

Paul Okonkwo Oral History Interview

December 20, 2024

Interviewee: Paul Okonkwo

Interviewer: Chinaza Asiegbu

Location of Interview: Phone Call

Biographical Note

Professor Paul Okonkwo has had a storied career as a Professor of Pharmacology at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, which has included teaching, research, and international academic collaboration. Having lived through many eras of Nigeria, in addition to his many travels, he offers his recollections on growing up in pre-colonial and colonial-era Nigeria, the development of education systems, and changes in long-held traditions in social and cultural life over time.

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Technical Note

This interview was recorded using a voice recorder and transcribed from an MP3 audio file. The transcript has been condensed and lightly edited for clarity and readability while preserving meaning and content.

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Chinaza Asiegbu: Hello, my name is Chinaza Asiegbu, and I'm conducting an oral history interview for the Nigerian Stories Archive today. The date is December 20th, 2024, and I'm with Professor Paul Okonkwo.

And I was talking to you earlier about the research and the archives to talk about having a conversation about just your life in Nigeria, in your youth and growing up in Nigeria, all of your different experiences. To start the interview, I'll just ask you for your name and your age and different things like that, just to start the interview, and then I'll just ask you some questions.

Paul Okonkwo: My age.

CA: Yes.

PO: Oh, 82. I was born September 22, 1942.

CA: Okay, I'll just start the interview and say thank you so much for speaking with me about this. I wanted to know more about, kind of, the kind of Nigeria you experienced from the time you were born.

PO: The time of Nigeria?

CA: Yeah, what was the state of the country when you were born?

PO: It was very good. It was very good. I was, my father was a blacksmith, a hunter. I lived in the west, west. He had two wives, so we used to go to and visit in Ekpe. Ekpe is one of the towns to the end of Lagos. It was also like a medicine man, he had roots. He had roots and all those herbs in the west. He was traveling to Ijebu and so on, and he spoke languages, so he was traveling to Ekpe, and he's coming back every Christmas, it was joyous. We wait for him for the... it's called the Onwa Asaata. It wasn't Christmas, but it's called the Onwa Asaata.

CA: Obu Asaata?

PO: Onwa...

CA: Onwa?

PO: Onwa Asaata.

CA: Onwa Asito?

PO: Onwa Asaata. That's Onwa Asaa. The seventh month of the year, and the eighth month of the year were just months. They come up and give us presents, we have masquerades, we have festivals. You know we worshipped, they worshipped shrines, as well as shrines of fertility, shrines of... Aputakpu was a shrine for blacksmiths. Akputakpu.

CA: Did I say that right? Did I say Aputaku?

PO: Aputakpu, not Apotaku.

CA: Aputaku.

PO: Aputakpu.

CA: Aputaku.

PO: Aputakpu. I didn't have problems.

CA: Say it again, Professor.

PO: Aputakpu.

CA: Aputakpu.

PO: That's Imo Awka, was doing festival.

CA: *Imooka?*

PO: Imo Awka.

CA: Imooka.

PO: Imo.

CA: Imo.

PO: Awka.

CA: Awka. Imo Awka. So, what did you do?

PO: So we always had a festival for Imo Awka.

CA: And so did every different profession have a different shrine? Because you said there's a shrine for blacksmiths.

PO: No, that's to protect blacksmiths. Akputakpu. No, no, so. So if they go to the foreign place, what they do there, they come back. And they celebrate their coming back safely. So Akputakpu guarded them wherever they were.

CA: And you said that was in the seventh month?

PO: The seventh and eighth month. They had Imo Awka around there, too. They had masquerades all over. Not only masquerades, Imo Awka also involved cooking, cooking competitions. The cook ukwa.

CA: Oh, who would be competing? Who competed in the competitions?

PO: The women. Cooking competitions. When there was cooking competition, ukwa would be like bread. The best ukwa would win a prize. They had ofe onugbu. Do you know about ofe onugbu?

CA: Onugbu soup.

PO: Can you cook it?

CA: Yes, I cook it with my mother all the time.

PO: The best ofe onugbu. Each village would cook and there would be judges to taste them and award marks. There were visits to your mother's ancestral village. If you go back to your mother's place, presents.

CA: So...

PO: You can go ahead.

CA: My question was, so when you back to your mother's village...is it the? If the mother and father have different villages, which village do you go to?

PO: They don't have the same village. We don't do incestous...nobody from the same village. It would be considered incest. You go to a different village. My mother's village is Umu Uzocha and my father's village is...So that is the time you go and visit your grandparents, if they are still alive. Or with your maternal grandparents, give them presents.

CA: Okay, so you said that people would be giving presents and things.

PO: Yes.

CA: So, that was the equivalent of Christmas.

PO: Yes.

CA: So there was, yeah, there was no Christmas at the time.

