

# **OCTOBER, 7<sup>TH</sup> 1967: ASABA AND THE SACRIFICE FOR NATION BUILDING**

**BY**

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## 1.0 PREAMBLE

It is incontrovertible that Asaba custom and culture and traditions has one of the richest and most colorful burial practices in Africa; if not the entire world. If you consider me excessively superlative in this statement, then you should watch my video on the recent burial of Rt. Rev. Mnsgr. Chukwumah. The iconoclastic Monsignor Chukwumah was until his death on July, 30<sup>th</sup> this year, our parish priest in St. Joseph's Pro-Cathedral. From all walks of life; from all homes; from all nooks and corners and from inside and outside of Asaba, Asaba sons and daughters poured out in their thousands to pay their last respects.

Whether it was deliberate or purely coincidental Asaba people were indeed responding and hearkening to his last wishes. My brother, the Rev. Fr. Biachi, one of his successor sons in the Lord, recalled his reminiscences in the ambulance, when they were taking the Monsignor to University of Benin Teaching Hospital, a few days before his demise. The sage had asked Fr. Biachi, " Nka njeko, amam ma nga natakwa. Ma ndika natakwa o, egwu ota ga fio; egwu ji ga fio; egwu uje ga fio; egwugwu gap u."

I can confirm to you all here and now and without equivocation, that after the full catholic doctrinal funeral rites due our most revered parish priest, egwu ota fio. Egwu ji fio. My village Umuaji, in which the egwu uje is traditionally domiciled, made it fio the way I have not known previously. Our nna and egwugwu, the most respected ancestral masked spirit of all the quarters in Asaba were abroad. It was indeed a carnival and a spectacle to behold; which am sure many kings will beg to be given. AHABA UNU KWA FADA UNU. DALU NU.

Before we leave the subject of Fr. Chukwumah's life and times permit me to remind you of one of his most cherished desires. I happen to know from many of my not too frequent visits to him, that he was committed to the cause of the Diocese of Asaba. The logic for an Asaba Diocese is so, so overwhelming and long, long over- due as to make the present situation incongruent. When a case is so convincing, then it is collective failure, when we refrain from standing up for it. So my injunction to all well meaning Asaba personages today is do not forget so soon, the things that Fr. Chukwumah stood for. The 14<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Lotel once wrote "...it is the imbecile of a son, who will consign his father's memory to oblivion."

Now to the subject of our gathering here today; to the best of my recollection, never has Asaba community, as a collective honored its sons and may be (daughters ) who lost their lives on that gory showery afternoon of October 7<sup>th</sup> 1967. Yes, individual families or kinsmen, might have consummated the characteristic funeral rituals of their respective departed loved ones over the years. But those whose lives were so brutally terminated on October 7<sup>th</sup> 1967, died for the same national cause on the same day. The least we owe them therefore, is that we properly and consciously and collectively, as a community and nation commemorate their huge sacrifice.

Curiously this is the very reason of our assembly here today. To remember or better still, not to consign to oblivion, the memories of our grand fathers and fathers and brothers and

sons who paid the ultimate sacrifice on October 7<sup>th</sup> so that Nigeria can remain one. The slogan after all was “ To keep Nigeria one is, a task that must be done.” Or have you forgotten?

## **2.0 MISSION STATEMENT.**

I draw from Mark Anthony’s eulogy in Julius Caesar in fashioning out my mission statement today. I come to commemorate October 7<sup>th</sup> 1967 and not to condemn anyone. In the same national interest for which they laid down their lives, I ask for no probes, no Nuremberg-like or Geneva-like war crime inquisitions: only that their memories be not consigned to oblivion. My task today therefore is less of defining the events of October 7<sup>th</sup> as it happened, as it is of defining the importance of that day from the perspective of Nation building. It is a poignant coincidence that we celebrate Nigeria’s fiftieth year as an independent nation this same October. My assertion is that no other town and its people collectively, nay if unwillingly and unknowingly gave up so much of itself, so that Nigeria may be one. I fear that I might even be inadvertently whittling down the noble nature of this sacrifice, by my rather careless usage of the words “unwillingly” and “unknowingly” in describing how their lives were laid down for our country to remain united. It is on record that some of the few who miraculously escaped the massacres in Ogbe Osowe and Umuaji, recall hearing and actually seeing some, who had luckily survived the first volley of shots by being buried under those who did not survive, actually calling out to the soldiers to come back and finish off the job because “ See me, I never die o.”

