to living in our father's house. So we came down, it was this eerie feeling, but we decided we will not live in the big building, we will live in the houses at the bag that form the fence. So my brother's wife and I lived in one of the bungalows at the back. And there we were hiding, and my mother very brave stood there, she said she was waiting for Emma, that Emma was going to come back. And the soldiers kept coming back to my father's house, looting. Sometimes they would come into the backyard, and whatever they looking for, and we would hear them, and we dared not come out.

And then one day, who did I hear? It was my husband, my boyfriend then, my fiancé. He came in and the only thing that made me to come out was I heard my mum come out and scream his name, oh Peter, my son! So as soon as I heard Peter, I came out. I threw myself on him and started telling him these stories. He was the one that took us away, myself, my brother's wife and my nephew. Ogwashi-Ukwu was calmer, so he came in company of some solidier friends and they took us back to Ogwashi-Ukwu. But my mother came back to Asaba.

I: Your mother stayed in Asaba?

Yeah, she did, with the hope that Emma would come back.

I: And your father stayed?

P: My father came back after several months.

I: And your mother's house must have just been destroyed, or damaged?

P: It was a house build with solid brick, so it was shattered with bullets, and the windows were shattered, things were looted, things they could lay their hands on, I don't know who looted, whether the townspeople or the soldiers, things all over the place.

I: We saw some pictures of relief agencies that were in Asaba at the time that were providing food for people. Did your mother, how did she survive when she was there living by herself?

P: Yes, I said that in Ogwashi-Ukwu I used to visit home. I used to take her to [*unclear, Catholic Relief?*] an agency that came down to Asaba, that planned to rebuild certain places. But local politics, people kept saying no, it mustn't be built here, so they didn't manage to build whatever they wanted to build. Something, a market to help local women start again, but the market wasn't built. But my mother, she survived because every weekend I would visit from Ogwashi-Ukwu with foodstuffs, to make sure she had something to eat.

I: There were still soldiers there for many, many months.

P: There were soldiers there, everywhere, but Peter would get someone to make sure I was safe. And there was a time when international observers came down to Asaba, from Ogwashi-Ukwu to Asaba to find out whether what they had heard or read was true. So at that point soldiers were drawing in a little bit. But it was terror.

I: So were people able to tell what had happened to those observers? Because they went back and said nothing bad had happened.

P: I don't know if you've heard of Half of the Yellow...

I: Half of a Yellow Sun?

P: Yes. The girl who wrote it, I don't think she was born before the war, it must have been the stories they told her. Nigerian government would not allow that book to get published unless it was censored. And I had an interview with one TV house here, and the lady was asking me, because when I wanted to launch my book I was invited to come and talk about the book. The lady, being a Nigerian TV station, said to me, don't you think you are raking up things that should be allowed to be? It's been more than 40 years ago, you shouldn't have written this book. I said, what I've written is for future generations to know what has happened to my people. If the Jews are still talking about the genocide, my own view, it's also a genocide. The world should hear what happened.

I: A while ago, you had mentioned, and in the letter too, you mention how a lot of women and girls were raped and assaulted. Can you talk a little more about that and how people protected themselves...

P: Yes, I know when we were in this little hut, when we had left St. Joseph, we were escorted down to this little hut about 2 miles from where we were, my mother was very very protective of myself and my brother's wife. The soldier would come and look around and say you, follow me, you know? And when they come I hated them, I can't describe the anger and the hatred I felt for any soldier in that uniform. And I would see what would happen, you come near me. And that's something I didn't mention in my book. When I was in Ogwashi-Uku, I was living in my own one bedroom, and my husband was living in his staff quarters and we were preparing to get married. I had left some of my valuables in his place. One of them was this hot comb, like we use to straighten it. And I had taken it because I wanted a friend of mine to help me set my hair for the wedding. And I had spent the night at this place and in the morning I was going back, there was this checkpoint with soldiers there. And each time they would stop you and harass you, and ask you all sorts of silly questions. This fateful day, I was going, I had this little basket, you could see what was inside the basket. One of the soldiers, there were about three there at the checkpoint. One of the soldiers said to me, come here, so I get to the point, and the soldier says, what is this? Open it, and I said, can't you see, it's a basket. I open it, he saw this iron stretching comb, he says what is this? I said, are you blind, can't you see it's a comb. And he pulled out his gun and I said

are you going to kill me? And I didn't know what happened, I slapped him. He cocked the gun and was going to shoot me. My only savior was a woman who was sitting in front of her house. She screamed and said they should go and call my husband, so he run with a towel around his waist, he run, because he was friendly with the soldiers and said, don't you shoot that gun. So I slapped a soldier. But I had had it, because it this point there was nothing anyone could do to me but to kill me. Two of my brothers have been killed, very close brothers of mine, and life was not ... So people, some women decided to follow the soldiers. Some even gave their daughters to the soldiers. But my mother was very protective of us.