PO: There was Christmas for Christians. There were no Christians really then when we were growing up, few. Anyi nwere nwoke, a trader or a blacksmith who was giving to the church. Like the Euclids, they were Christians. You know, blacksmithing is a very exhausting profession.

CA: Yes.

PO: Have you seen a blacksmith before?

CA: I've never seen a blacksmith at work.

PO: If you go to the museum for African American museum in Washington, there's a gate made by blacksmiths in South Carolina. Exactly the way my father used to make them.

CA: Oh wow.

PO: Gates. Iron gates. I think they have in Buckingham Palace, they gave to Queen Elizabeth.

CA: So blacksmithing, it existed already before colonialism already.

PO: Yes

CA: What were some of the popular trades before colonialism?

PO: We all kinds of trade. We had things like palm kernel, palm oil, yams, chicken, people reared chickens, goats. Then just...we grow pawpaw, we grow all kinds of vegetables. So when he went to the market, the market did to exchange them. And that time it was trade by barter for a while. Then money came in, it was cowries. You know cowries?

CA: Mm-hmm.

PO: Yes. I know the kind of money people use, in exchange for goods. So Akpaego is one full bag of cowries. That's about a hundred.....gold. Akpaego is a hundred.....

CA: Akwaego?

PO: Akpa. Akpaego. Akpa. That's a bag of money.

CA: Oh Akpa. Akpa. Akpa ego.

PO: Akpa

CA: Oh, akpa. So this is a bag of money?

PO: Yes.

CA: Okay. And they would use cowries.

PO: Yes, they use cowries as money.

CA: So cowries was like the unit of money?

PO: Yes

CA: At the time. So when someone was wealthy did they just have a lot of cowries?

PO: Yes

CA: Or...or what was the sign of wealth back then? Was it the amount of cowries someone had? Was it property or was it something else?

PO: What?

CA: The indication of wealth was it just the amount of cowries or was it something else like property? Like how could you tell if someone was of high status?

PO: They had cowries, they had many wives. It was status how many wives. They had a good farm which would bring yams. That's the place where he would keep his yams. So a rich man would have a lot of yams. Yam was the highest produce you could have.

CA: Oh. So, somebody would be, they would have their farm and then they'd also do a trade?

PO: Eh?

CA: Would everyone have a farm and a trade?

PO: Yes, people have farms, and then sometimes they hire farm hands to help them till the harvest. So, land was also a means of acquiring wealth. Land and property.

CA: And so, would a property grow within a family, or would people leave the home still? So after marriage, who stays on the family plot and who leaves?

PO: The boys leave the property. And the firstborn usually has the main house. There are other houses he gives to his siblings. But then they are the people who now inherited the wealth after their children. Girls were married, so they had to go live with their husbands. I told you, we don't marry from the same village.

CA: Oh okay.

PO: That way the wealth spreads. You know the marriage ceremony?

CA: Igba Nkwu.

PO: Yes. You wouldn't do that? Have you seen that?

CA: Yes, I've only seen videos. I've never attended one myself.

PO: Okay, so you will be one day married, of course.

CA: Yes.

PO: Do you have a boyfriend now?

CA: No.

PO: You are focusing on your studies first?

CA: Yes sir.

PO: So, usually, before someone gets married. She brings the husband to show the father. And the father would go and investigate the family. If there's an element of drunkenness or disease. Then they will reject you. Things like leprosy, leprosy, tuberculosis, schizophrenia. Those are the cause of all the bad deaths it has no cure. And if there is bad death, they will reject it.

CA: So they kind of inquire into the family.

PO: Yes.

CA: And do they only ask the family, or do they ask other people around the family, in the family?

PO: You don't ask the family. The family would deny. You ask the neighbors and other people.

CA: Okay, neighbors and everyone?

PO: Yes. Indirectly. I get indirect evidence.

CA: And then what are the other parts of the process? So there's the knocking, Ikụ Akwu?

PO: Ikụ Aka.

CA: Ikụ Aka. And then...

PO: As you knock on the door, they accept it. Now, it's become a big ceremony before, it was just... The bride groom's people will come and say that... They say somebody in your family want to join a family, and they will say, okay, let the father, or the bride, or the relatives of the bride, will now go. And then after that, there's the Ime Ego ceremony, the bride price ceremony, these are the ways of transferring wealth.

CA: And what are some of the things on the list for the bride? Because there is also the list of items requested.

PO: Yes, part of...

CA: Is that a part of the bride price or is that something different?

PO: Something different.

CA: Oh, something different, okay.

PO: The bride price is for the father of the bride. In some villages, they ask you to buy clothes for the relatives. For example, Nkwerre in Imo state, is very, very notorious for the high bride price. As I said, boxes of shoes, wood items. They ask you to buy a lot of food items

CA: So, it can get quite expensive for a man to get married in Igbo land.