Therefore that which I have referred to here as unwilling and unknowing, might after all be very, very deliberately and voluntarily offered. Those of the military who fought and laid down their lives have been honored either for individual or group effort by our country. This is rightly so and no one contests that. The armed forces remembrance day and the tomb of the Unknown Soldier bear testimony to these practices world-wide.

## **3.0 ASABA AND NATION BUILDING.**

Since nation building is the central theme of this thesis, it will be worth our while to examine in which ways individuals or groups in a community can contribute to nation building.

### **3.1 DEFINITIONS**

Quoting from the open Wikipedia, “Nation-building refers to the process of constructing or structuring a national identity using the power of the state. This process aims at the unification of the people or peoples within the state so that it remains politically stable and

viable in the long run. Nation-building can involve the use of propaganda or major infrastructure development to foster social harmony and economic growth.”

There is therefore no doubt that state power often plays some role in instilling nation building: in many instances coercively. This seemingly external influence by state power in the unification of a nation or a people need not detract from the individual contributions of members of a community either as single persons or as a collective. The role of the individual in nation building is best appreciated under the heading leadership.

### **3.1.1 LEADERSHIP IN NATION BUILDING**

Before, during and since October 7<sup>th</sup> 1967, Asaba people have contributed immensely in nation building in Nigeria in various aspects of endeavor. Small as the city on the Niger is and few as their relative population is, the activities of its sons and daughters in all spheres of life is mammoth. This author does not intend to be economical with the mention of prominent Asaba sons and daughters and the areas and specialties in which they have sold their wares. Yet I must point out, that apart from the impracticability of sieving out every role played by people of Asaba ancestry in the building of Nigeria, it is also equally herculean to be able to do justice to the many persons involved. Therefore I apologize in advance and profusely too, if I omit any genuine contributions. Believe me it is purely inadvertent. Perhaps such names, if any, should be communicated to me for possible future periodic revision of this treatise.

- (i) **LEADERSHIP IN GOVERNANCE;** The very first Premier of the defunct Midwest Region, when it was excised from the old Western Region in 1963 was Chief Dennis Osadebe, the then Ojiba of Asaba of Umuezei Quarters. The first Nigerian Director of Mines at independence was Mr. Daniel Obiago of Idumugbe, just as the first indigenous substantive Director of the Nigerian National Archives was late Mr. Lloyd Gwam of Umuaji. Although fate did not permit him a protracted stay in office: by the time of his death in 1965 after only a year or so as substantive Director, he had already become fabled for his huge contributions in re-engineering the archival retrieval system in Nigeria, even as a Principal Archives Officer. He is on record as having personally supervised the relocation of the Nigerian Archives to its temporary headquarters in Ibadan. In chronological other, mention must be made of the leadership roles of Chief N. Edozien from Umuezei and father of the present Asagba of Asaba and who was the Secretary of the Nigerian Coal Board in Enugu. And when it was time for the coinage of the terminology “ Super Permsec” Asaba was promptly represented by no less a personality than Chief Philip Asiodu of Umuda in Umuaji. Leadership at the very apex of national governance did not elude Asaba with the appointment of Chief Emmanuel Edozien, the current Ojiba, as the Economic adviser to the Shagari administration post military rule in 1979. It is also on record that his younger brother, the Odafe of Asaba Chief John Edozien served as Deputy Governor in

both the defunct Bendel State and subsequently in Delta State when it was created out of the former. Noteworthy in the governance of the old Bendel State are the contributions of Professor Mathias Obiaya, the Osuma of Asaba from Umudaike, who was both Commissioner for Works and Acting Governor at various times. The versatile Iyase of Asaba, Chief Goodluck Onyeobi of Umuezei, held the office of Secretary to Bendel State Government at a period in which Asaba witnessed considerable infrastructural upgrading. He is therefore the imperious emissary of Asaba indigenes in that position, as he was closely followed by late Kordit Mordi of Umuaji, who became the Secretary to the Delta State Government. In contemporary times, Sir Okey Ofili, of Umuda, Umuaji, the present Head of Service in Delta State Government heads a pack of Asaba indigenes comprising several sons and daughters who are commissioners, special advisers or permanent secretaries. Permit me, purely on account of gender balance, to mention just the two female Permanent Secretaries. They are Dr. Mrs. Alfrida Uraih of Umuezei/Umudaike and Mrs. Martina Osaji of Umuaji/Umuezei

