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The Asaba massacre and the Nigerian civil war: reclaiming hidden history

S. ELIZABETH BIRD AND FRASER OTTANELLI

This article explores the consequences of a massacre of civilians in Asaba, a town on the west bank of the river Niger, during the early stages of the Nigerian civil war. While ethnically Igbo, Asaba was not part of the Igbo-dominated Biafra, remaining part of the ethnically diverse midwest region. In the international memory of the war, the midwest action, which claimed several thousand lives, has been eclipsed by the catastrophic events east of the Niger, after the federal blockade of Biafra. This article sheds new light on the human cost of the war on civilian populations outside Biafra. Drawing on interviews with survivors and their descendants, we describe the killings, pillaging and rapes that followed the arrival of the federal troops, and trace the long-term impact and memory of the physical and human devastation in Asaba on family structure, gender roles, educational opportunities and social structure. We show how the official suppression of the massacres, coupled with Biafran awareness of the events, contributed to the subsequent course of the war, and we suggest that this suppression has left a legacy that perpetuates resentment and has kept ethnic tensions alive to this day.

Introduction: the October massacres

In October 1967, a few months into the Nigerian civil war, federal troops entered Asaba, a small town on the west bank of the River Niger, in pursuit of the retreating Biafran army. Over the next few days, at least a thousand civilians were killed, and the town was left in ruins. News of the atrocities was suppressed by the federal government and, consequently, subsequent histories of the war barely mention the massacre.¹

In an earlier article, drawing on three years of interviews with survivors and witnesses of the killings, pillaging and rapes, we reconstructed the history of the Asaba massacre, using their accounts and available archival sources.² In so doing, we aimed to describe the details of the events that unfolded over a few weeks, while suggesting longer-term consequences. In this new article, drawing on additional interviews and sources, we focus more centrally on the short- and long-term impact of the Asaba killings, providing new insight into the nature of the war as well as into the legacy of ethnic suspicion that continues to reverberate in Nigeria today.

The civil war had broken out in July 1967, when Lt. Col. Chukwuemeka Ojukwu, governor of the predominantly Igbo eastern region, declared its

independence as the sovereign state of Biafra. Ojukwu argued that Igbos were not safe within Nigeria, responding to massacres of Igbo people in the north and west, following the coup and counter-coup of 1966. These ‘pogroms’, as the Igbo called them, had prompted thousands to return to their ancestral homes in the east or mid-western regions.³ After the conflict had simmered for a few weeks, Ojukwu made a decision that was to prove momentous—to send Biafran troops across the Niger to invade the midwest. This was the most multi-ethnic of the four Nigerian regions, and was outside Biafra, which lay east of the Niger. On 9 August, Biafran troops crossed into Asaba using the new bridge that had been constructed in 1966.

The apparent purpose of the invasion was to draw advancing federal troops away from Biafra’s capital, Enugu, and perhaps even to capture Lagos. The Biafrans spread west, overrunning Benin City and advancing as far west as Ore, barely a hundred miles from Lagos, where they were halted after key bridges were blown up. However, by late September, the hastily organized federal Second Infantry Division, under Col. Murtala Muhammed, had pushed back and retaken Benin City. By 4 October, they had forced the Biafrans back to Asaba, where they retreated across the Niger, blowing up two spans of the bridge and leaving the federal troops angry and frustrated at their inability to pursue their enemy.⁴ The people of Asaba became the victims of the troops’ anger, with hundreds dying at their hands in the next few days.

Before the war, Asaba was a quiet town known mostly for high levels of education; estimates of its population in 1967 vary from 5,000 to 30,000.⁵ Although linguistically Igbo, Asabans consider themselves distinct from their cousins in the east, often claiming the identity ‘Anioma’,⁶ and their region officially favoured the government’s ideal of ‘One Nigeria’. The Biafran troops had passed through Asaba without incident; however, as federal troops advanced, reports were reaching the townspeople of killings of Igbo by other ethnic groups in the midwest, and people were anxious. Many in Asaba undoubtedly held sympathy for Biafra and distrusted the government, justifiably believing that it had condoned previous atrocities against the Igbo; some, including the Asagba (traditional leader), fled to the east or elsewhere.⁷ Nevertheless, Asaba’s population also included many current and retired high-ranking civil servants, who had a strong allegiance to a unified Nigeria. They believed in the professionalism of the country’s armed forces and some were no doubt aware of General Gowon’s ‘operational code of conduct’ which was supposed to guide the proper treatment of civilians by the military. Some of those civil servants had fled back to Asaba when non-Igbo civilians took the opportunity to slaughter many Igbos in midwest cities like Benin and Sapele after these cities were retaken by federal troops. In spite of witnessing that horror, many still believed that government troops would not attack civilians. As interviewee Gertrude Ogunkeye notes:

The Sunday before the horrible events of October, at mass the Reverend Father had said people were to stay calm and remain in their houses and just stock food and water because if there’s going to be a war, it might take a while for things to calm down . . . wait for the war to pass through Asaba and then your life can continue as normal.⁸

Troops entered Asaba on 5 October; citizens were shocked when soldiers began going from house to house looting, demanding money and rounding up boys and men accused of being Biafran sympathizers,⁹ then shooting them on the spot or taking them in groups to execute elsewhere. In some cases, soldiers were seeking specific individuals, who were executed,¹⁰ while others report indiscriminate group killings,¹¹ and a horrific episode when youths were lined up, ordered to dig a grave, stand in it and be shot.¹² Several hundred people seem to have died in small groups all over the town. On 6 October, in an attempt to end the violence, senior leaders met to plan a show of support for the government, in which money and gifts would be presented to the commander.¹³ This strategy had been used in other midwest towns.¹⁴ The next morning, hundreds (by some witness estimates, thousands) of men, women and children assembled, with elders in front. Singing, dancing and chanting 'One Nigeria', they moved up the main street, picking up many more on the way. As the crowd reached a major junction, troops removed women and small children and began channelling men and boys of around twelve and upwards on to the square at Ogbe-Osowa, a village in one of Asaba's quarters. Machine guns were revealed and shooting began. Witnesses report panic as the assembled hundreds were mowed down, starting with elders at the front. Some managed to break loose and run into the bush, while others were shielded by the bodies of the dead and survived.¹⁵

Exactly how many died in this incident is unclear; between 500 and 800 seems likely.¹⁶ Sporadic shooting continued for hours, until darkness caused the soldiers to disperse. Some families were able to retrieve bodies for traditional burial in their compounds,¹⁷ but with surviving townspeople fleeing, many more went unclaimed and were later buried in mass graves or thrown into the Niger. Witnesses report seeing piles of bodies in the street before it was considered safe to begin burial.¹⁸