PO: Yes, in those days. Now we are to simplify so that is not so expensive.

CA: And you mentioned also that things are now more elaborate than they were before, like the Iku Aka is more elaborate now than it was.

PO: Yes.

CA: Is that the same for all the other parts of the Igba Nkwu?

PO: It's called the Igba Nkwu now, but it used to be Okuko Onye Uwa. We call it okuko onye uwa.

CA: Onye Uwa

PO: Onye Uwa. And, Ewu Nna it's a goat for the father of the bride. And the Okuko Onye Uwa, when you kill a chicken, cook it, and the girl and the husband share the meat. It's important, like a blessing, like a sharing, sharing of, almost like a betrothal. That is the village meat. Igba nkwu is that you get palm wine and give it to the bridegroom. You give him the drink and then he comes, gives you the drink and two of you come to the oldest man in the village come before him and he gives you advice. Either the oldest man or the father of the bride. The two of you now will stand up, you are married. This is exchanging vows, you have eaten the meat and you drink palm wine. But now all kinds of things are added. Each ceremony you have to go round. I remember my daughter's wedding. We had at least 400 people.

CA: Oh wow.

PO: People use it to show off, you know?

CA: The size of the party.

PO: Yes.

CA: The greater the size, the more extravagant. And the more prestige?

PO: Yes.

CA: And that was even in the olden days with Okuko Onye Uwa.

PO: Yes, but people abandoned it because they say it's a fetish.

CA: So when was it that the marriage ceremony changed? Because now people drink from the cup, it's different now, right?

PO: Ehn?

CA: Because people no longer share the same vow, like the bride and the groom.

PO: They still drink from the same cup, but they don't drink palm wine. Some people say you shouldn't drink alcohol. But I don't believe in that because alcohol is the major thing. Even these born again people say you should not use alcohol.

CA: Okay, I didn't realize, so some people won't use alcohol during the ceremony?

PO: Yes.

CA: But everyone else will do palm wine, will drink palm wine.

PO: Everyone wants to do palm wine, but now the born againers are not happy about that. They say if you start with alcohol, nobody will be drunk and you know how serious the ceremony is. But you know some drinks like that are very good for everybody. A lot of coke, you drink a lot of coke in America. They have sugar, diabetes.

CA: So the ceremony has just the marriage ceremony has gotten longer throughout the years now.

PO: Yes, I think they are trying to imitate the Yoruba people. The old, how elaborate their ceremonies.

CA: And I was also interested to know: so you were mentioning how on a family plot the oldest son will take over the family plot, and then he'll have an adjacent kind of property inside of the family plot and then the younger brothers will go elsewhere.

PO: Yes. Like me, I'm the first son, but I built my house outside my father's house, but I still have some buildings in my father's house which I built before I came back. So it's open to all. My father's house, which I built before I came back. So it's open to all my relatives to come and stay. I own everything there. When I pass on, my son will own everything there. So every other land that my father had, I shared it with my immediate brothers and distant relatives.

CA: Was there ever a time where a village would be worried that the land will run out? Because with everybody, with all of these sons going off to create their own plots, was there ever not enough land for everyone?

PO: Yes. They would have to go outside of the village enclave to go and get land and pay for it.

CA: Oh wow. So if they went outside of the village enclave, were they still a part of the village or did they have to go to another village?

PO: It is part of the village because if you call a village meeting, we are going to have one on the 26th of this month, usually we have one on the 24th and then one on the 31st. Everybody who is from the village, even if you don't live in the village proper, if you are now living somewhere in another village, you have to come. You can consider yourself like my village, Umu Eneji. You

have to come, even if you are living in the... Now, if you go to Awka, there are places that are very far from the center of the town, but part of.... Awka is spread out so much now. You still have to be part of the Umu Eneji village. You get what I'm trying to say.

CA: Yeah, so even no matter where you plant your land, you're still going to be a part of your village.

PO: Yes.

CA: And you'll still participate in the politics.

PO: Yeah, politics has relevance.

CA: I'd love to know more about the importance of the village meeting and all of the different ways that village governance is structured.

PO: In the old days, the person who was in charge of the village was the oldest man. Surprisingly, he was the arbiter of the nation. But you see, even if he's old, he's going to be wiser. But what happens is that if he's very old, the village will find someone, a young person, who is modern, who will be interpreting his thoughts.

I had an occasion where the village head was blind and couldn't talk and couldn't communicate properly. The young boy was interpreting the man's thoughts to the villagers. , the one that talks to the villagers. So they usually call him Otochala. That is the... In Awka it's called Otochala.

CA: Otojela.