(ii) **LEADERSHIP IN POLITICS:** Mention has already been made of the late sage Chief Dennis Osadebe who became the first Premier of the Midwest Region. The corresponding political edifice of the late Chief J.I.G.Onyia of Umuezei and erstwhile frontline political heavy weight and Member of the Federal House in the first Republic must be documented. At various times the late jurist and Senator Dan Azinge from Umudaike and Ogbueshi Goziem Onyia were politically relevant in Asaba. Still visibly active in today's political Terrain are Senator Francis Nwajei of Umudaike, Ogbueshi Ndozi Onyia and Barr. Mrs. Adora Giwa-Amu one time Hon. Commissioner of Women Affairs in this state.

(iii) **LEADERSHIP IN THE FIELD OF MEDICINE:** At the last count my statistics for Asaba sons and daughters who are qualified medical doctors is well over the 300 mark. I intend to produce an accurate and verifiable register. If confirmed, it makes Asaba easily the town with the highest 'per capita' indigenous medics nationwide, continent-wide and probably world-wide. I am not joking. Suffice it to mention a few names only here, of some of the older first generation accomplished doctors Asaba has produced. Amongst these are the late Dr. Obiakpani of Umuezei, late Dr. Peter Ofili of Umuda in Umuaji, late Dr. J. B. Azinge of Umudaike, late Dr. Osuzoka of Ogbe Osowe. Late Dr. Akwule of Umuaji, is on my record, as the only doctor, among those mowed down on that fateful October 7<sup>th</sup>. The present Asagba of Asaba, was the Dean of the Faculty of Medicine in the University of Ibadan, as far back as in the 60s, and is at the head of contemporary senior retired medical doctors of Asaba descent; including but not restricted to Professor J. Obi of Umuonaje, Dr. Nicholas Azinge of Umudaike, Prof. M. Obiaya of Umudaike, Prof. Peter Isichei of Umuaji, Prof. F. Iweze of Umuezei and Prof. Mrs. Angela Okolo of Umuaji/Umuezei. To the best of

available records, the first two CMDs in quick succession of the Federal Medical Centre Asaba were Chief Dr. Francis Edozien of Umuezei and Dr. Greg Eboh also of Umuezei. Dr. Odinma Ofili of Umuda, Umuaji who is currently a Permanent Secretary in the Delta State Civil Service, was earlier the Medical Director in the Delta State Hospital Services and was preceded in these two positions by Dr. Mrs. Veronica Onianwa of Umuaji/Ogbe Awo. There are so many among the senior medics who still maintain very viable private practices; they include Dr. Louis Odogwu of Ogbe Ogo, proprietor of Leila Hospitals Benin, Dr. David Maduemezie of Umudaike and proprietor of Nwakaego Hospital Asaba, Dr. Ngozi Allannah of Umuekwu and proprietor of Avenue Specialist Clinic, Warri, Dr. B.O.C. Chukwumah of Umuezei and proprietor of St Mary's Hospital Warri. So also are the two brothers, both physicians, Dr. Alex Nwajei and Dr. Anthony Nwajei, who hail from Umudaike and maintain very viable practices in Agbor and Asaba respectively.

- (iv) **LEADERSHIP IN THE FIELD OF LAW AND JURISPRUDENCE:** Although not as numerically strong in the field of Law as we are in Medicine, Asaba citizens who took up Law as a profession delivered to a proud topping as well. Notable among them are the late Justices Chike Idigbe from Umuaji and Uche Omo from Ogbe Ogo, both Justices of the Supreme Court of Nigeria. The late Justice Oditia of Umuezei, was Chief Judge of Delta State before his retirement. Similarly, the late Olisa Chukwurah SAN of Umuonaje blazed the trail among Asaba sons called to the pre-eminent legal club of senior advocate of Nigeria. Today, in very active service are Chief Anthony Idigbe SAN of the Punuka Chambers Lagos and Prof. Epiphany Azinge SAN, arguably the foremost legal academic and who is the current DG of the Nigerian Institute of Advanced Legal Studies.
- (v) **LEADERSHIP IN EDUCATION-FROM THE CRADLE:** Whether the individual turns out to be a successful professional of whatever description, will depend most certainly or largely on the educational foundation. I place a huge amount of premium on the profession of Teaching and by extension, the Teacher. It probably stems from my own cherished career and history. My own father was an accomplished teacher. He was generally known in this town as "Onye nkuzi". Or better still "Onye nkuzi opia itali." His career, as either travelling teacher or headmaster or Agric-master traversed the whole of what was the mid-west of the old Western Region, from Asaba to Ogwashi-Uku to Uromi, where I was born, to Ewu to Auchi and finally to Abraka from where he took ill in 1955 and later died. It is an understatement to say that teaching is [or should be] the most prized career. It is no wonder then that it was our Lord's chosen occupation. Note how he was addressed as The Master or Teacher at various times.