After the massacres

After 7 October, the worst killing stopped, although federal soldiers remained barbed in Asaba for many months, and acts of violence continued. By the second week of October many civilians had found refuge in nearby bush or small towns in the area; others with family elsewhere had fled to Lagos or crossed the Niger into Biafra, not to return until the war's end in 1970. The once thriving town was largely deserted, with most houses burned and everything of value stolen. The records of relief organizations, several of which came into the area in the months following and at the war's end, indicated the exceptional and long-lasting nature of Asaba's suffering, one noting in 1969: 'UNICEF reports the Midwestern region normalized, except for Asaba'.¹⁹ Another reported in August 1968:

During the fighting around Asaba, 60% of the homes were leveled and destroyed . . . People are actually living in what were former latrines which have been merely covered over with a layer of dirt.²⁰

The extent of the destruction is indicated by Asaba's removal in 1969 from the government's official list of Nigerian towns.²¹



Figure 1. Refugee camp at St. Patrick's College, Asaba, 1968. Photo courtesy of American Friends Service Committee Archives, Philadelphia, USA

In the immediate aftermath, those who had remained in Asaba, or who trickled back as things settled down, were focused primarily on survival. Many returned to what was left of their houses, gradually making them habitable,²² while others subsisted in refugee camps established in local schools,²³ joining other displaced refugees from surrounding areas. In a report to the American Friends Service Committee in August 1968, visiting relief workers David Scanlon and Christian Hansen described conditions in the largest camp, at St. Patrick's College, where they witnessed 'extreme malnutrition' and a complete lack of medical care. Scanlon notes that six or seven refugee teachers were trying to offer classes:

There are probably about 400 children in the camp/school. They have no books, paper, pencils; the teachers are trying to recall the subject matter that they would be covering in an ordinary class I have never seen teachers trying to teach without any materials/supplies I have nothing but admiration for these teachers . . .²⁴

Conditions remained dire in Asaba for the rest of the war. Throughout 1968, repeated incursions of small groups of Biafran soldiers led to skirmishes around the town, followed by reprisals from federal troops. In April 1968, federal troops forcibly evacuated many still living in the town for several weeks, further swelling the numbers in the refugee camps, and resulting in another



Figure 2. Refugees assemble for distribution of rice, beans and yams; Catholic Mission, Asaba, 1968. Photo courtesy of American Friends Service Committee Archives, Philadelphia, USA

significant wave of killings of men and boys accused of Biafran sympathies.²⁵ This is known in Asaba as the ‘second operation’. During this time, Asabans were caught in an impossible situation, struggling to survive while under occupation from soldiers who distrusted their every move. Scanlon and Hansen noted:

People are confined in the town by the military government as it is feared they might . . . give help to the Biafrans . . . Medical supplies are simply not there. Theoretically people could go to the doctors attached to the military but after the . . . killings that have taken place in the town the people are petrified and are afraid to go near the army at all. And they would have to go through army lines to get to the military doctor.²⁶

They observed that people still in the town were required to get permits from the military to move about, and that farming and commerce had come to a halt, further exacerbating the food shortages.

Resilience and recovery

With the loss of so many men, a huge burden fell on women as they faced the task of rebuilding their families’ lives alone. Felicia Nwandu describes her return to Asaba after a few weeks in the bush:

We have no home to enter. Our house was burnt down. Everything. In fact, you know, the bags they put rice and beans, that is what we tied, because there was no clothes, there was nothing for us to hide our nakedness.²⁷

The family lived as refugees in their own community:

We suffered . . . later we saw some Christian organizations, they give us salt . . . you just put your finger in the salt like this (*swirls finger*) and then put it in your soup so you can get that taste. A lot of children [suffered from] *kwashiorkor*, people were dying just like that. We ate rat, lizard, all these things.

At times, religious groups stepped in. Emma Okocha, for example, described how after the death of his father, his mother felt unable to care for him as the youngest of several surviving brothers. She handed him over to a Catholic nun, who then raised him.²⁸ Aged fourteen in 1967, Martina Osaji lost her father and up to forty other male relatives. Her mother was a refugee in Biafra, so Martina was taken in by a Catholic priest who had studied under her father, until her sister finished secondary school and could take care of her.

However, in families that rebounded, women were the key. With the breakdown of traditional patterns of responsibility, some women took on roles that would have been unthinkable before, as in the Uraih family. Before the war, Asaba indigene Robert Uraih was a successful tailoring contractor in Kano, northern Nigeria, where the family lived in the *Sabon Gari*, the ‘strangers’ quarters’ assigned to non-indigenes. Several of Robert’s ten children were born in Kano, and visited Asaba only during the summer holidays, spending time with grandparents in the family home. Ify Uraih describes their life in Kano: ‘my father was quite well-to-do. We were comfortable. We had stewards; we had a driver who was taking us to school’.²⁹ When the 1966 pogrom began, the family fled to Asaba; the oldest son was at university in Britain. Robert and two of his sons, Paul and Emma, were killed on 7 October, and another son, Medua, was gravely wounded. Robert’s other son Ify also survived, crawling out from among the bodies of the dead. Later, Robert’s wife, Veronica, then forty-nine years old, found the bodies of Robert and Emma, and dragged them in a wheelbarrow back to the family house for burial. Paul was never found.

Mrs. Uraih, who had lost nine members of her own natal family, took on the role of family leader. Robert had been the patriarch, with many extended family members beholden to him, and with his death the surviving children described how those family members turned their backs on her and her children, refusing to help:

I think it was not out of wickedness and such It was because there was no money. They didn’t even have money to train their own children. It was my father helping them. So, when it happened, they couldn’t get their share.³⁰

Life had been turned upside down:

If you look at it, for a woman who was not a working mother because she was being provided for, all of a sudden turned to be a trader, a working woman, to fend for her children—not only one but about six. Life has to change greatly.³¹

Although she had lost almost everything, the family home remained standing, if damaged, and Mrs. Uraih was determined to ensure her children succeeded. She became a trader and her children also hawked goods when they could. While tradition had dictated dependence on the extended family, the Uraih's formed their own tight-knit unit: 'It taught me a lesson—mind your business Because you don't know who is your friend, who is not So we had our own relationship amongst ourselves'.³² All the Uraih children went on to higher education, including the girls:

Her eyes were red, she would say this smoke that is making me cry now will never touch my daughters They must go to school . . . as long as I'm alive none of my daughters will suffer. So that had been her determination.³³

