Anthony Anyanwu Oral History Interview

September 21st, 2024

Interviewee: Anthony Anyanwu
Interviewer: Dawn Chinagorom-Abiakalam
Location of Interview: Zoom

Biographical Note

Anthony Anyanwu is a supervisory public health analyst. Originally from Nigeria, he spent part of his childhood in Cameroon during and after the Nigerian Civil War, before returning to southeastern Nigeria for his secondary and tertiary education. His experiences span both the immediate and long-term aftermath of the Biafran War, as well as later migration to the United States, where he has built a career in public health administration.

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Technical Note

This interview was conducted remotely via Zoom and recorded in digital audio format. The recording was subsequently transcribed and lightly edited for clarity and readability. This transcript preserves the content and meaning of the original interview while correcting minor transcription errors and formatting inconsistencies.

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Dawn Chinagorom-Abiakalam: Okay, so I'm going to start. So hello, my name is Dawn Chinagorom-Abiakalam and I'm conducting an oral history interview with you today for the Nigerian Stories Archive.

So I would like you to just give me a brief introduction of yourself, so your name, where you currently reside, what you do now, and then after that, I will get into the questions, thank you.

Anthony Anyanwu: Okay, thank you so much. My name is Pastor Anthony Anyanwu. I currently reside in Maryland, United States of America, but originally from Nigeria. And I work with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services as a supervisory public health analyst.

DCA: Thank you very much. So the questions I'm going to be asking today are just going to be on your experiences with the Nigerian Civil War. So they're going to be just brief history questions on what you saw during the war, your life experiences during that time.

So the first question is going to be how old, so basically how old were you when the war was declared? Where were you living at that time? And yeah, so that.

AA: When the war broke out, I was living in Cameroon. I was then in elementary school as of that time. When the war broke out, and I stayed there until the war is over, much much later, before I returned back to Nigeria, I would say maybe by then, I probably was about10 or something like that.

DCA: Yeah, and what state in Nigeria are you from? What part of Nigeria is your family from?

AA: My family is from a Imo state, which is in the eastern part of Nigeria.

DCA: And were you… So was your family living there before the war was declared and then moved to Cameroon because of the war, or were you already living in Cameroon?

AA: Yeah, I was already living in Cameroon. My family were all the time back in the east, but I was living in Cameroon with my uncle. It's not that my family actually moved. They just made that move to go and live with my uncle before the war broke out.

DCA: And so how was that experience for you being in Cameroon and having your immediate family being in the southeast of Nigeria with everything that happened with the war?

AA: Yeah, for the reason that I could not go home to see them, it was very challenging for me. I was missing my siblings, missing my parents, and hearing the horrible news, it was for me very emotional, knowing whether I'll ever see them again, alive or not see them again alive. So all those things bothered me. At the same time, I was grateful that I was in a little bit of safety from the heat of the war.

DCA: Yeah, and well, that's very interesting. And that must have been quite difficult, knowing that all that was going on and you were far. And so I also want to ask about your experiences after the war. So when you went back to Nigeria, did you go back to the southeast? And if you did, how was that for you experiencing Nigeria in the aftermath of the Biafra war?

AA: Yeah, I went back to the southeast to go to high school, go to middle school and high school. Yeah, it was a very challenging time in the sense that there wasn't much of economic activities to be able to take care of some of our things. My parents didn't have quite a lot, so I had to work hard. Sometimes I had to do some things to earn money for myself, to assist myself while going to middle school and high school. So basically, it was difficult economically. But God in His mercy helped us to forge ahead.

DCA: Yeah, and so did you also go to university in the southeast of Nigeria, or did you move away to do that?

AA: Yeah, no, I went to university in the northeast. After I finished my high school or secondary school, I got admission to go to the university in the northeast.

DCA: Yeah, and so in the first few years after the end of the war, there were still a lot of ethnic tensions in Nigeria. So how was that for you being an Igbo man in the northeast of Nigeria, attending a university there in the wake of all that?