“And when he was gone forth into the way, there came one running, and kneeled to him, and asked him, Good Master, what shall I do that I might inherit eternal life?” Mark 10:17.

“And behold a certain lawyer stood up, and tempted him, saying, Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” Luke 10:25.

“And a certain ruler asked him, saying, Good Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” Luke 18:18.

“ And when she had so said, she went her way, and called Mary her sister secretly, saying, The Master is come and calleth for thee.” John 11:28.

“..Lord teach us to pray..” Luke 11:1.  
To illustrate the import of good and dedicated teaching in the life of the child I will digress a little to visit my Pry VI year in Township/Council School Sapele, in 1961. My classroom teacher then was nicknamed Mr. Mental. I guess Mr. Mental knew, that his pupils had a code name for him; but he probably did not give a damn. It was a bit difficult to make him out those days, since he hardly even smiled. He was just simply focused on his teaching. For example, Mr. Mental never went for the morning assembly, which our then headmaster Mr. Iyangaga held ever so religiously. Instead, he stayed behind in the class and put up twenty arithmetic sums on the blackboard very religiously too.

As soon as the morning Assembly ended and we returned to the classroom, each pupil reached for their exercise book and descended on the 20 sums; with Mr. Mental quietly and slowly pacing about the room; with his koboko provocatively protruding from his long hose. After 30 minutes, Mr. Mental collected the scripts and graded them. The rules were quite simple: the number of strokes of the cane you got was the number of sums you failed. And there were a few toughs among us those days. I recall Aiyewu, one of my classmates, who would come to the class, padded with about 3 shorts and would commence his approach to receive his daily tonic of 20 strokes, even before Mr Mental had finished marking and calling the result. Since I dreaded the raised rod so much even those days, the only option was to work extremely hard, not to fail Mr. Mental’s sums every morning. The immediate impact of this in my life was that at that tender age of twelve, I had mastered a complete array of formulae for dealing with mental arithmetic.

I must confess to you now, that although I attended the great Loyola College Ibadan, I never sat for the formal interview. After passing the Common Entrance exam that year, the proximity factor made my uncle and guardian ( late Mr. B.O. Nwanze, a great surveyor and who was himself the foremost Lands Officer of Mid-western dissent in the old Western Region of Nigeria) opt for Government College Ugheli, on the day of the interview, since we were then in Sapele.

Everything went smoothly and I was to resume school in January 1962. But my uncle who was then in the Geological Surveys, got summarily transferred to Oshogbo just before school was to resume in the new year. Clearly Oshogbo was too far out from Ugheli, for a little twelve year old boy to be commuting. My uncle sought recourse to reopen our interest in Loyola College Ibadan. The Principal then, Rev. Fr. Mackle of blessed memory would not hear of our request for admission, since I did not turn up for the interview earlier in the year. My aunty, Mrs. Theresa Ndep, a staunch catholic, who came along with us almost exhausted her power of persuasion before Rev. Fr. Mackle, somewhat reluctantly, agreed to meet us half way. They were to leave me behind and return for me at 2pm, during which time, he was to administer my own written interview himself.

My uncle and aunty had practically just driven off, when Fr. Mackle, with me in the opposite chair facing him, directed his Secretary to take me to the staff room, where he was coming to issue the test papers. But just as I stood up to follow the Secretary, Fr. casually threw a question at me; “ My dear young man, how many three-pence are in £1:7s:6d (One pound, seven shillings and six pence). I immediately invoked my therapy with Mr. Mental. There are four three pence in one shilling and twenty shillings in one pound.

£1 has 20X4 three pence = 80

7s has 7X4 three pence = 28

6d has only 2 three pence = 2

Total =110.

I gave Rev. Fr. Mackle the answer within a twinkle of an eye. Matter of ten to twenty seconds I imagine. I noticed that he slowly removed his glasses from his face; took a second look at me and without uttering any further word, dismissed his Secretary with a wave of the hand and searched nervously in his drawer for the template of the admission letter, which he promptly, there and then issued to me. I was to resume school immediately. There was no further written interview.