In Asaba, as in Igbo society generally, when a woman dies she is returned for burial to her natal family. When Mrs. Uraih died in her nineties, her children insisted she be buried in the Uraih family house, recognizing her central role in their survival and success. We heard other stories like hers; the resilience of such women was striking. Again, relief workers' reports point to the way the people of Asaba, especially women, worked hard to rebuild their shattered homes and lives:

While we were in the area we saw some of the most imaginative examples of self-help projects and cooperatives of any of our trips. These included rabbit raising, piggeries, poultry farms and fisheries We were impressed with their foresight and initiative as they prepared for a return to normal life even while the military situation could not permit mobility and continuity.³⁴

And, as Egodi Uchendu notes, their new independence began to undermine traditional male dominance in a way that still resonates today.³⁵

While many other communities throughout Nigeria and secessionist Biafra suffered great loss of life in the war, few lost so many key people in such a targeted way. On entering Asaba, the rampaging troops had singled out influential men by name,³⁶ and many more elders and titled men were in the forefront of the Ogbesowa massacre. Some families lost up to forty men and boys; witness Charles Ugboko noted, 'some women went crazy, they just couldn't bear it . . . Some lost all their sons, plus husband'.³⁷ These losses had a profound impact on the political structure and traditional family support system. For instance, Assumpta Mordi's uncle, Daniel Mordi, was the recognized family head. A prominent figure, he ran a successful stenography school; his impressive home and its telephone (the first in Asaba) stood as symbols of his influence. Like many Asaba leaders, he was a strong proponent of western education, and family members turned to him for guidance and to settle differences. Assumpta, a small child in 1967, was living temporarily away from Asaba with her immediate family, but described how cousins from the same extended family of polygamous marriages usually lived together 'like brothers and sisters. All the children ate according to age grades, and the wives took turns to cook'.³⁸ Daniel Mordi died at Ogbesowa, along with his brothers Gabriel and Benedict and at least one cousin; after that, 'everything fell apart'. Daniel's wives struggled to keep the children

in school, as they had lost not only him but also his brothers who would normally step in to help. The two surviving junior brothers, including Assumpta's father, were overwhelmed and could not take care of them all. The family never returned to its former prominence: 'my family with that glory and all that is all gone We never really recovered'.

Many other families were equally devastated. Emmanuel Chukwura lost four brothers—Eddie, Christian, Dennis and Samson—as well as his mother, Mgbekwe, and father, David. He survived because he had taken his wife and children to safety as the troops arrived:

There is no house . . . that did not suffer the killing. There are places you have three doctors, all killed. Father, mother, everybody. In my mother's case, the senior brother was killed, the next sister was killed, the junior ones, about five of them I was the only man in the house where you have more than thirty people I was responsible for my children, for the children of my relations, too.³⁹

Emmanuel described how heavy this burden became for him, as a man who would never normally have this level of authority, and how many family members, himself included, were never able to receive the education that once would have been expected.

As noted by anthropologist Victor Uchendu, the extended family, often including the descendants (through the male line) of one great-grandfather, was (and still is) the building block of Igbo society.⁴⁰ Senior males are the lynchpins, but all males are highly valued: 'Following from mutual dependence, is the value placed on the importance of man. Man is valued above all things in Igbo society. The society demanded, and still demands, a large family, a demand that makes polygyny a desirable goal and the position of ancestors a dignified one'.⁴¹ Influential men would likely have two or more wives and many children; in addition to having responsibility for them, they were also expected to provide leadership to their full and half-brothers and their families, and to assist with education and other needs. Such men would also be expected to provide for the widows and children of men who died. This hierarchical kinship structure is an essential foundation for local community cohesion; as Elizabeth Isichei points out, it incorporated

the authority of the family head, Diokpa . . . over the extended family, the authority of the governing age-group, Oturaza, over the whole town, and the limited and specific duties and the personal prestige of individuals holding particular titles. The Diokpa was the oldest man of the oldest surviving generation in a family. Each quarter, as well as each component family, acknowledged a Diokpa's authority. He was regarded with reverence, for he embodied the authority of the ancestors.⁴²

The disruption of traditional support mechanisms within families led to spirals of decline that affected generations. Emeka Okelum Okonta, not born until after the war, offered a vivid picture of the long-term impacts on his family.⁴³ His grandfather (his father's father) was killed, along with two sons; Emeka's father and one brother survived. A wealthier uncle had taken care of this branch of the family, but

worn down by the deaths of many family members and the destruction of their homes, he died ‘of heartache’ in 1969, leaving no clear family leader. Emeka’s father fled to Biafra and joined the army, as did other young men who found themselves alone. Returning from the war, he began to rebuild his life without support, his hope of education dashed by the uncle’s death. He married, and obligations to take care of his family and his wife’s surviving relatives forced him to take any available occupation. He found work as a driver for the federal ministry of agriculture, but lack of skills and education made him vulnerable to economic downturns and he lost his position to budget cuts in the 1980s. He briefly worked as a taxi driver, but eventually lost the car and became a motorcycle (*okada*) taxi driver, never finding stable employment again. Born in 1973, Emeka was a gifted student who found his prospects for higher education closed. He remembers that, to his dying day, his father repeated how ‘his life would have been different’ but for the war. Emeka believes that his fall ‘from grace to grass’ tore his family apart and eventually led to his father’s death. He speaks for a generation that sees the disaster resonating today:

I will never be a happy man knowing that this war, this massacre . . . brought penury to me . . . for instance, when I was in the Federal College of Education A lecturer asked me to buy his handout Do you know how much his handout was? Forty naira [about twenty-five US cents in today’s currency] I couldn’t afford it.

The lecturer berated him, saying he had repeatedly failed to buy the handouts: ‘I just can’t forget that statement. It lives with me and it will die with me . . . and that contributed to leaving school without the certificate . . . mine is a typical example’.

Along with the civilian killings and the pillage of the town, federal troops targeted many women in Asaba, and rape was widespread. As Tuba Inal notes, ‘throughout history, it is almost impossible to find a war where rape did not happen’,⁴⁴ yet it was only in the late twentieth century that rape began to be recognized as one of the most devastating crimes of war.⁴⁵ Our male informants typically referred to rape not as a violation of women but as a challenge to men’s rights over ‘their’ women, for the shame it brought on husbands whose wives or daughters were raped in front of them or abducted by soldiers.⁴⁶ In our interviews, both male and female interviewees described the widespread rape and forcible ‘marriages’ to soldiers, while also vividly showing how shameful and difficult it was to acknowledge this at the time:

Oh, yeah, there were rapes. I came by enough girls that were forcibly married by soldiers. I have an auntie who was forcibly married by a soldier. After, he left the woman with the children Children were raped, even old women were raped They treated us like animals.⁴⁷