PO: Otochala. That is the oldest. But in addition to the Otochala, when the British came, they introduced what they call warrant chiefs. So that's how we have chiefs. For example, in Awka we have Otochala Awka, in whose house there is always a general meeting. There is a chief, chief comes also, but the main person is Otochala. So chiefs are modern introduction to governance. So, you start from the village, you see the village has Otochala. Within the village there are still Umunna. You have Otochala and Umunna. Like Owerri has a lot of this.

The oldest there is there to preside over and settle disputes. Because if you take any of the disputes to the court, when you show it to the court. They ask you, have you discussed it in the village? Things can be treated in the village and disposed of before going to alert the process of customary court, magistrate courts and supreme court of Nigeria. That's the reason for the customary court.

CA: So still, the village system of disputes was predominant over the court system still?

PO: Yes, the court system was European. It was British.

CA: So when? Did you as a child...when did you start seeing things change in your village? Because you said you grew up, when you grew up, Christmas was not even yet celebrated and that was in the year 1940. When you were born was the year of 1940?

PO: 42.

CA: 1942.

PO: Yes, their village, their town was Aglo,they said Aglo, what's your town?

CA: Oh, Adazi-ani.

PO: Adazi-ani. Yes. That's Adazi-nnukwu.

CA: Yes, Adazi-nnukwu is where my grandmother was from. In Anaocha local government.

PO: Yes. So it was close to when I started going to schools. I went to school, primary school was a government school, Awka. At that time, when the Christians came from Onitsha, the Christian Bishops both Protestant and Catholic.

CA: About what time? What year was that that you started primary school?

PO: '48.

CA: And these were run by the missionaries? Or somebody else?

PO: You know, by that time the government school was run by the government, the famous government school in Awka. So the teachers were trained, and teachers were trained in colleges. You know that's the last, the teachers were the, the important thing was that those were the respected people in the village, those days, teachers. Onye Nkuzi, they were called.

CA: Onye Nkuzi. So these teachers would be trained, were they Nigerians, or people from your village, or were they people who came into the village to teach students?

PO: No, at first they were Europeans. My school headmaster was a European, British. Eventually, it was taken over by Nigerian teachers. Only one person I remember was from my village. The rest were from different towns in the area. Udi, Onitsha. They were contributing teachers. It was even teachers from Ghana. Because at that time, Ghanaians, Nigerians, everything was together. You know that the exam they took was West African Examination Council. WAEC. Have you heard of WAEC?

CA: West African Education Council.

PO: West African Examination Council.

CA: Examination...Yes, I have heard of this.

PO: It was all over. So even Senegal, Gambia. One man who lived with us was a Ghanaian, and his family. And then, after that, we went to secondary school. And most of them were European teachers. You learn science and you learn religion.

CA: But were you the first generation to do school in this way? Like people's parents, did your class's parents also learn this way? Or no?

PO: No, my eldest sister was, half-sister, was the first in my family to go to school.

CA: Oh, how old was she?

PO: Well, she's, well, she's dead now.

CA: Well, how much older was she than you?

PO: Oh, she was much older. When she was about, uh, twenty-something. I was still in primary school by the age of twelve, ten. Go ahead.

CA: So, I'm just trying to understand when the education system became so standardized because you said WAEC kind of took control and they began doing kind of examinations and facilitating the different grades.

PO: Yes, what do you want to know? What do you want to know?

CA: So, your sister, your sister, the oldest was the first person to go to school, but when she went to school, when she started school, I'm trying to understand whether WAEC existed.

PO: No. When she started school, she was in elementary school. It was primary school first. Primary school was not governed by WAEC. It was first school leaving certificate, they call it. After which, you went to secondary school as well. The secondary school examination was called WAEC or Cambridge. So it was Cambridge. And when the British decided to regionalize education, they called it WAEC.

CA: Was it competitive?

PO: Yeah, to enter...Not everyone could enter secondary school. In the eastern region, there were only three.

CA: Only three?

PO: Yes.

CA: Three students?

PO: Three schools.

CA: Oh, there are only three schools.

PO: For the whole of the East, including the Cameroons, Southern Cameroon. You know we had, we had teachers from, students, I told you that the teachers came from Britain first. So Nigerians went and got their BA overseas. Most of my European teachers, most of them had their BA or a technical degree. We had one Mr. Carpenter. Who is a carpenter trainee, he teaches us carpentry, he didn't have to have a degree. Because we had to do practical. So, Government College Umuahia was the first. Owerri Afikpo. Owerri

CA: Okay, Owerri.

PO: Which school did your father go to?

CA: For college? University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

PO: No, that's university. Secondary school.

CA: Oh, for secondary school. I don't know which one he went to.

PO: You can ask him.

CA: Yes, I'm going to ask him. I'll ask him. He always told me how competitive the exams were.

PO: Very. Somehow, we didn't take it because we just failed through.

CA: Wait, how does that work? What? How does that work, to fail through?

PO: How does it work?

CA: You said many people just fail through.