My straight passage into Loyola College, even when I did not write the formal interview, was a powerful testimony, of the efficacy, of the untiring effort and dedication of Mr. Mental and all his types everywhere. I pay them unreservedly, my undiluted respects. Asaba has produced so many Mr. Mentals, amongst its numerous men and women, engaged in teaching at both the Primary and Secondary levels. I can only use a few fabled names, among the early starters, to eulogize them all. They include Chief J.I.G. Onyia, the two brothers Mr. A. C.

Nwanze and Mr. R.O. Nwanze, Mr. Okafor Nma, Mr. H. Monu, Mr. Igbodo, Mr. Anisha as well as the two brothers Mr. F. Isichei and Mr. Leonard Isichei, all of blessed memory now.

(vi) **LEADERSHIP IN ACADEMIA AND RESEARCH:** If Asaba would be so blessed with great educators at the lower levels of Primary and Secondary education, it was logical that with time they would emerge big players, in the big league of tertiary education. Again early results from statistics being compiled, indicate that we may have over 150 Asaba indigenes, serving as Professors in various disciplines in practically all the countries, all over the world. To cap it all, four eminent Asaba sons, have recorded the rare feat, of having headed a University at one time or the other. Heading a University anywhere in the world requires men or women with immense wisdom and vision. But in Nigeria in particular, with our many nuances and ethnic jingoism, the job quite often, portends immense dangers, if you are determined to lead and show the light, as should appropriately be the case. Two Asaba sons, Professor Frank Ndili, of Umuagu and Professor Emmanuel A.C. Nwanze, of Umuda, Umuaji, have had the distinct and exceptional honor and privilege of being appointed Vice-Chancellors of Federal Universities. One Asaba indigene, Professor Awele Maduemezie, of Umudaike, was appointed Vice-Chancellor of a State University and one more, Professor Nduka Uraih from Umudaike also, was not too long ago, appointed Vice-Chancellor in Tansi University, a private concern. Professor Ndili, served meritoriously as Vice-Chancellor in the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. He put his foot down to correct so many anomalies he found in the system then and met with opposition, from those who were reluctant to accept reform. He was practically chased away from the University. Yet I have it on good authority, that after Ndili left, UNN hardly knew any peace, through the tenures of many VCs, until 'a Daniel came to judgement' when Prof. Nebo was appointed Vice-Chancellor to UNN in 2004. He reviewed the situation and in fact recalled Prof. Ndili for the University to officially apologize to him and accord him his due respects for the wonderful job he did for the University.

It pleased the Almighty Lord to use our former President to insist on merit in the appointment of my humble self, as Vice-Chancellor of the University of Benin, another Federal University in February, 2004. Only the strength and character of a strong President like General Olusegun Obasanjo GCFR could have ridden over all the obstacles and impediments, that were suddenly being thrown up, from far and near would you believe; after I topped the interview of twenty-eight eminent Professors. No I am not an arrogant man. It is just that I am not given to being conservative with the truth, even when controversy rages. I have now successfully completed my five year tenure and I am happy to announce to you, without an iota of doubt, that the University of Benin has been wonderfully re-

engineered and repositioned into a world standard institution. The University could not otherwise, have emerged in the 2<sup>nd</sup> position (of a total of 948 other Universities in the Commonwealth) in the Commonwealth University of the Year Competition 2006. The facts on ground shame and humiliate all those, who mischievously choose to draw other conclusions. A visitation Panel, comprising five of the most knowledgeable authorities in University matters anywhere in the world, has submitted its full report on the governance of the University between 2004 and 2009. From the grapevine I hear the kudos. Time will reveal more of the intrigues.

Professor Awele Maduemezie, also had severe challenges in Ekpoma. He also turned the fortunes of Ambrose Alli University Ekpoma around favorably. However, he was similarly not spared the vituperations and scorn of those he probably stepped on their toes, whilst reforming the place. When Bendel State was split into Edo/Delta, the ethnic warlords took over. As stated above, Prof. Nduka Uraih is currently engaged as the Vice-Chancellor of Tansi University, a private enterprise. Even though the University has only just taken off, we are already beginning to hear and read about the rigors and intrigues in its governance, to the extent that, there are now contesting claims to management of the University by different groups. I can only advise Prof. Uraih, my in-law, to remain focused on the mission statement which I expect he set for himself. The former Minister of Education, Mrs. Nora Obaji, who I believe was on his recruitment drive committee, asked my opinion, as his VC in Benin then, about his suitability for the job and I had no hesitation in favorably recommending him.