The family we stayed with, their daughter was abducted by soldiers . . . taken from Asaba . . . and brought back to her father after a week. When she came back, she was a different girl . . . she wouldn’t talk to anybody, she was very weepy We got to hear later that the child was taken by one of the officers and used for a week But, you see, we come from a culture where talk like rape is taboo—a girl says she’s been raped, getting married is like an impossibility. So lots of girls had been raped and not said anything.⁴⁸

In these accounts there was no doubt as to who bore the physical and emotional scars of the experience: 'One of our sisters, one of the army officers took her away and dumped her ... At that time he has impregnated her and then he moved away'.⁴⁹ Emeka Okonkwo, a boy of six in 1967, observed something he did not understand at the time:

I can remember my mom and one other lady, a soldier man was pointing at them ... And my mum and her was kneeling down, begging. After some time my dad took us to the sitting room. And later my mom came and joined us again ... when I told my mom what I witnessed, she was shocked that I could remember such.⁵⁰

Another male interviewee spoke of the long-standing trauma experienced by a female relative:

After the killing of people in Asaba ... They started raping the women. They come to the house. They say they heard gunshots around, that the women are hiding the soldiers. They take them away, then they bring them back later. These girls come back, they cannot talk ... One of my relatives, when she sees me, she says, 'Fabian, do you remember what happened when they came to take us away?' She told me, 'I have not discussed this. I have never mentioned it to my husband'. She is feeling bad that she wants to tell him. I said, 'Listen, it's your deal. If you want to tell him, tell him'. She says, 'I want you to tell him'. So, we went out ... he said he'd never heard, and when he got home, they cried. Anyway, at the end, that was a way for her to forget, because she's been carrying it in her mind all along.⁵¹

We heard no first-person accounts of rape, but we cannot rule out the phenomenon Thomson describes from her interviews with genocide survivors in Rwanda: 'it was common to learn early in our relationship that the sister or neighbor had been raped ... Sometimes, later on, the individual would report that in fact she was the person'.⁵² Clearly fear of rape was pervasive. Several women described how, as young girls, they were disguised as older women or given babies to carry, in an attempt to ward off would-be rapists. In addition, their stories pointed to the fact that, contrary to many survivors' reports that only males died, many women were killed in the massacres and occupation, often after resisting the soldiers' advances.

In the last few years, many studies have appeared of the traumatic effects of wartime rape.⁵³ For women, the experience of rape must somehow be incorporated in their daily lives as they continue to function as mothers and providers, often in silence.⁵⁴ So many years later, it is probably impossible to capture the suffering of women in Asaba, yet the literature from more recent events can act as surrogate. As Inal writes, 'For centuries ... the physical pain of women has been translated into a social pain through the meanings attached to rape'.⁵⁵

In Asaba, the mass rapes have indeed left a palpable legacy in the community at large. Chiseche Salome Mibenge writes of the concerns with male honour that traditionally colour attitudes to rape, and that are 'rooted in such patriarchal considerations as fear of miscegenation ... the idea that women raped by the enemy army/nation/race will bear children that will be alienated from the targeted group'.⁵⁶

Although some survivors told us that the children of raped women were not stigmatized, they were clearly not easily incorporated into the strongly patrilineal social structure. A child without a recognized father has no place in the extended family, and thus in the village and the quarter. Tradition had ways to absorb the children of unmarried mothers, such as adoption by the woman's father. No doubt some children of rape experienced this, but because of the large numbers and the decimation of the male population, this option was often closed. The unasimilated children of rape were known to all, since they carried their mothers' names and had no inheritance rights.

The combined legacy of massive loss of life and widespread rape continues to cast a long shadow on contemporary Asaba. Today, the city faces many of the same problems as other Nigerian communities, such as high unemployment, crime and disaffected youth. However, a common and distinctive narrative in Asaba is that these problems can be attributed to the war; younger generations are described as disrespectful and violent, with no appreciation for tradition, as a direct result of both the physical destruction and the disruption of traditional authority. A specific thread in this narrative, shared by many Asabans, blames the generation of children of rape for many of these problems; we often heard versions of this. A local history, written by a well-known town leader, captures this in describing the 'decline in education' in Asaba, noting that the war 'saw many Asaba families shattered', and pointing to the rise in single mothers of children fathered by soldiers: 'In the end, a good number ended up being school dropouts. Thus, they simply attained growth without development. Today, such children have matured to adults without any visible, sustainable means of livelihood'.⁵⁷ The author argues that these young men then fall into lives of crime, especially blaming them for the pervasive and fraudulent selling off of communal land that has plagued Asaba recently.

While the disaffection of these youth is commonly attributed to the social breakdown caused by the war, some blame the town's problems on a kind of physical 'pollution' of Asaba. This narrative is encapsulated by Emeka Okonta:

We are highly educated people, we are highly intelligent people. We don't steal . . . After the war you now see children, you now begin to see them steal, to see things that our forefathers never do. You now see youth come out unintelligent . . . Who when they go to school, fail. This is not a trait of our people . . . Our people are a race who are advanced . . . How come we have children who can't express themselves and who resort to vices and crime? Some of these [were] children of those who the federal troops either raped, or those of our women who they enticed to have sex with, they now imported blood—traits—that are foreign. Most of the boys who are creating havoc in town today if you check their birth—they are those born in 1968 to '70 . . . Because those are the people who have this bad blood. They are not the original stock . . . That is why our people will say *ahaba amago umu wa*—that means this town knows her children . . . anywhere you see a child or a man who is becoming unruly, you will know that these are product of those, we call them *gwodogwodu* soldiers.⁵⁸

Egodi Uchendu notes that Asaba historically had a strong disdain for soldiers, dating back for decades before the war. The word 'soldier' could be flung as an

insult to women—‘an indictment that would automatically label her as defiled and in need of ritual purification’.⁵⁹ The troops who occupied Asaba were from the north and drawn largely from Hausa-speaking populations; witnesses described them as ‘vandals’—very tall, very dark, often bearing tribal scars, and very brutal, encapsulated in the derogatory term *gwodogwodu*. The difference between Hausa and Igbo (especially Asaba) is seen by some as biological, so pollution by a soldier of this origin is especially shaming. This sense of ‘bloodline’ derives from the core notion of the ‘indigene’. To be an Asaba indigene, one must be able to trace descent through the male line of one of the five quarters, all of which descend from Nnebisi, the founder of Asaba. Accordingly, the children of rape cannot be true indigenes. The impact of this can still be heard in conversation, or in the discussion on Asaba online forums. For instance, in discussing the impact of a flood in Asaba in October 2012, a contributor on such a forum wrote:

Illegitimate half Sons and daughters gotten from Loose Asaba Women and Rape Victims in the Asaba Genocide have turned Scavengers, selling Asaba Land indiscriminately to any criminal who can give them money for illicit and worthless life style of women, drugs and alcohol.