PO: Those were the brilliant ones. Those who eventually had to stop at secondary school or find it difficult, no primary school. They couldn't pass it to any college. I called them colleges, but they were really secondary schools. It turns to university, that's where your father met me.

CA: So for those who didn't make it to university, would they pick up a trade?

PO: Yeah, many people dropped out of secondary school. Some of them were very funny because they were traders, so they could make money fast. Riding a bicycle. Riding a new bicycle. It was like a Rolls Royce. And they had various names of bicycles. One was Raleigh. It was called Raleigh bicycle. It used to make a noise. The new one was making kick, kick, kick, kick. And then when he is passing your door, he blows his horn to show you that he has arrived. And those of us who were still in secondary school will still be trekking, going on foot for two hours. But it wasn't long before we overtook them and that was it. We actually couldn't have anything else to rely on.

CA: Yeah, after studying so much.

PO: No. In a way, some people were destined to study. And some people were destined to do hard work. Handy work, that is using their hands. It was just a natural partition. But you would say when you were born whether you would go to good secondary schools. Some went to very bad secondary schools.

CA: So the different kind of secondary school you went to also had an effect.

PO: It had what?

CA: It had an impact on where you went, like it changed somebody's path.

PO: Yes. I was even introduced to reading. It was a very part of life. You must learn how to read, I learned how to read. I was a voracious reader because I read faster than even my seniors, who were in universities. From primary school, people who were in secondary school were coming to my house to pick up books, so that I could continue to learn.

CA: Did anyone, because of how much you read, did people think you were going to end up in medicine?

PO: Yes. They were calling me doctor when I was a small boy. You chose careers, so They said you're a lawyer, if you're talking too much, they said are you going to be a lawyer? If you like to dissect, they said oh you'll be a doctor.

CA: Were there any other professions? Was it just lawyer, doctor, the main ones?

PO: You could be a teacher. You could be an architect, those were later.

CA: But the first ones were doctor and lawyer and teacher.

PO: And nurse.

CA: And nurse. So when did...around what year did the other professions start coming?

PO: Well I will say, professions evolved from the Europeans leaving positions to give way to Africans. When the hospitals were established, they didn't have nurses, so we would bring nurses. I went to buildings that had architects, surveyors, who studied geography. People didn't think of ecology or any of those things. Then agriculture wasn't studied as a science. It was something you did. People did agriculture, grew their crops to eat. And animal husbandry. We saw the Hausa people with their cows. Have you ever seen Fulani herdsmen?

CA: Yes.

PO: Some decided to gather chickens, they became poultry farmers. So, just a matter of evolution and available opportunities.

CA: Before I continue, I wanted to ask you whether there are any kind of pre-colonial traditions that are no more in Igboland. If there are any pre-colonial traditions that didn't survive after colonialism?

PO: Professions or just individuals?

CA: Just in general, like professions. Professions, yeah, to start professions that didn't survive after colonialism because I'm sure that with education, all of the entire system changed.

PO: It didn't change completely, there are herbalists. Even now, many people who rely more on herbal drugs, you know these supplements, your father will tell you there are many supplements now.

CA: Okay.

PO: Herbalists. They have these people they call soothsayers. Of course, some were charlatans, but some of them...

CA: Soothsayers.

PO: Soothsayers, you know what it is? You know what soothsayers are?

CA: Someone who can see the future?

PO: Yes.

CA: Wow. My dad, my father told me about rainmakers.

PO: Yes, they are still there.

CA: So they're still there.

PO: Yes, if you hold any events during the rainy season, you have to go see the rainmakers.. Although they claim to hold the rain, but they... There's a way they tell you, advise you to, either to shift it or something, you know what I mean?

CA: Yes.

PO: And the soothsayers just like the, some of the pastors, who predict for you what's going to happen to you. You only get inside information, for the, before they do the ceremony. Have you seen the film...What's it called? I remember the film, it's about Christianity, about somebody who was performing miracles.

CA: Oh yes the.. About this mega preacher. He was a major preacher; is it that one? Is it...

PO: Leap of Faith.

CA: Oh, Leap of Faith.

PO: Leap of Faith was a film where a man was living with people and performing miracles. Then he got one cripple, a polio victim who so believed in him. They believed in the man, the crippled self, this polio patient, was praying so well, and suddenly he started walking. So the pastor was so afraid of what was going to happen, what was happening. So the pastor took to his heels, leapt at everybody and ran away. He said that he didn't believe in that spiritual walk. It was only a few people.

CA: Wow.

PO: That is called *Leap of Faith*. So some of the pastors who are asking at this time to let you know. Oh, what leap of faith? Leap of faith was that when you come to the church, somebody in the door asks you about your name and your profession, right? Mm-hmm.

CA: Yes.