I: Why do you think people made that choice to maybe go with the soldiers?

P: Poverty. Poverty...

(CHANGE OF TAPE)

P: You know, I remember going back to bury my brother, Osi, digging that shallow grave, I was helped out by this soldier who was sympathetic enough to say, were he came from, women don't dig graves. So he helped us to dig deeper, and helped us to carry him from the spot where he was shot, and drop him in the grave.

I: So there were some soldiers who were not killing or...

P: Yes I met one, and the two that escorted my husband to come and look for me. Because Asaba was a no go area. But he braved it, came all the way to look for me.

I: So there were some soldiers who helped him too. So we're talking about these women who were essentially forced to go with soldiers or made choices...

P: Yes...poverty in my view. Because I can't see anybody's right mind. Somebody has killed your son, your husband, your brother. And then you go after that person and profess love? No. Not for me.

I: We heard, people would talk about forced marriage or forcible marriage.

P: To the soldiers?

I: To soldiers. Were you aware of that or do you know...

P: No, not to my knowledge. But I frowned badly at women around my area, the ones I know, who I know, whose children, even if it's not your daughter. Asaba then was such a small place, that if it didn't get to you directly, you knew somebody that was affected, and you had to sympathize with that person. Not give yourself to that person. I couldn't just fathom it. And I thought, that's the worst thing you could do to the memory of those who were brutally massacred in cold blood.

I: But on the other hand, there were also women who were raped, who had no choice. Did you know anybody who was raped?

P: No but nobody would tell you. Nobody would tell that she was raped. But I knew those who went willingly. I mean you could see from their facial expression. I heard they were forced initially and then later got to accept it. If you were forced, if you don't like it, you run away won't you? You find a way of escaping. Not following the soldiers in their trucks, going into people's houses, looting what they have. Taking their blocks and erecting your own building, or taking what they have? No.

I: We heard that some women were actually taken away, abducted, brought back eventually. Did you hear any of that? They were taken from their families, presumably raped and then sent home again.

P: That could happen. I'm not saying that there were no incidents like that. But I was just looking at the negative aspects of what people could have done to show their resentment of what happened to Asaba people. Not say, okay, it's Asaba what can we do? No, that's not the way forward.

I: If you were to think of, overall, the impact on Asaba of what happened, how would you describe it in terms of the general impact on the town and the community?

P: See, it's a mixed thing. Mixed, in the sense that people of my generation who witnessed it, some people have the feeling of, what can we do? While others feel, this is bad. We have to do something about it. Then the young ones, the war has ended, over 40 years now. Nobody talks about it. It's like, hush hush. We don't talk about it because the federal government is hush hush. I was talking about my book when I was interviewed by television, and the presenter said to me, don't you think you are doing this? And I said no, I am not doing anything wrong. But back home in Asaba, it's a question of, hush hush, don't talk about it, it happened long ago, let's not talk about it. But I find every occasion, when I visit Asaba, the boys, the young boys they read my book and say oh, we didn't know that this happened. I explain to them and say, this is what happened. You must bring it to the limelight. Otherwise, something like this will happen again. You can't brush it under the carpet.

I: What do you think, do you think the government should do anything for Asaba?

P: Of course. The government should do something for Asaba. Because it's just like, people who were killed we are just like flies. Families, there are families who were wiped out. I talked about the woman, who had only two sons. They were, attending, I don't know how you say it in America but here, it's second to the last years of college. Both of them were killed. I saw their mother, with the help of other people, pushing this truck, a wheelbarrow, pushing it and crying, looking at her two sons. She has passed the age of bearing children. Even if you had the opportunity to have more children, they will never grow up to be as old as those two boys. Families were wiped out. There are names I used to hear growing up that I don't hear anymore. But the young ones, it's a question of money. They see money, they forget about morality. And that is what really upsets me.