AA: Yeah, we were really conscious of that. So, I mean, in the campus where we stayed, it was a little bit, should I say, more secure than in the city itself. So, yeah, the campus wasn't as problematic or troublesome as one would expect. So basically, there was some level of security and peace. But that tension was still there. So we're living in the consciousness that we don't want to provoke tension. So we live with that consciousness and keep your name.

DCA: Yeah, wow, that's really interesting. And at the beginning of the interview, you mentioned that you now live in the US, in Maryland. And I know for a lot of Nigerians who were not just who experienced the war, but who were very close to that time, there was a desire to leave the country and be far away from the pressures of war and instability. And I was wondering if your journey was influenced by the current state of the country in terms of ethnic tensions, or if your decision to migrate was influenced by other things entirely?

AA: Yeah, I didn't move because of the ethnic tension. I moved for some other reason, like maybe trying to experience going to school in another country and then maybe living in another place to start for greener pastures, we would call it. Yeah, so it wasn't motivated by any type of ethnic conflict or tension. It was just something I decided I wanted to do.

DCA: And how was that experience for you? Because I know right now in our history as Nigerians, it's becoming an increasingly popular thing to do. But earlier on, that wasn't the case. And so how was that for you moving at a time when lots of Nigerians were not doing the same?

AA: Yeah, because the things that I've been… Before then, I've been to other places that I should say maybe because I'm somehow adventurous. I want to see what's going on in another country. Probably because I grew up in Cameroon, not in Nigeria. So it was easy for me to move to anywhere in the world that is interesting to me.

DCA: Yeah, and also, going back on your childhood history, as someone who grew up in Cameroon, so that's a different experience of growing up, not just in a different country from Nigeria, but in a West African country. I know lots of Nigerians, especially Igbo people, have history with being in Cameroon and moving there. So I wanted to know if you could share more on your experience of what that was like for you.

AA: Yeah, it was really nice. It was really a good experience. I enjoyed my school, my friends, my church. It was a good experience. But strangely, once in a while, there is a tension because the government kind of puts some policies in place that were not, should I say, friendly, particularly to Nigerians, and especially to the Igbo ethnic group. But apart from that, I think I still have a fond memory of my stay there.

DCA: Yeah, and so for your time and when you were living there, were the majority of Nigerians there from the same ethnic group, or was it like a diverse group of people? And in terms of policies, what kinds of things were Nigerians doing in Cameroon at the time? Because usually people move for education or for work or to do business. And in Cameroon, what kind of was the driving force there?

AA: Yeah, I think most people that I know, they were there for business, and then they settled they had family. So they integrated into the society and became part of the country. I think essentially it was business ventures and seeking the better opportunities that drove many people there.

DCA: Yes, that sounds, wow, that sounds really interesting. And in the, so this is a specific thing that people also talk about, how in the wake of the war, lots of Nigerians moved to Cameroon and moved to Gabon.

Not Nigerians per se, but Igbo people moved to Cameroon and moved to Gabon. Since you were in Cameroon at that time, do you have any memories of experiencing an influx of Nigerians into Cameroon during the war, or how was that?

AA: Yeah, I can't remember, maybe people would come, but I never paid attention or it never crossed my mind that people are coming. But I know people never stop coming to settle down there, to do business, to live there. So I don't think I want to call it as an influx, I think that people were coming.

DCA: That's interesting. Yeah, so I was also wondering if there were any things that you wanted to share, specifically about how, so like in Nigeria has changed a lot in the time since the war and now, and I was wondering if there were any things you wanted to share about how things have changed specifically in the Southeast compared to what you remember during that time and what prevails today?