PO: The seats are already numbered so there is a way you can listen to the preacher. So when the preacher goes and confronts you, he calls your name. Oh, you are surprised there are these men over there. You will remember that you told your name to the usher at the gates.

CA: Yes, so they'd be surprised.

PO: Yes.

CA: That this person knows your name.

PO: You'll be so surprised and so enchanted. You'll do anything he tells you...if he tells you to bring money. That's what they do.

CA: I'm definitely going to take time to see this movie.

PO: Yeah, Leap of Faith.

CA: Yeah, I wrote it down. So, you were about 18 when Nigeria gained its independence?

PO: Yes.

CA: Could you... did you know coming up into that moment that it was happening?

PO: Yes, that's when I finished secondary. Then I added two extra years to finish my higher school certificate. It was very joyous, Zik was now the President. Tafewa Balewa was Prime Minister. We were proud to be Nigerians.

Even when you are going to London in those days, you didn't need a visa. We were part of the Commonwealth. And the dollar was very inferior to the Nigerian pound. It wasn't called Nigerian naira then, it was called Nigerian pound.

CA: Okay, Nigerian pound.

PO: Yes.

CA: And it was stronger than the British pound.

PO: Yes, it was stronger than the British pound at that time.

CA: Wow.

PA: The dollar was two times weaker. That is, two dollars is equal to one Nigerian pound.

CA: Wow.

PO: But gradually, Nigeria was eroded.

CA: Yeah, so yeah, what happened to make it erode so much?

PO: I don't know but economic mismanagements. You know, when you get your goods, raw materials, and you send abroad to England, especially England, they process it, and they send it back to you. So you won't have any factories. Take a small thing like vegetable oil. You get palm oil or any vegetable. And said to be exported. Britain will now have their factories get you the vegetable oil in bottles, so you buy it. You don't produce anything, really. You just sell it to the American or British workers. And then we had oil, which Britain didn't have. But they didn't want us to try the oil. And also, criminality is forgery and corruption. Also, that money will be in Britain or France.

CA: When was the oil discovered? When did they start drilling oil in Nigeria? Was it in your lifetime?

PO: Oh, yes. The Oloibiri was the first oil plant. I guess all of them were all in Igbo land. Even now, I remember when Amanzi had a gas explosion. We were just in school and they said we should not go home. Do you know there? Amanzi, out of Awka. You had gas in the air, people said it was the end of the world. Those gas supplies had not been exploited yet. So it just exploded, and we went outside and all we could see was soot and fire.

CA: Oh my gosh. When was this?

PO: About, uh... Fifty-two. 1952.

CA: Oh, wow.

PO: I was in elementary school.

CA: Did people get hurt?

PO: Yes. Some people died.

CA: And which village was this that this happened?

PO: Amanzi.

CA: Oh, Amanzi.

PO: Amanzi gas explosion.

CA: But then they continued drilling there, or did they stop?

PO: There was not much oil there but there was a lot of gas.

CA: And that was in the beginning when they started drilling oil but then they continued.

PO: Yes.

CA: Did it get more and more? Because Igbo land is where all of the gas and the oil is, mostly.

PO: They wanted more and more.

CA: Did they keep trying to explore for more places to drill?

PO: Yes. They went further, they went to the sea and most of the oil is from offshore, west in the ocean. Nigeria is supposed to be the third largest exporter of oil and gas.

CA: And before that, Nigeria was mainly exporting like yam, was it yams and palm oil?

PO: The yam, pumpkin and oil. Not yams. Palm kernel oil. Palm oil. So you have a company like UAC, United African Company, a British company that came first as a part of British colonial rule. It was called British, what's the name then? It transformed itself to UAC,

CA: UAC?

PO: United African Company, but it's really a British company.

CA: So they named it United African Company but it was really a British company.

PO: Yes.

CA: Wow. Was it operated by British people too?

PO: No, the British people were the management. But it's what I told you, you get palm oil, palm kernel. Then the seeds. You get emulsion by the seed. Also soya beans. S-O-Y-A.

CA: S-O-Y-A. Oh, okay.

PO: The will, you farm and get these things and you come to a factor. One of my uncles was a factor in Ogoja. He sells all these things to the Europeans, that is UAC, and they will send it to Britain. And when you came back you had soy butter.

CA: So all of this was happening, and then Nigeria gained independence. So what happened, I'm trying to understand, after that joyous occasion, when Nigeria gained independence, the country changed again. And I wanted to know what your experience was like in the years leading up to the Civil War.

PO: Nigeria didn't really change, it's just that competition between the three tribes became more intense. You see, education decreased in the North. They didn't bother with education, that's why eventually, when somebody says Boko Haram, you know what Boko Haram is?

CA: Yes.

PO: What is it?

CA: It's that terrorist group in Nigeria that's predominantly in the North.

PO: What is this? Boko Haram?