In the area of Leadership of Research Institutes, Dr. Oni Idigbe from Umuaji headed the Nigerian Institute of Medical Research successfully for a full tenure. Reports available to me point to the marvelous work he did there.

(vii) **LEADERSHIP IN ENTERPRISE AND CONSTRUCTION:** In all fields of enterprise, Asaba sons have made immense impacts. Names of prominent sons include Chief Sonny Odogwu, the Ide Ahaba who is so universally acclaimed and visible. He hails from my own quarter of Umuaji as well and it has been my distinct privilege knowing and associating with him. Also Chief Philip Asiodu from the same Umuaji is well invested in business, many with direct impact on Asaba such as The Summit Factory. There exists many captains of industry in several private organizations who are Asaba indigenes. Notable among them are Mrs. Mary Uraih, of Umuaji/Umudaike currently the Director of Human Resources, of The Giant Flour Mills PLC. Other prominent Asaba indigenes investing in or directly involved in construction at one time or the other include, Engineer Prof. P. Okwuobi, Asaba's first Professor of Engineering, Chief Oni Edozien, Engr. Amaechi Chizea, Engr. Okwudarue. It is also an established fact that both Mr.

Nelson Ononye and the present Onihe of Asaba Chief Ubaka Ato are serious players in the mining sector. The most topical subject in Delta State now, I suppose, is the new Asaba International Airport, which we have been assured will be commissioned this year. It is being built by no less a person than Mr. Uche Opkuno. Ogbueshi Okpuno, if you make our dreams of flying in and out of this beautiful city from anywhere in the world a reality, I assure you of a place of distinction in Asaba history. The December date must not shift.

(viii) **LEADERSHIP IN INTERNATIONAL DIPLOMACY:** Yes our sons and daughters have represented this nation at the highest levels internationally. The present Nigerian Permanent Representative at the United Nations is a remarkable Asaba woman, who until that appointment was first the DG Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, before moving up as Foreign Affairs Minister. She is Prof. Mrs. Joy Ogwu ( nee Maduemezie) from Umudaiké. Other sons of Asaba who have headed diplomatic Missions include, Abassadors S. Okobi of Umuda, Umuaji, Leo Okogwu of Ogbo Ogo and Amb. Monu of Umuaji. Another of the great Nwanze siblings in the person of Dr. F.K. Nwanze is the current President of the world-wide Agricultural development body IFAD.

(ix) **LEADERSHIP IN THE MILITARY:** Asaba has contributed a rich quota to the military. Names such as Col. Ochei, of Umuagu, Col. Okonkwo, of Umuaji, Col. Achuzia, of Umuezei, Lt. Col. J.O. Akaraiwe, Lt. Okonweze of Umuezei, and Lt. Okonji of Ogbe Agueze and Wing Cmdr. P. Iweze of Umuezei ( retired ) are household names that tell of our noble contributions in this sphere of life as well.

(x) **LEADERSHIP IN THE ARTS AND LITERATURE:** In a more direct reference to the reason of our gathering here today, I underscore and underline the remarkable contributions of two Asaba sons/descendants whose writings have drawn attention to the need for posterity not to lose sight of the sacrifice for nation building which October 7<sup>th</sup> entails. I refer to the spectacular writings of Mr. Emmanuel Okocha appropriately titled 'Blood On The Niger'. I do not think I have come across a more comprehensive and accurate account of what happened in Asaba in the light drizzle of that day October 7<sup>th</sup> 1967. I have since also come across a book 'Surviving in Biafra' by Alfred Obiora Uzokwe, whose mother is from the Gwam family of Umuaji. A very vivid account of the fate that befell the Gwam family on that dreadfull day is rendered in that book. Many other budding authors from Asaba are making good contributions. Notable among these are the two volumes on Asaba costoms and sayings and proverbs, thus far written by Mr. Augustine Ndili of Umuagu. Pa Ilo Okwudiafor, senior citizen and erstwhile retired Permanent Secretary, has written a worthwhile account on the coming of Christianity to Asaba.

(xi) **LEADERSHIP IN CUSTOMS AND PRISONS SERVICES:** These important government agencies have also been on the receiving end of meritorious national service by prominent Asaba indigenes. Chief T.D. Rapu of Umuezei, Chief

S.Agili of Umudaike distinguished themselves in the top management of the Nigerian Customs and Postal Services respectively whilst his brother Mr. Chukwuma Agili and Mr. George Nwamu of Umuda Umuaji retired from the top echelons of the Prisons Services.