AA: Oh, quite a lot have changed in terms of what's going on in the Southeast. Before then, there was a lot of, now there is a lot of insecurity, which wasn't part of the society then, which is a very problematic now. There were no, should I call it, no really ethnic tensions or crises. People were living peacefully, but I tell you, it is no more the same. There is so much conflict, so much evil in the land, I would say. And then people are really suffering and insecurity, which was not like that. Before you could travel anywhere freely in the night, in the day, but now it is a matter of taking a risk adventure to be traveling. And within the Nigerian society, it's like the war is over, but the issues that were there before the war haven't completely given way. There's still that, should I say, other ethnic groups, looking at the Igbo ethnic group, should I say, with a great degree of love, so to speak. There is still that hatred, that idea, try to think that the Igbo ethnic group is the one causing the trouble, which is not.

So the tension is still there, but probably I've learned to manage it more than before.

DCA: And even speaking on that, because you had said issues before the war still prevailed, after the war, Nigeria went through different government transitions, like moving from military roads, democracy, and in between those. And I was wondering if you would like to share some of your experience of what you remember in terms of what that was like for people living in the country during all these transitions between different heads of state and different forms of government?

AA: Yeah, to whether it was military or civilian, personally, it never made any change for me as an individual, because it's not like one bettered my situation more than the other. It was the same situation, the same circumstances for me, whether it was military power or politicians in

power, because basically the people in politics that cater to their friends and their relations or families, they do not care to the general public. So if you're not in politics, I mean, you may not feel the impact at all. It will just be the same thing, just a different set of people being at the helm of affairs.

DCA: And were there any specific events that were striking to you in terms of the progression of Nigeria as a country? Because Nigeria has been through quite a bit in terms of flows of government. So like gaining independence, moving into military rule, moving out of that. Do you have a sense of what the general public was feeling like during all these transitions? If it mattered to people so much, if people didn't really care, what was the general feeling of people during that time?

AA: Yeah, I think the general people are feeling most likely would be it doesn't matter who comes in the government, because sometimes the things the political class are doing, then it seems they bring in much suffering on the population, the army steps in, takes them out of the way, and the army comes back and say, okay, we're going to hand over again to the civilian, and then the civilian started acting very unfriendly to the population. Then the community.

So it was that cycle that was going on. You give the politicians authority, and they used it to better themselves, instead of bettering the society. So on average Nigeria, it didn't make any difference. Just like me, it didn't make much difference. The suffering was there. The challenges were still there, whether it was the military or the civilian. But in fact, looking at it now, you find that the military was more disciplined than the civilian.

DCA: That's really interesting. Because yeah, I get the sense that people have this feeling where things were similar, just under different people. Because both forms of government were supposed to represent very different things. So yeah. Yeah, and I was just wondering if you wanted to share any, or just any last thoughts about, you know, Biafra or like the experience of the civil war in general, because the point of this archive is to maintain and preserve Nigerian histories, because there's a lot of information about the war and the experiences of people, the varying experiences of people during the war that we don't have recorded. And I was wondering if there was just anything you wanted to share on that lastly?

AA: Yeah, the thing I want to share it is something that I find very sad and very disgusting that the war is over. But it looks like, should I say, the government, particularly the ruling class, because the power is much more in the north and in the west, they still see the east as not a place to develop. They kind of trample the east so much that they seem to think that the war is still on, even though there is no bullets being shot. But to me, there is still a fight going against the Igbos, from the west, from the north. They're still fighting them. But whatever means they

could, whether it's political means or that type of means, they still fight them. That's the way I look at it. They are not allowing them to, should I say, be themselves and do realize their full potential, because the south east has a great potential. It has people with great potential, but the system, the structure, essentially is against them.

DCA: Yeah, that's very interesting and a lot to think about. Thank you so much for sharing and thank you so much for taking time out to do this interview with me today. This is very important in terms of preserving the histories of different Nigerians around the world. I really appreciate you taking time to answer my questions today.

AA: Thank you.

DCA: I will be ending the interview now. Thank you very much.

AA: Thank you and have a blessed day.

DCA: You as well. Thank you.