Later that year, during a discussion about the prevalence of kidnapping, another contributor commented: ‘those killed or captured should undergo DNA testing to ascertain if they are real Asaba indigenes!!’⁶⁰ Such comments point to the current symbolic meaning of the massacres, a point to which we return below.

Silence and suppression

More than four decades since the events of 1967–68, the trauma is still felt, leaving a pervasive sense of unresolved grievance. At one level this is personal—surviving individuals still mourn the loss of so many loved ones. At another level, there is anger that this trauma has gone so long unrecognized. Many interviewees told us they rarely spoke of the massacres outside their families, because they would not be believed:

I kept it all buried in my heart. When I went to school in Lagos and the war had ended . . . I was talking about the civil war with a group of Yoruba classmates, and I told the story. One of them, whose father was a magistrate, looked me in the eyes and said I was a liar, that it could never have happened. I took a knife, and I almost killed him. I was going to be expelled from my school because his mother . . . thought the principal brought in some ex-Biafran soldiers to kill their children . . . Fortunately for me, the principal was a Catholic reverend father, and he happened to have known a little bit about what happened. So, he managed to solve the problem.⁶¹

This lack of knowledge outside Asaba is not surprising. In Nigeria in 1967, the government kept tight control of the media, with newspapers taking a firmly pro-government line and the midwest action, including the arrival of federal troops in Asaba, was described as a ‘liberation’.⁶² On 9 October the *Daily Sketch* published a photo of Col. Murtala Muhammed on the Asaba end of the

Niger Bridge, without mentioning the destruction of the Onitsha end. Accounts of federal soldiers slaughtering hundreds of fellow Nigerians would have seriously undercut claims that the war was aimed only to keep Nigeria united and the massacres went unreported. London *Times* correspondent Bill Norris passed through Asaba in mid October, sending back photos of the damage and noting that the town appeared to be largely abandoned.⁶³ When interviewed in 2012, he noted that while the damage in the largely deserted town was extensive, he had no idea that a systematic massacre had occurred.⁶⁴

The international media mostly relied on official Nigerian sources and hearsay accounts.⁶⁵ The British press, especially influential in Nigeria, was largely silent about the war in 1967. According to Norris, most other reporters 'stayed in Lagos and took briefings from the British Consulate [who] lied through their teeth throughout'.⁶⁶ The only mention of mass killing in Asaba appeared in the London *Observer*, almost four months later, when Africa correspondent Colin Legum confirmed that federal troops took part in the killing. However, his (second-hand) account claimed that a group of 'implacably hostile' Igbo attacked troops by surprise as they watched the welcome dance, leading to retaliation.⁶⁷ Book-length accounts of the war written close to the time, whether pro-federal or pro-Biafran, typically made no reference to the Asaba massacre (or any other large-scale civilian deaths).⁶⁸ The occasional mention, such as by John de St. Jorre, echoes the explanation given by Legum, as do some later histories.⁶⁹

It is unclear how much the federal government in Lagos knew about what was happening in the midwest; it is well known that Col. Muhammed functioned much like an independent warlord.⁷⁰ There is evidence that attempts to inform people outside Asaba of the massacres were systematically suppressed. Our interviewee Sylvester Okocha, an Asaba indigene and then senior civil servant in Benin, wrote to the International Committee of the Red Cross describing what had just happened. After his letter was intercepted by the military, he was arrested, tortured and incarcerated in Lagos.⁷¹ Indeed, the Nigerian government kept tight control of all information from the war zone, making it illegal for anyone, including international news sources, to divulge information deemed detrimental to federal authorities.⁷²

Some attempts were made to get news to Britain, resulting in a series of exchanges in the letters pages of the *Times* in late 1967, in which reports of a massacre in Asaba were condemned as 'wild rumours' by the High Commissioner of Nigeria, B. O. Ogundipe,⁷³ and also dismissed by Bryan Sharwood Smith, former governor of northern Nigeria.⁷⁴ The British government was firmly on the federal side,⁷⁵ and the official position denied all atrocities. The *Times* of London reported in 1968 that Biafran propaganda had instilled fear of federal soldiers in Igbo people, but these fears were unfounded.⁷⁶ A year later, the *Times* reported that an international observer team had 'been unable to find one single trace of mass killings of Ibos'.⁷⁷

The silence only lifted in 1994 when Emma Okocha (who lost his father at Asaba) published the first sustained account of the massacres. It made a considerable impact in Asaba and among the Nigerian diaspora and was crucial

in spurring recent attempts to reclaim the history.⁷⁸ Okocha brought the Asaba events to the attention of the Nigerian Human Rights Violations Investigation Commission (HRVIC, or Oputa Panel), established in 2001 by President Olusegun Obasanjo. The panel considered human rights abuses from 1966 to May 1999, and included 1969 depositions made by Asaba survivors and testimony from witnesses. The Oputa Panel dissolved in ethnic wrangling,⁷⁹ and its report was never officially released, although it is now available online.⁸⁰ However, it brought visibility to civil war (and other) atrocities, and set the stage for more survivors to write and speak publicly.⁸¹ Especially valuable was the work of Egodi Uchendu, whose interviews with women in 2000–2001 shed light not only on the Asaba massacres but on the neglected experience of women in the entire Anioma region.⁸²

The distinctive suffering of Asaba

Clearly, the Asaba experience is only one among many stories of suffering left by the civil war. However, it presents singular characteristics that had a major and unique impact not only on the progression of the war but also on the deeply entrenched ethnic hostility that continues to linger today. Asaba, while suffering one of the worst systematic killings of civilians by federal troops, was in the midwest region, which had not joined secessionist Biafra. Indeed, all those who died in the massacre of 7 October were killed while pledging support for ‘One Nigeria’ and condemning secession. As noted above, Asaba’s tradition of civil service had contributed to a sense of allegiance to a united Nigeria, along with trust that federal troops would behave appropriately. It is striking that one of those who decided to await the arrival of federal troops, presumably sharing this sense of trust, was Sidney Asiodu. A younger brother of Philip Asiodu, an Asaba indigene who was a federal permanent secretary and a prominent member of General Gowon’s war cabinet, he was residing in Asaba and was killed in the early days of the occupation.