(xii) **LEADERSHIP IN FINANCE HOUSES (INSURANCE & BANKING):** We were not to be outdone in the direct management of finance institutions. Notable early performers in these spheres include Chief Odigwe, of Union Bank, Chief Nwokolo of Unique Assurance and Mr. Okolie of First Bank all of Umuaji who distinguished themselves at the apex of their professions. So also are Chief Ofili of Umuonaje of the African Continental Bank, Mr. Adaba of Umudaike, of First Bank and Mr. Onyeama Ugboko of Ogbe Ilo of the Afribank fame.

(xiii) **LEADERSHIP IN RELIGIOUS LIFE:** Most appropriately as the town on the bank of the great Niger, who first encountered Christainity, our sons and daughters have given selfless service to Church. We opened this treatise by paying glowing tributes to our recently deceased Monsignor C. Chukwumah of Umuezei. Preceding him was the first Asaba ordained catholic priest, Monsignor Ugboko, of Ogbe Ilo, who for many years was the rector at The SS Peter and Paul Major Seminary, Ibadan. They both are late now but blazed a trail which has yielded much fruit. With us are notable very senior catholic Priests such as Rev. Fr. Isichei, of Umuaji and Rev. Fr. Vincent Mordi also of Umuaji and the first Nigerian Prior of The St Benedict's Monastery, Ewu. Amongst our daughters, we have the first Asaba woman to profess her vows as a catholic nun, Rev. Sister Nuala Edozien from Umuezei. Rev. Sister Mordi from Umuaji is the Mother Superior of the congregation of Our Lady of Apostles. The service to the Christain Church is not limited to the catholic church alone. One of our finest Bishops in the Anglican Communion, Rt. Rev. Emmanuel Chukwuma, Bishop of Enugu Diocese is from Asaba.

(xiv) **LEADERSHIP IN ENTERTAINMENT/MUSIC:** Do not imagine that Asaba would allow itself to be outdone in the field of music. Two gentlemen of blessed memory help locate Asaba in the entertainment lexicon of this country between the 1950s to the 1980s. These are in chronological order Mr. Okonkwo Adigwe and Zeal Onyia. Okonkwo Adigwe's " Ebe awelem di" and Zeal Onyia's many works especially "Weli nu Ekwolo tunya nofia" are simply legendary and everlasting.

#### **4.0 OCTOBER 7TH THE ULTIMATE IN NATION BUILDING:**

We should be in no doubt whatsoever about the worthy contributions of Asaba indigenes of various disciplines and hues to nation building ; at least from the perspective of voluntary service in leadership. The point being made is that the events of October 7th marked an even higher call to nation building albeit coerced.

That day, forty-three years to this day, Asaba people came out from their homes and places of other engagements in response to a call to come out and welcome and receive the conquering Federal troops. When the troops requested them to separate into groups of males and females, they naively complied never having ever witnessed such event before in their lives.. The men were marched away to the more secluded axis of Ogbe Osowe- Ilo-Umuaji-Ogbe Ilo. When the guns started blazing it was too late to escape. The staccato over, only the groans of those on the throes of death could be heard with blood flowing freely: indeed 'blood on the niger'. The few alive or not completely dead who had been clobbered to the ground by the falling dead could be heard calling on the soldiers to come on and finish the job. Hence the weak cries of " See me, I never die o" earlier referred to. Is there still any doubt that some gave up their lives willingly.

" Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends".  
John 15:13

#### **5.0 OUR OBLIGATIONS AS THEIR HEIRS:**

To the extent that we survived them or were born after them we have become their heirs. What then must we do to sustain the noble cause for which they paid the ultimate price? To help us understand better, let us recall Barack Obama's address on 'ground zero' on September 11th, 2010 during the commemoration of the terrorist attack on America, on the same date 2001. "For our nation, this is a day of remembrance; a day of reflection. A day when we gather on these hallowed grounds." That is a statesman leading his countrymen to make the right choices to preserve today for tomorrow's generation. The controversy over the 9/11 memorial site is not whether there should be a memorial; rather it is whether America is prepared to tolerate an Islamic centre in a place where Islamist extremists ruthlessly terminated the lives of over 3000 persons of the world. All are irrevocably convinced and committed to the cause that there must be a befitting edifice, in which the names of all three thousand victims would be engraved. It is the right thing to do. It is what the specie homo sapiens does everywhere this kind of thing has happened. Sometimes, I wonder whether some of us qualify to classify as homo sapiens- "wise man". We might just as well pass off as "homo utilitarian": i.e very good at utilizing what others create. All through history and all over the world, homo sapiens have used commemorative features and memorabilia to mark such events. The holocaust memorials at the last count, have exceeded the hundred mark. They are to be found even in far away Australia, where evidently there was no hunting down and killing of Jews. But the great Jewish people in their migration have made it a point of duty to always remind themselves and others of the terrible atrocities which xenophobia can lead to. It is, as one of my Jewish friends once pointed out to me, to remind the next generation, rather than to re-awaken old bitterness. It was Disraeli, the great British politician who once said that " A politician thinks of the next election whereas a statesman thinks of the next generation."

Forty-three years have gone like the wind. It was just like yesterday. By the next forty-three years there will almost certainly be no eye witness account; because even a baby born on that day would be eighty-six and could not possibly give an account of what transpired. What a grave loss that will entail for the next generation, who will certainly hold us accountable for failing to preserve their past. So let us stop being politicians and try to be statesmen. What, for heaven's sake is wrong with our heads? Many of us will hop into the plane and jet away overseas. We will be photographed proudly with the pigeons in Trafalgar Square ( a war memorial). Even in the thick of winter, we step out in our heavy winter coats (looking out of place, if you ask me) to record our visit to the Arlington Cemetery in Washington (another commemorative ground for American heroes). It beats my imagination how we can treasure these commendable landmarks in other people's places and yet when mention is made that we should work to commemorate our very own, our remark is " omekwa. Hapu kanu ife".

## 6.0 CONCLUDING REMARKS:

(i) perhaps the fears and apprehension of some about commemorating October 7<sup>th</sup> can be understood: especially in the knowledge that some of the dramatis personae are very much around. And perhaps not only around but quite still very influential in the leadership of the country. But October 7<sup>th</sup> 1967 was a reality. It happened. Take it to the sea bed and like the fabled banana peel, it will float in due cause. Paradoxically, it is the open confrontation with the facts which will best douse troubled consciences.

(ii) Yet it must be borne in mind that forty-three years have gone by and the wounds should have healed, especially in the spirit of reconciliation. What remains are the scars that can never be wished away. It was better that we note the scars to remind us that we must make conscious efforts never to walk that way again.

(iii) As a direct way forward, I wish to identify very strongly with the proposal that a befitting cenotaph is put up in an appropriate place, with the names of all the victims of October 7<sup>th</sup> engraved. With many eye witnesses still alive, this is the time for accurate verification of the victims.

(iv) It is not naïve at all to state categorically that this author has absolutely no interest in any form of inquisition or Nuremberg –like or Geneva-like or Rwanda-like war crimes hearing. The superior logic of nation building, the bed rock of my thesis here, renders such probes untenable.

(v) I call for honor and remembrance for the dead and not for any form of financial compensation. What measure of money will compensate the lives lost: where sometimes up to seven siblings were lost in a family? Asaba people are a proud race and we abhor putting a price on the head of our kinsmen. It will amount to asking for a ransom and therefore tantamount to extortion. Therefore if for the remotest reason, this initiative is a smokescreen for compensation claims, I opt out.

(vi) Agreed that funds will be required to execute the cenotaph project if accepted: such funds should be domiciled with a respectable and accountable body such as the Asagba-in-Council or ADU. I propose further that in order to effectively mobilize for such funds, a graduated universal levy of all Asaba males should be considered. For example, all olinzeles could be levied the sum of ₦=1M [one million naira] only; all nkpalors ₦=250,000.00 [Two hundred and fifty thousand naira] only and ngba mkpisis ₦=100,000.00 [One hundred thousand naira] only. Further voluntary contributions can come from all and sundry. There should be no sourcing of funds into individual pockets. It is after tasking ourselves that we will have the moral leverage to reach out to Government and external agencies for support.

(vii) It remains for me to register my deep appreciation to the President and entire Executive of Asaba Development Union (ADU) for inviting me to give this talk. I share the sentiments

that “their memories must never be forgotten”. I identify with Lotel’s quote earlier stated “It is an imbecile of a son that will consign the memory of his father to oblivion” The living owe the dead an obligation to remember them.

**THANK YOU ALL FOR LISTENING TO ME.**