

## Nicholas Azeh

### Asaba Memorial Project

Interviewee: Nicholas Azeh (NA)

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

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Interview location: Asaba, Nigeria

EB: Alright, we're just going to start with an informal announcement for the tape. My name is Elizabeth Bird, I'm here with Fraser Ottanelli, and also in the room is Ify Uria. We are speaking in Asaba, Nigeria, October 5<sup>th</sup> 2011. And I'm speaking with...if you could state your name.

NA: I'm reverend Nicholas Azeh.

EB: And your place? You live in Asaba?

NA: I live in Asaba.

EB: And what was your date of birth?

NA: I was born the 24<sup>th</sup> of June, 1950.

EB: Thank you. And place. You were born in Asaba?

NA: No, I was born in Kano, yes.

EB: But you are from, you are an indigene of...

NA: I'm an indigene of Asaba.

EB: Thank you, today what I would like to take you back in time to the time when the war was breaking out—where were you? What were you doing? And what do you remember from those times?

NA: Yes, well I was at St. Patrick's college, Asaba. Yes, I was at St. Patrick's school Asaba when the war broke out. And many of us came home. We came home.

EB: So you were at St. Patrick's College?

NA: Yes, and we came home holidays, and then the war broke out. So we, I mean there was quietness, because Asaba were not in the war zone per se, well at least we know that the Biafran troops and the Federal troops were setting fire at Ore. Then suddenly they move from Ore to Benin, they were coming towards Onitsha, right? And suddenly they came to Asaba. And it was a very, very ugly experience for most of us, who weren't soldiers.

EB: Do you remember when the Biafran troops were coming through from Onitsha? Across on their way through to Benin?

NA: Uh, no because we were right in the middle of the town so I didn't experience that. I didn't experience that.

EB: So the first encounter you had was with Federal troops coming in.

NA: Oh, yes. With Federal troops coming in. Coming in. They were fighting.

EB: Do you remember when that was actually when the first started coming in?

NA: I don't remember when exactly, others might help me, but it was a morning about—it was about 6:30 in the morning. I come out and fetch water, you know? And suddenly I heard gunshots—bah-bah-bah-bah-bah [makes gun sweeping motion with his fingers]. I ducked out of the house, and the next thing I saw was four—yeah four hefty looking men. Horrible looking men with guns, right? And I was scared. I ducked out of the house—my mum was, went out of the house. It was a hopeless situation, right? And of course that day they start taking over Asaba. And they went to the town, so that had happened then. And we are getting used to them. Then suddenly, suddenly, hell set loose in town. You know? At about 6:00 in the evening they took us, they marched us civilian boys from the house and took us down the road to where we had school. And that is where I saw the most horrible sight in my life. When we got there it was an open field, and uh, when I got there people had been killed, massacred. The scene was quite ugly, you would lie down and they would shoot a person there. And then they would come and somebody else would come on the corpse and then not excavated, then you would lie back and be shot. So you were covered with somebody else's corpse when you were tormented and then shot. And god sent me a messiah.

EB: So you, if we could, just the timing of this—this was not the march on October 7<sup>th</sup>, this was before that. Was it?

NA: No, that was the main holocaust when they came in.

EB: So you came out, you were part of the march to Ogbe-Osawa ?

NA: No, I wasn't a part of that. They came and the very first movement, they picked us up, young boys and carried us picked up.

And I was one of those picked up from my house, and they marched us towards the school, the school, and that is where I experienced the killings. And of course at night we dashed off from there to Ibusa.

EB: So when you got to the school—they kept—can you describe, you were all in a line? In a group? What was...

NA: I mean there was pandemonium. It was hopelessness students were everywhere, and uh there was crying in the town it was a hopeless situation. Right? And when I go to the field already people have been killed there. And, so what happens is we would get there, and you would cover somebody else's corpse and you would lie down and be shot. I would cover somebody else's corpse and then lie down to be shot, and then suddenly God sent me a messiah.

EB: And what happened? He misfired the gun you said?