CA: The meaning of it? I'm not sure what it means, I just know it's an Islam group and they tend to spread Islam?

PO: Yes, Boko Haram, Book is sin. Haram is sin in Arabic. Boko is their way of saying education. To go to school is a sin, so that's their philosophy. Nothing else. Those who could be traders traded. Those who could be farmers. They didn't believe in going to university or anything like that. So, competition between the three. Yorubas were the first to go to school, but we caught up with them. Eventually, there was competition. We believed that the Igbos were going to rule over Nigeria when I was young. And the Igbos were united. It's like, for example, when I was in university, we were at Ibadan.

CA: So, what year did you leave?

PO: What?

CA: What year did you leave Nigeria?

PO: 1963.

CA: Okay. So, had you just finished medical school?

PO: No, I didn't finish medical school.

CA: Okay.

PO: I came to America to do my first degree. And went into my courses, medical sciences.

CA: So what brought you to America?

PO: What brought me to America? What brought your father to America?

CA: Opportunity?

PO: So people went to Ibadan to do medical school, but me, I wanted to go to America. I went to the United States Agency for International Development, USAID scholarship, I went to Cornell.

CA: Okay, Cornell. Were there many other Nigerians who were doing this?

PO: Yes. You either went to USAID or you went to what they call American Society for African Students. They paid all the fees and you had to take an exam.

CA: And then if your score is high enough, you get it?

PO: Mm-hmm.

CA: And your score was high, so you got the scholarship.

PO: Yes.

CA: But you couldn't have expected for the Civil War to happen right after.

PO: Pardon?

CA: So then were you surprised when the Civil War happened right after you left?

PO: No. Because the North was...It was...

CA: Oh, so that was, the Civil War lasted from '66, or was it '66 to '70?

PO: Yes.

CA: Wow.

PO: I came back in '73.

CA: Oh wow. So you were still at Cornell when the civil war happened?

PO: Yes.

CA: Were you receiving calls from back home?

PO: Yes, we were sending money.

CA: Do you remember the first day when the war broke out? How did you find out?

PO: I thought Biafra would defeat Nigeria, through the propaganda.

CA: Was that the news from Igbo land?

PO: No, not from Igboland. I was deceived. I didn't know they were not prepared.

CA: Were there more Nigerian soldiers than Igbo soldiers?

PO: Yes. They had more equipment. We were using very inferior weapons, so we were manufacturing weapons.

CA: What kind of weapons?

PO: Like, um, a bomb called Obunigwe, it's, um, a grenade that launches, almost like a boomerang. After launching it, it will come back. One of my friends, a professor, when the first time they designed it, almost decapitated the person who launched it, because it came back to attack them. It was very powerful, like a landmine, you know. One of the things we used against the Nigerians was in Abagana.

CA: It was developed in the university.

PO: No, Abagana is not a university.

CA: No, it was developed in the university.

PO: Not in a university, it was already developed in the field. You know, our people were very ingenious. So they went underground.

CA: So some people were creating weapons and others were fighting?

PO: Yes.

CA: Do you know anyone, did you have any friends who fought?

PO: Yes, I have many friends who died. I remember your father now.

CA: Yes?

PO: He was a very, very intelligent man.

CA: Yes. Thank you.

PO: Is he still like that?

CA: He's more selective with his words, but he's very curious.

PO: He is very light and fair-skinned, right?

CA: I'm not sure... his family is fair, but my father isn't too fair. But, professor, you were saying about the Civil War. So you said that many of your friends were also fighting in it. And when the Civil War broke out, you were about 24 years of age?

PO: Yes.

CA: What was the most memorable thing about the war that you remember?

PO: I wasn't there.

CA: Or just like what you saw on the news? Or you heard on the radio.

PO: I thought the Igbos were going to win, there was a time they almost reached Ikorodu.

CA: Where is Ikorodu?

PO: Ikorodu is still in Lagos.

CA: Oh, okay.

PO: While the northerners were attacking Biafra, we also went behind. We almost reached Lagos. And Lagos was undefended. We fought the others and we didn't want to attack. So that's why they were executed.

CA: Yes.

PO: So that's why they were executed. I told that to us.

CA: They were executed?

PO: Mm-hmm. Yes, that's why they were killed. They wanted to stage a coup against the leader.

CA: Oh.

PO: They wanted Ojukwu to surrender.

CA: And that was within Biafra?

PO: Yeah.

CA: I didn't know that some people were trying to take over.

PO: Yes I think that's what Ojukwu said. Instead of going straight to Ikeja and capturing a lot of armory, they started coming back empty handed.

CA: So then, I also saw that there was a lot of starvation during the war too.

PO: Starvation, yes. I wrote a book on it. In *Science*.

CA: Okay. What was the paper on?

PO: Starvation as a means of warfare.

CA: As a means of warfare. Was this an internationally known tactic?