The Asaba massacres are distinctive in other significant ways. First, we argue that the slaughter of civilians outside of the secessionist Biafra had a major impact on the progression of the war. While the federal government worked hard to prevent news reaching the outside world, people fleeing Asaba brought news of the massacres to Biafra, and this killing of large numbers of people of Igbo ethnicity appeared to confirm long-standing Biafran claims that the war was one of genocide. A few months later, the Joint Consultative Assembly of Biafra sent a document to the UN Committee on Human Rights, listing multiple atrocities, starting with the 1966 pogroms and continuing through the midwest invasion. In requesting that the war be ruled genocide, it noted: ‘Asaba was one of the centers of mass killings of the natives’, and gave detailed accounts of murder and rape, with one witness estimating 2,000 killed.⁸³ Essentially, the Biafrans were arguing that if federal troops would massacre so many of those who remained loyal to Nigeria, simply because of their ethnicity, they would do far worse to Igbos who had defied the government and seceded.

Therefore, while Asaba was not the only site of civilian killings in the midwest,⁸⁴ the combination of the numbers killed, along with the other atrocities committed in the town, sent an especially chilling message that served to steel Biafran fear and resolve. Meanwhile, although it might be speculative to suggest that the success of the Nigerian government in suppressing this news might have muted international opposition to the war, it seems safe to assume that the consequences of the massacres almost certainly helped to prolong the war.

Furthermore, the suffering inflicted by federal troops on a community that was part of the midwest and therefore lay outside Biafra has left an especially bitter sense of grievance, which has had long-lasting effects. As Wole Soyinka wrote in 1972, the midwestern Igbo, caught between their desire to remain part of the federation and their identity with eastern cousins, became ‘the most vulnerable Nigerians’.⁸⁵ In fact, to this day, Asabans (and some other neighbouring midwesterners) still feel caught in the middle. The legacy of the federal soldiers’ actions makes identification with a truly united Nigeria problematic. Yet at the same time they also resist attempts to be pulled into Biafran resurgence movements or initiatives to group them with ‘Biafran war dead’ for memorial purposes, since many blame Biafra for having initiated the war in the first place.

Conclusion: the significance of memory

In objective terms, it is impossible to prove, as some claim, a direct link between the wartime massacres and many of the problems that currently afflict Asaba. The physical destruction of the town is undisputed, and in the absence of significant government help, the people depended on the ability of the extended family to start again. Bullet holes still scar many buildings, and survivors pointed out homes that had never been repaired; the main boys’ secondary school, St. Patrick’s College, was only restored in 2012. More complex is the broader perception of social decline, which speaks to the symbolic meaning of the massacres today. Still, in the community’s collective memory there is a strong connection between the events of October 1967 and the problems of the present. With a paucity of full documentary sources, our knowledge of the October events derives largely from oral accounts. Alessandro Portelli, in an early and influential defence of oral history, noted that the richness of the method does produce valid accounts of past events, especially when these have been silenced in traditional histories.⁸⁶ At the same time, he cautioned that ‘memory is not a passive depository of facts, but an active process of creation of meanings’,⁸⁷ a point that has been taken up by the burgeoning interdisciplinary field of ‘memory studies’ in recent years.⁸⁸

Our many interviews showed that over four decades, the people of Asaba have constructed potent memories about the massacres and their contemporary salience. This construction starts with the community memory of the Ogbé-Osowa parade itself, which is now often framed as a horrendous betrayal that was completely unexpected, given the goodwill gesture of the people—joyful marchers were mowed down without warning, in a grotesque dance of death. This core narrative is regularly heard from people who were not physically present. Yet eye-witnesses

report that the killings started days earlier, as soon as the troops arrived, and that the parade was not a joyful welcome but a last-ditch attempt to stop the killing. Several days of chaotic killing are distilled into one highly dramatic (if undoubtedly real) event that has become the centrepiece of a narrative that also offers a horrific and one-dimensional depiction of the evil northern perpetrators.

This collective memory does important symbolic work. It marks out Asaba as being especially badly hit, and supports the notion of exceptionalism that characterizes many Asaba people's sense of identity. A common expression in Asaba is '*aya buta kpum*'—'the war brought my grief'—showing the sense among many that everything bad, unjust or wrong in the community is the result of the massacre and its aftermath. Asaba people generally believe that resentment of its tradition of education and professional success was one reason the town was targeted. The war destroyed that elite status, which in the view of our informants 'set us back decades'. Interviewees repeatedly told us of the important people who died—the doctors, lawyers, civil servants and chiefs, with less emphasis given to the many 'ordinary' people also killed. One man noted: 'The long-term effect is that we lost our rightful position in the scheme of things. In Nigeria, generally'.⁸⁹ This sense of exceptionalism is further bolstered by the additional threads that speak to the purity of Asaba indigeneity, as well as by the failure of post-war Nigeria to acknowledge the atrocity. For the people of Asaba, the combination of official concealment and the local selective narrative of the event as an act of genocide has worked to keep ethnic tensions alive and stood in the way of meaningful reconciliation.

Named the Delta State capital in 1991, Asaba has experienced great growth in the last two decades, with a new airport, quality hotels, restoration of some schools and an explosion of home and local government building. Nevertheless, the legacy of the massacres and destruction is still potent, exacerbated by the long history of silence. In 2002, after the Oputa Panel, former president General Gowon (while quite plausibly stating that he had no knowledge at the time) offered a personal apology to Asaba. This was a deeply symbolic moment that emboldened more people to speak out. Survivors and community leaders are now working to create a public memorialization, efforts in which we are active participants,⁹⁰ while others propose pursuing more legal remedies based on a desired formal government admission of guilt.⁹¹ Whatever their differences, the common goal is to make the story of the Asaba massacres part of the 'officially sanctioned heritage' of Nigeria.⁹² Many now also speak of the role that the story of what happened in Asaba could have in opening dialogue and inviting reconciliation. For instance, during our research, stories (sometimes reluctantly) emerged that complicated the common narrative of pure evil. Several survivors recalled instances in which, amid the brutality, individual federal officers and soldiers stepped in to prevent violence and to save and protect civilians. Some of them came from the same ethnic groups whose 'impure blood' was seen as 'polluting' Asaba, yet they displayed the upstanding behaviour that prevented even further bloodshed. Some people in Asaba recognize that these stories are an important part of the history, and may help point the way to reconciliation rather than revenge.

In Nigeria, the process of memorialization as a form of transitional justice is complex and fraught with potential dangers. As Chinua Achebe noted in the memoir published just before his death,⁹³ there has been a deep-seated reluctance to discuss the war and its consequences; standard Nigerian history curricula largely ignore it.⁹⁴ Some commentators argue that violence and ethnic hatred in contemporary Nigeria are partly attributable to the legacy of the war;⁹⁵ our research suggests that the unresolved burden of memory has indeed become a potent symbol of festering injustice. However, our hope, shared with many in Asaba, is that an understanding of the community's complex history, and its acknowledgement in the nation's sanctioned memory, will not only enrich the record of the Nigerian civil war but may also help to address this lingering legacy and ultimately contribute to meaningful reconciliation.