NA: No, none was fired. I mean they can't miss you—it is a close, a close-range shot. When here is a man on the ground and you do buh-buh-buh [machine gun noises], and he dies there, with blood gushing out. So I am sure. And of course the fear has gone out of me, I mean it was a hopeless situation so I wasn't afraid anymore. So, I cover somebody else's corpse, right? Blood was everywhere. And so I take the shovel and I have to obey, I mean you have to obey at that point in time. And so I had the shovel and I was covering the corpse of someone who was killed, and my own self I was to lie down. I mean I can't just say no. I was to lie down there and be shot—it was a close-range shooting. And the next thing I see is a young man came—an officer came, and he exclaimed—what is this? What have these young boys done? Leave them alone! That was all that I saw. And thank God they left us. And by then it was getting dark. They left us and from there I ran to a town called Ibusa. Right? How I got there heaven knows. When I got to Ibusa I didn't know anybody there. But God helped. The reception of the righteous, the good lord helped me. I had a good reception. I was in Ibusa for a long time before and I came back eventually to Asaba, you know.

EB: So you were actually lying down waiting to be...

NA: I had just finished covering somebody else and it was my turn to lie down. So if God hadn't sent me, if he hadn't come, I would have been shot there.

EB: Do you know who the soldier was who came to...

NA: No, I don't know him. They were some horrible looking guys from the north or something, I don't know.

EB: So it was an officer who came and he saw what was happening.

NA: Yes, he saw what was happening. He was there, he was godsent.

EB: You don't know who he was.

NA: I don't know who he was. You know? Another soldier? I was at St. Patrick's college, I've not fought a war before, I don't know about soldiering. I mean it was a horrible sight. Very horrible.

EB: So when they shot people they told them to lie down first and then they shot them...

NA: Yes!

EB: Not standing up.

NA: No! In my own scene. Others were shot other ways, but in my scene you would lie down, first of all you would cover somebody else's corpse, then you lie down. And you can't protest. You can't say no.

FO: How many people were in the, how many people were in this...

NA: In this place? Already about a room, I mean a floor like this [points to the room] all full of corpses. You can see this and see blood. You know?

FO: It was a large grave.

NA: Yes, a large swath of ground. A large field, you excavated a bit of land and you covered and then you would lie down, and they would bum-bum-bum shoot you. They shot you there.

FO: So there would be a group of people standing or sitting and then they would call you.

NA: No, they weren't calling, I was brought in and it was my turn to be shot, so. So they gave me a shovel, and they asked me to cover somebody who has been shot already. You know? So after covering him I would have just gone in there and be shot. Except for God sent somebody at that point in time to rescue me.

FO: So you were lying down already?

NA: No, already I was covering somebody else who was shot. And after you cover somebody else who had been shot of course you had now made a space for yourself to lie down. You know? And if I had lie down, I would have been shot like that.

EB: Do you know who the person was who you had covered?

NA: No, it was a hopeless situation. You don't even know.

EB: Well, most of these people were they young boys like yourself?

NA: Of course, young boys. Young boys like me.

EB: Mhm.

NA: Of course, young boys. Here they were killing young boys. It was later at night I heard that there was a spray, just spray people at random. And then we escaped to Ibusa.

EB: So, it seems from the way you were describing it that the soldiers were not acting on orders, they were just doing this because they wanted to?

NA: No! It was an order! It was an order to kill, to massacre! To destroy the young folks and the elderly middle class in Asaba—no other.

So they are disciplining people anyway, and the other, I guess this is a troubled thing. Because they come and they burn houses, the war of Niger, there are horrible looking people, terrible looking people. They are big, tough, dark. I mean you look at their faces and you are scared. You can just tell by looking at their faces, these aren't the people that you are used to. I mean as a student we are not used to them—right?

EB: If, would you be able to show us the location, the place where this happened?

NA: Um, yes, I can. I can, yes. I mean it has been how many years now, more than 47 years, uh, yes. We can see to it. Yes.