[The typed copy of Celestina's letter to her brother, Patrick, retrieved from among the papers of Dame Margery Perham, University of Oxford, is below]



from Celestina HP 421/2 1967 Papa

My dear Brother,

2010:67

It is a pity you could not hear from me for a long time now. The reason I am sure is clear to you. I need not write much about that now. The reason why I am writing this is to tell you what has happened to us. When the Federal troops got to Ogwashiuku we were afraid and decided to run away. I suggested that we should run to Oko or Abala or Ibusa but papa refused. On the 4th of October we started hearing shots and not long they succeeded in getting into Asaba. People were asked to open their windows and to shout "One Nigeria" this they did throughout the whole day. Some people who ran away were asked to return that things are alright. They collected certain amount and gave to the commander. On the 5th we thought that things were alright but around 9 a.m. the soldiers started firing into the house and there was no way for us to escape. After few minutes they came into the house and wanted to kill Osi. I begged and they left him and asked for money. Mama gave them some amount and they left. Firing still continued and there was no room for us to escape. Until another set came in and ordered us out of the house at gunpoint as we were running one of the soldiers attempted to kill Osi ^{he gave him his} ~~text~~ card of S.P.C. to show that he was not a soldier. The first soldier left him but the next asked him to lie down as he was doing this he was shot dead. They continued pursuing us and took us to a certain tree. They left us there and went into the town to collect other people there we were until all the people of Umuaji who could not escape were brought down. We begged and begged for release they refused. After some time we were taken to Ogbeawo near Mr. Asiokwu's house. There they separated men from women. Amongst the men who were there papa and Emma were there. The women were asked to go and we went away. They took us from one canteen where we passed the night. The following day I went to search for papa and Ema. When I got home I could not see anybody so I went to ~~next~~ where we were separated and found Emma dead and all those who went with us there. I went back to Mama and did not tell mama that Ema ~~was~~ is dead too because I knew she will not be able to bear it. For four days we were not released until soldiers started raping girls I continue to hide, Emma's wife continued following me. On the 11th we managed to escape and look for food. As we were going I found the body of Osi still lying where he was. Ema's wife joined ~~me~~ me and we dug a grave in the yard and buried him there. Some women helped in burying Ema and many others who were killed. Mama did not know. Even till today. On the 12th we were told that papa was at Achala so we went on the 12th. On reaching there he told us how they opened machine gun on all those who were taken to Ogbeawo. He said bullets did not meet him and that when the soldiers left he ran into the nearby bush and found his way to Achala where he said that we should not go. He told mama that Ema ran into the bush as a result she has the hope that he will come out one day. We continued living in hiding because of soldiers who want to rape girls. No food until on the 18th when Isamah came down to Asaba with some soldiers and ask us to go with him to Ogwashiuku. Mama refused to follow us but Ema's wife myself and Nwachuku to Ogwashi where I am now writing this letter. More than four battalions of soldiers are now at Asaba. All that we have at Asaba have been looted. Doors and windows broken. Some houses burnt down. Asaba is very quiet nobody can be seen out-side. It is a pity such things happened to us. Hear is the list of those who were killed whom I can tell now.

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| Leo Isichei (Mmo's father) | C.Y. Isichei (Young's 1st son) | Okobi Michael |
| Rufus Isichei | Chukwuede of Enugu | The two Mordis and |
| Biachi (3) people | Tolafe | George seminarian |
| L.A.Gwan | Toy Gwan | Simon Ojogwu (sen) ^{seminarian} |
| | | Chief Justice's |
| | | father and the brother |

(In short in Umuosa every man was killed with the exception of papa and Odogwu. Iwewe of Ibadan and his first son. The Okogbas. Mr. Okogwu Leo's father. The two Monus. At Ogbilo no man was left. Somebody like E.C. Philip and all these people were buried in common grave.

I cannot remember the names of all those killed at Asaba. I am writing you so that you can tell Peter, Anthony and others. The Isegbus are safe. Papa has refused to come to Asaba and mama refused to come here. We are here under Isama's care. Please write soon using the above address. Nothing like life in Asaba. Pray for us.