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Endnotes

- 1 For full details, see S. Elizabeth Bird and Fraser Ottanelli, 'The history and legacy of the Asaba, Nigeria, massacres', *African Studies Review*, Vol. 54, No. 3, 2011, pp. 1–25.
- 2 When citing interviews, we indicate the name of the interviewee in an endnote, along with the interview date. Unless stated otherwise, interviews took place in Asaba.
- 3 Immediately before the war, Nigeria was divided into four regions: the Yoruba-dominated western, Igbo-dominated eastern, Hausa/Fulani dominated northern, and the multi-ethnic midwestern region.
- 4 Stanley E. Orobator, 'The Biafran crisis and the midwest', *African Affairs*, Vol. 86, 1987, pp. 367–383.
- 5 Egodi Uchendu, 'The growth of Anioma cities', in Toyin Falola and Steven J. Salm (eds.), *Nigerian cities* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2004), pp. 153–182, puts the figure at 30,000. However, relief workers' reports from 1968 mention 6,000 or 12,000 (e.g., David Scanlon, Report to American Friends Service Committee [AFSC], Philadelphia, 3 October 1968; Archives of AFSC). A 1970 assessment of damage at the war's end noted that before the war there were '1,186 recorded houses', which would suggest that 30,000 is an over-estimation (Quaker Service—Nigeria, Refugees Relief and Rehabilitation Report #14 June 1970, p. 2, Archives of AFSC, Philadelphia). Differences may reflect a distinction between the town proper and the Asaba administrative district.
- 6 Don C. Ohadike, *Anioma: a social history of the western Igbo people* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1994).
- 7 See Egodi Uchendu, *Women and conflict in the Nigerian civil war* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2007) for a discussion of Anioma sympathy for Biafra.
- 8 Gertrude Ogunkeye, 11 December, 2009, Lagos.

- 9 Testimony of Francis Dike Okwudiafor, made 20 January 1969; included in *The violations of human and civil rights of Ndi Igbo in the federation of Nigeria (1966–1999)*, October 1999, p. 78, available at: <http://www.asabamemorial.org/data/ohanaeze-petition.pdf>. Ohanaeze Ndigbo, a pan-Igbo rights group, presented this ‘Ohaneze petition’ to the Human Rights Violations Investigation Commission (known as the Oputa Panel). In subsequent endnotes, ‘Testimony’ refers to 1969 depositions included in this document.
- 10 Stanley Okafor, 12 October 2011 (Ibadan); Medua Uraih, 13 December 2010.
- 11 Patience Chukwura, 10 December 2010 (Lagos).
- 12 Nicholas Azeh, 5 October 2011.
- 13 Testimony of John Kanayo Hudson Oddittah, p. 90.
- 14 Uchendu, *Women and conflict*, p. 76, notes that several midwest communities had staged formal shows of support for ‘One Nigeria’, hoping to avoid reprisals.
- 15 Interviewees present at the parade offered consistent accounts; for details of the event as it unfolded based on their testimony, see Bird and Ottanelli, ‘The history and legacy’. Another eye-witness account is provided in Celestina Isichei-Isamah’s self-published book, *They died in vain* (Seattle: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2011).
- 16 No precise casualty count has been established. In 1981, the Asaba Development Council compiled a list of 373 dead, acknowledging many more not included. Eye-witness estimates range from 500 to over 1,000. In 1968, Legum noted 700 dead (see note 67). In October 1968, David Scanlon of Quaker Relief Services reported that 759 men and boys had been massacred in Asaba after ‘the recapture of the city’ the previous year (Report to American Friends Service Committee, Philadelphia, 3 October 1968, consulted in Archives of AFSC). Both these reports rely on second-hand accounts.
- 17 Testimony of Francis Dike Okwudiafor, p. 78.
- 18 Frank Ijeh, 13 December 2009; Patrick Obelue, 12 December 2009; Emeka Okonkwo, 28 June 2010; and others.
- 19 International Red Cross Committee, ‘Food and relief situation’, 24 April 1969, p. 22.
- 20 American Friends Service Committee, ‘Nigeria/Biafra relief’, 10 October 1968, Archives of AFSC, Philadelphia.
- 21 Uchendu, ‘The growth of Anioma cities’.
- 22 Igwemma Osakwe, 12 December 2009 (Asaba).
- 23 Uchendu, *Women and conflict*.
- 24 Transcript of tape recorded by David Scanlon and Christian Hansen, 15 August 1968; summary of recommendations to American Friends Service Committee, no page numbers, Archives of AFSC.
- 25 Many interviewees mentioned relatives killed or displaced in April 1968. Felix Onochie (interviewed 28 June 2010), for example, described how the troops stormed into the family house and fired into the ceiling, killing his brother Emanuel, who was hiding there.
- 26 Scanlon and Hansen, 15 August 1968.
- 27 Felicia Nwandu, 28 June 2010.
- 28 Emma Okocha, 13 October 2009 (Tampa).
- 29 Ify Uraih, 9 October 2009 (Tampa).
- 30 Victoria Nwanze (nee Uraih), 3 May 2012.
- 31 Medua Uraih, 3 May 2012.
- 32 Chineze Uraih, 3 May 2012.
- 33 Victoria Nwanze, 3 May 2012.
- 34 Report of Bradford and Jean Abernethy, ‘AFSC relief efforts for war sufferers in the federally reoccupied areas of Nigeria, Sept–Dec. 1968’, Archives of AFSC, Philadelphia, pp. 3–4.
- 35 Uchendu, *Women and conflict*.
- 36 Joseph Nwajei, 10 October 2009 (Tampa) described how his uncle George, a prominent civil servant, was executed in the family home.
- 37 Charles Ugboko, 12 December 2009.
- 38 Assumpta Mordi, 7 October 2011.
- 39 Emmanuel Chukwura, 15 December 2009.
- 40 Victor Chikezie Uchendu, ‘Ezi na ulo: the extended family in Igbo civilization’, *Dialectical Anthropology*, Vol. 31, No. 1–3, 2007, pp. 167–219.
- 41 Uchendu, ‘Ezi na ulo’, p. 216.
- 42 Elizabeth Isichei, ‘Historical change in an Ibo polity: Asaba to 1885’, *Journal of African History*, Vol. 10, 1969, pp. 421–438.
- 43 Emeka Okelum Okonta, 24 June 2010.
- 44 Tuba Inal, *Looting and rape in wartime: law and change in international relations* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), p. 4.