IU? : I saw when this was happening, when they killed these people. And, I didn't know what was happening to them, you know, we were dancing past. You were in that field. And I didn't know what you were doing I thought you were doing something else.

NA: No, no. We were the victim of shots.

IU: We went there, after the events. That, too.

EB: So you would know where this place was, you could show us.

IU?: Yes, I have an idea.

EB: Do you have any, if you had to estimate the number of people who were killed in this situation, how many do you think?

NA: That's the, what—there were over 200 people killed. There were 200 people killed. Because I came in there, there was bloodshed. People just left, there was blood and corpses. And, uh.

FO: You were standing in a line waiting to be killed.

NA: Yes. You know they kept us in there and my turn was next to be killed. You know, and at that time you don't have the mental strength to count or to find out—I mean it was a hopeless situation. Really hopeless.

EB: Were people, did some attempt—try to run away or?

NA: Run away? The whole town was filled, there were soldiers. Where are you running to? We're just like zombies, like robots. We've lost our willpower. I mean, you can't run! When the whole town was littered with soldiers, these horrible-looking people. Some were screaming, some were crying—it was a hopeless situation, it was a hopeless situation.

EB: There was only men and boys there, no women?

NA: Of course, no! No women! Only men and boys, and of course later on they took advantage and they started raping—I mean they got free wives in Asaba. Best of the system. They have not recovered yet from that damage. Raped them. When the husband is gone, when the children are gone, they start raping the children. Women, the Hausa had free wives. They had the women and they brought forth bastards to the land. I mean Asaba was a very peaceful place, but suddenly we had a group of people who are raw. Who are not disciplined, who are not educated. And these are the offsprings of the soldiers. Right?

EB: And there are many of those people still here?

NA: Still around. They are still around. What do you expect? They brought forth a generation of people who are not really Asaba. Now a man who is a bastard, now a soldier who he impregnates a woman, he brings a child into this world and he goes back to that place and these children have no parents.

EB: And what effect has that had on Asaba do you think?

NA: Oh my, it is a very ugly social abnormality. You know? Right now we have land barons, who are young boys selling land. Criminals. They will sell land and sell to about 5 people. And they use the money from land to bribe the police, right? If you go to court of course the juries are bribed. So the town is completely destabilized.

EB: In your own family, how, were there many people killed in your own family or no?

NA: In my family, in my family I am the first born. Right? And I am the only one that became a victim. In my family.

EB: What happened to the rest of them? Did they run away?

NA: No, the rest, they are children then. But I'm the one, them, it didn't affect them. They only took those that had age. And the children were left behind. The women were left behind. The children, I mean the youths and other people were victims.

EB: At the time how many people were in your family? Both your parents?

NA: My mother, my siblings, but I'm the oldest, so I was the only one picked. And the others who were behind.

EB: And was your father living?

NA: My father was living, but he wasn't in Asaba then.

EB: Oh, so he, yes.

NA: So he wasn't there.

EB: Yes. And how many siblings, younger siblings did you have?

NA: We had about 6 of us. But none of them were affected except me. It was just me, and God on my side I didn't fall a victim.

EB: So you left and you went to Ibusa, how long?

NA: It was about, uh, about uh, 7 months or thereabout. Now by the time the issue came down I came back to Asaba. Right? And by then I came Asaba and we still had troops. In my father's house. I mean I was there and uh, I was born in the north I was born in Kano, so my family could speak Hausa very well. So they spoke very well and they could sit back in our home and converse with us. But later on that same house, that housed the federal troops became a victim. They launched a grenade there and the house came down.

EB: And when was that? Was that...

NA: That was the second attempt.

EB: In 1968 when they came through again, yeah.

NA: Yes, and that is how we lost the house.

EB: Mhm. And so were they, was it just a random grenade or was it...

NA: They launched it straight onto the house. That and the, the advanced soldiers had infiltrated, and I don't know what really happened, because then I wasn't in there I was in Ibusa. So they just launched it there and the whole house came down.