PO: Yes. It was. But the British didn't want to stop the war.

CA: But nobody in the world intervened to help Biafra.

PO: They did, but Russia and Britain on the British side, on the Nigeria side.

CA: So it was too much.

PO: We lost.

CA: Yeah. So then after Biafra lost, how did that affect the country? How did that change the country?

PO: It started affecting Igbos more. That's why there's still agitation for Biafra.

CA: And why was it that they wanted to keep Nigeria together?

PO: Nobody wanted to keep Nigeria. It's propaganda too.

CA: They pretended to? Wait, who pretended to, Professor?

PO: Propaganda. Gowon was saying that there was no business for, after the Aburi agreement between him and Ojukwu. As he said, there was no business for unity. They are going to the North to form their own government.

CA: So everyone was originally going to form their own government?

PO: But the British told them they are better stronger if they are together. So...

CA: So then, after you graduated from Cornell, did you go to medical school in the United States? Yes.

PO: Yes. In New York, New York medical college.

CA: Okay. So you did both undergraduate and also medical school in America?

PO: Yes.

CA: And then you decided to come back to Nigeria.

PO: Nigeria. I thought I would do that if I could.

CA: Did many people who went to study with you come back to Nigeria too?

PO: Yes, a lot of them.

CA: Is it because they wanted to help the country or...?

PO: They want to help the country.

CA: Because I think that now, people who leave typically, they won't come back in the same way.

PO: No, the country is different now. There's no opportunity for anybody.

CA: So how was Nigeria when you went back? In 1973, when you came back, how was Nigeria?

PO: Very good. The roads were safe. You drive from Enugu to Benin, or to Lagos, in one day. I used to examine in Lagos, in Benin, and Ibadan. All I did was in the evening, I will just drive from Enugu to Benin. Asaba. Benin to Ibadan. Arrive Ibadan at 9 o'clock.

CA: Wow. So when did you see the country start to get worse?

PO: Greedy leaders, they are very inept. They don't value research or education. They said if you don't want to... There was a post that will pay 14,000 naira a month. 14,000, but when Obasanjo came he said that's terrible that they should increase our salary to 400,000 a month.

CA: But before it was only 40,000.

PO: 14,000.

CA: Oh, 14,000.

PO: That's 14,000 now. Now we're being paid 400,000.

CA: Okay. Oh, so teachers began being paid more.

PO: Mm-hmm.

CA: Teachers were being paid more. Wait professor, so who was being paid 14,000? You said someone was being paid 14,000.

PO: Yes. We were paid 14,00 before Obasanjo came in and increased it.

CA: So that was a good thing?

PO: Yes.

CA: Then afterwards... So when you started as a teacher what year was that?

PO: 1973.

CA: Oh it was that same '73?

PO: Lecturer, then I rose to professor.

CA: Oh wow. At the same school?

PO: I rose to professor.

CA: Did you remain at that school?

PO: Mm-hmm.

CA: University of Nigeria Nsukka?

PO: University of Nigeria, Enugu campus. Now, I teach also at Nnamdi Azikiwe University and Odumegwu Ojukwu University.

CA: Were you always paid properly like on time?

PO: No. Not always.

CA: What happened? In the times when you didn't get paid on time.

PO: They just paid us November salary last week. Mine was half of what I should be receiving. They payroll officer called me and told me there were going to correct it.

CA: Has there been an increase in the amount of doctors who have been trained in Nigeria or is it the same amount?

PO: The same amount.

CA: And do many of the doctors that you've trained, have they stayed in the country or do they travel abroad as well.

PO: Many stayed back. Not everybody has the opportunity to travel abroad. Everywhere I go, I see my students. They are very rich. I remember one time we were going to Barbados, we were at the Kennedy Airport. And we were going to come back early and miss our flight. We went into town, so he just gave me his credit card. They will pay for the weekend. We used it to go to town. We met him at the airport.

CA: That's a blessing.

PO: Your father remembers what I taught him.

CA: He told me that you taught pharmacology.

PO: Yes.

CA: Your students have now...they travel all over the world now.

PO: Yes. Professors, directors...

CA: After going to the United States do you have...How often do you visit the United States and other countries?

PO: At least once a year. At least once. There's no country in the world I wouldn't go to to give lectures or conferences. Even Russia.

CA: Wow.

PO: My wife is a historian, too, so...

CA: And what does she study specifically? Does she specialize in a certain history?

PO: Yes, she got her PhD. Her book was on unsung heroes of African nationalism.

CA: Oh, but professor, is there any, is there anything else that you wanted to make sure entered the archive regarding your life or Nigeria, or...

PO: I'll send you my, I'll send you my biography, I'll send you.

CA: Oh thank you so much professor, I really appreciate it. I'm going to make sure that I record. I'll write up everything that we discussed to you.

PO: Okay.