EB: So for a while, after the soldiers were there in the first time, then they left but then they came, then more—different soldiers came back again. So the soldiers were in Asaba all those months when you were in Ibusa. There were soldiers there for many, many months.

NA: Yes, yes.

EB: They were staying in your...

NA: They were staying in my house. In other places, yes, they were stationed in Asaba. Yes.

EB: Now you said, you talked about earlier about the rape and assault on women and girls, was this very common?

NA: This was very common. The soldiers, they are not disciplined. I mean everywhere they go, the story in Nigeria, you know, uh, women who have lost their husbands, who have lost their breadwinners, they are vulnerable. Right? So of course these women they had to feed themselves, they had to take care of themselves, and soldiers have free money, they are given money, and you can't give a lady money, you don't distribute your tithes without having sex with them. I'm sorry, don't mind my blunt language. Okay? And many of them were put in a family way. Many of them had the children of the soldiers. Right? And the experience of these bastards is still affecting us now. It is still affecting us now today.

EB: When a woman, um, did become pregnant by a soldier, how did the, what did—was she shunned by the family or did the family still um, was she disgraced?

NA: No! Already the town has been bastardized. Alright? So a woman becoming pregnant from a soldier, it wasn't a taboo because like, because the soldier comes in here, he brings in a level of economic support, right? He's there taking care of the woman, taking care of the pregnancy. And taking care of the baby thankfully, sort of like fathers, you know? So it wasn't really a bad omen realizing that the moral standard of the town has been broken. Been broken.

EB: So some of these soldiers actually had longer relationships with these women...it wasn't just a single rape and then go. They had a...

NA: Yes, they had, well—they were rich. Them, were just simply they would simply start living together. Or they spent years as girlfriend/boyfriend. And then, eventually when they left back from Asaba, of course they left them there. And those women who were pregnant who had children, whose parents were northerners—you know? And she had no choice. She has to survive anyway.

EB: Yeah. Alright, well let's go back to the area where you said you were taken for the shooting...now you said you spoke Hausa—were you able to—what were the soldiers saying to you all? What was their demeanor, what were they saying?

NA: I think the problem is these men are also so traumatized. They couldn't even speak. The whole scene here was ugly. The town was in pandemonium—I couldn't explain—Asaba was a very loving town, a very loving people. So suddenly we are invaded. By strange looking people. So I couldn't talk. I couldn't have spoken Hausa.

EB: But they, the soldiers, were they saying anything like you were Ibo, they were going to kill you because you were Ibo or anything like that or...

NA: No. No. No. They were not—whether you're Ibo or Yoruba or Hausa, we are all Asaba. We are all one people, we are young people. Let's go. They marched us through—you know. I mean I couldn't talk, I didn't protest. I didn't speak Ibo, I didn't speak Hausa, I didn't speak English. You know like a lamb taken to slaughter I couldn't open my mouth, it was this way. But it happened. I couldn't speak Hausa to them I couldn't say anything. I didn't even beg them, I didn't say please. I didn't say anything. I was just going.

EB: Were you with anybody you knew when you went through this—did you have friends or family or relations or anything or were you just ...

NA: I mean I'm careless, I didn't say anything. I mean here you are you see people dying I'm careless. I mean it was like, maybe it is time for me to go. That was my kind of, mental attitude. So I was, I was expecting the worst to happen—right?

FO: I have a question now, and I think I know how you're going to answer—I mean I, I, based on what you're saying it might be a redundancy, but when the officer came and he stopped the killing—do you have any recollection of what language he spoke?

NA: He spoke English. Not Hausa. I remember him saying "What have these young boys done? Leave them alone!" I'm not sure it is Hausa because he was a young guy. Very well—he was an officer, a decent young man. When he saw us he was amazed—he said "What have they done? What have these young boys done? Please leave them alone." And that is why I'm thinking that he did have authority, because he was an officer and he said leave them alone—they obeyed.

You know? And they obeyed and we marched off.

EB: So, some of these invading soldiers had different opinions about what—I mean some of them like him did not agree with what was happening...

NA: Of course, yes. I'm, my thinking is this. A lot of them had come from the north, right? They came here to simply exterminate the cream of the young ones and the middle class people in Asaba. That was the mission. Of course, we had different soldiers from other states who had different mindsets. But those from the north they had a mission to kill. Right? They had a mission to kill. Nothing else. They have the women and the young children. Kill the boys and the other people. Just means that they are completely exterminated. So it was a homicide of the greatest, greatest order. Greatest order. We've not seen such a mess in the world before—it is terrible, terrible. Terrible! You know?

EB: Amazing. You know now that people are trying to memorialize the event and remember it—do you think that is an important thing to do?

NA: You know my thinking is this, I'm a preacher, by God's grace, right? And this is my attitude. Isaiah said, Isaiah told us, don't rue over old things, right? Don't consider the fate of old. I will do a new thing. That is my concept as a preacher. Because if I remember it, if I start in fact, right now I'm trying to calm my emotion. I'm trying to control my emotion. It is sad. It's sad. And if we had had guns we would have fought back. But we were armless. I mean these are armless people, innocent people. Peace-loving people, we are dancing we are jovial. You came and invaded them. We're running and we're not soldiers. They came and they killed—I mean that is crazy [bangs his hand on the chair]. That's bad! That's bad.

EB: It is terrible, yes.

NA: Right?

EB: Yes, of course.

NA: It's really bad.

EB: It's indescribable.

NA: We've not recovered from that in this country. We've not recovered by the injustice done by the northerners. It was a long-term mission to exterminate southerners. Right? The Biafrans—we're not Biafran soldiers. We're not. We asked about—we're not Ibo speaking. We're not eastern Ibo, we're west Delta Ibo.

Right? And we didn't get involved in their fight. So why are we going to be so victimized? It was horrible. Right?

EB: Yes.

NA: So my answer is because of him [Ify Uraih]. I told him I would given an interview, let it get behind me. Let the almighty God bring about his resolution. I would like to say this please. You have an interview, an interview is futility. Something must be done. That has more about what happened to our people.

EB: So what would you like to see done?

NA: At least let the Federal government make an apology, a very good apology. And let us choose our retribution let them compensate us. A lot of families lost their breadwinners. The intellectuals. We had brains—professors, doctors, engineers—wiped out! Wiped out! And the government did nothing about it. And today we're still being victimized, eh! In Asaba. In our state today, we have been marginalized. We had the highest core of intellectuals in the whole middle state. Where are they today? They're gone. Eh? They're gone.

EB: Many left. Many died.

NA: Many left—it is sad.

EB: Well certainly we don't have the power to make it right but what we want to do is to tell the story and, we were just saying now that there are many people in the United States and in Europe who know about this who didn't know before. And that will hopefully get bigger.

NA: It is sad. It is very sad. The whole social status was changed by that. We have intellectuals. We, as a town we are peace-loving, our children were in schools.

EB: How did it affect, in particular your family. What was the long-term effect for your family?

NA: Well, for my family I'm the first son and um, that in itself, it didn't go too bad. Eventually my father, my mother is a first wife, she had 8 children, 6 boys two girls, and the social abnormality in the land was so much that my father got a second wife, got a third wife, and that is not as so in Asaba. I knew he had about 27 children, I mean that is not our style. You know? And then if a man has that kind of children, his ability to educate them properly is now limited. So uh, that went on and, people like us we are brought up from good schools. And that in itself gave me a bad psyche. Because when I went from Ibadon to Lagos, I got into drugs. I got into drugs. I mean my life was not for me, I got into drugs, I did not get married—I was really crazy. You know? That is what happened in Asaba—I mean life was of no value. But thank God. I got to know Jesus, right? So my life now came back to focus. So I came back to Asaba to help the young boys realize that life is not just all this triviality. And thank God that I'm changed, my own family is changed. I have 3 loving children and all went to University. They are respectable people. So our generation, we're trying to make things better right now. Right?

EB: Well, thank you. Thank you very much. Anything else you want to..

FO: Thank you.