- 45 The 1977 Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions offered the first legal protection against rape in wartime, and in 1998 the Rome Statute defined rape explicitly as a war crime. 1993 efforts to document 40,000 cases in Bosnia-Herzegovina represented the first systematic recording of rape 'as a weapon of war'. Michelle Hynes and Barbara Lopes-Cardozo, 'Observations from the CDC: sexual violence against refugee women', *Journal of Women's Health and Gender-based Medicine*, Vol. 9, No. 8, 2000, pp. 819–823.
- 46 See also Jyotsna Mishra, *Women and human rights* (Delhi: Kalpaz Publications, 2000) for a discussion of rape as humiliation of the male enemy.
- 47 Nkemdelim Maduemezia, 23 June 2010.
- 48 Gertrude Ogunkeye, 11 December 2009, Lagos.
- 49 Ken Eneamokwu, 28 June 2010.
- 50 Interview, Emeka Okonkwo, 28 June 2010.
- 51 Interview, Fabian Oweazim, 10 October 2009 (Tampa).
- 52 Susan Thomson, 'Getting close to Rwandans since the genocide: studying everyday life in highly politicized research settings', *African Studies Review*, Vol. 53, No. 3, 2010, pp. 19–34.
- 53 For example, Wenona Giles and Jennifer Hyndman (eds.), *Sites of violence: gender and conflict zones* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).
- 54 Veena Das, *Life and words: violence and the descent into the ordinary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).
- 55 Inal, *Looting and rape in wartime*, p. 60.
- 56 Chiseche Salome Mibenge, *Sex and international tribunals: the erasure of gender from the war narrative* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), pp. 41–42.
- 57 Augustine N. Ndili, *Guide to customs, traditions and beliefs of Asaba people* (Asaba: His Bride Ventures, 2010), p. 16.
- 58 Emeka Okelum Okonta, 24 June 2010.
- 59 Uchendu, *Women and conflict*, pp. 61–62.
- 60 Identifying information is omitted to protect the contributors' privacy.
- 61 Ify Uraih, 9 October 2009 (Tampa).
- 62 In affirming the narrative of the 'liberation' of the midwest, the federal government often cited its 'Operational Code of Conduct' governing interaction with civilians. For text of the code, see A. H. M. Kirk-Greene, *Crisis and conflict in Nigeria: a documentary sourcebook 1966–1969*, 2 Vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 1: pp. 455–457.
- 63 Some of these photos were published in Bill Norris, 'War across the Niger', *The Times*, 24 October 1967, p. 14.
- 64 Telephone interview, Bill Norris, 14 December 2011.
- 65 S. Elizabeth Bird, 'Reclaiming Asaba: old media, new media, and the construction of memory', in Motti Neiger, Oren Meyers and Eyal Zandberg (eds.), *On media memory: collective memory in a new media age* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), pp. 88–103.
- 66 Phone interview with Bill Norris, 14 December 2011.
- 67 Colin Legum, 'How 700 Ibos were killed by mistake', *The Observer*, 21 January 1968, p. 21.
- 68 John de St Jorre, *The brothers' war: Biafra and Nigeria* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1968); Robert Collis, *Nigeria in conflict* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1972); Frederick Forsyth, *The Biafra story* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1969); John Hatch, *Nigeria: a history* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1971); Rex Niven, *The war of Nigerian unity* (Towata, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1970); John Oyinbo, *Nigeria: crisis and beyond* (London: Charles Knight, 1971); Raph Uwuchue, *Reflections on the Nigerian civil war* (New York: Africana Publishing, 1971).
- 69 For example, James O'Connell, 'The ending of the Nigerian civil war: victory, defeat, and the changing of coalitions', in Roy Licklider (ed.), *Stopping the killing: how civil wars end* (New York: New York University Press, 1993), pp. 189–203.
- 70 Another officer, Col. E. O. Abisoye, described him as 'fiery' and even 'stupid', stressing the lack of a strong central communication system (p. 230), while Gen. J. J. Oluleye commented that he 'had no respect for battle procedure' (p. 774). Both in H. B. Momoh (ed.), *The Nigerian civil war, 1967–1970: history and reminiscences* (Ibadan, Nigeria: Sam Bookman, 2000).
- 71 Sylvester Okocha, 15 December 2009.
- 72 John J. Stremmlau, *The international politics of the Nigerian civil war, 1967–1970* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977). Members of Gowon's government may have discussed the atrocities in Asaba within a few months of the events. We note a memo dated 1 February 1968 from Anthony Ukpabi Asika, Administrator of East Central State, titled 'For Discussion with the Commander in Chief' and referring to the 'liberated areas of East Central State' (formerly in the midwest region). Under a section titled 'The case of

- Asaba,' Asika proposes responses that include 'investigation and publicity of results' and 'restitution in forms of pensions to widows, orphans and other dependents now'. No such action was taken. Memo provided by author Emeka Keazor, who is preparing a biography of Asika, and obtained it from his papers (personal communication, July 2014).
- 73 Letters, *The Times*, 1 November 1967, p. 11.
- 74 Letters, *The Times*, 2 November 1967, p. 11.
- 75 See John W. Young, *The Labour governments 1964–1970*, Vol. 2, *International policy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).
- 76 Michael Wolfers, 'Nigeria observers find no evidence of genocide', *The Times*, 4 October 1968, p. 8.
- 77 Julian Mounter, 'No evidence of genocide in Nigeria', *The Times*, 21 July 1969, p. 5.
- 78 Emma Okocha, *Blood on the Niger* (New York: TriAtlantic Books, 1994/2006). Unfortunately, the book is often haphazardly sourced, and uses a great deal of narrative licence.
- 79 See Nneoma Nwogu, *Shaping truth, reshaping justice: sectarian politics and the Nigerian truth commission* (New York: Lexington, 2007); Hakeem O. Yusuf, 'Travails of truth: achieving justice for victims of impunity in Nigeria', *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, Vol. 1, 2007, pp. 268–286.
- 80 See www.asabamemorial.org.
- 81 See, for example, Stanley Okafor, 'The Nigerian army and the "liberation" of Asaba: a personal narrative', in Eghosa E. Osaghae, Ebere Onwujiwe and Rotimi Suberu (eds.), *The Nigerian civil war and its aftermath* (Ibadan, Nigeria: John Archers, 2002), pp. 293–299.
- 82 Uchendu, *Women and conflict*.
- 83 Joint Consultative Assembly of Biafra, letter to Third Committee of the United Nations on Human Rights, 15 February 1968, Appendix D.
- 84 A 1968 report noted: 'perhaps 8,000 Ibo civilians died when the midwest was "liberated" by troops under Col. Murtala Muhammed' (Jack Shepherd, 'Memo from Nigeria: old headaches for our new president', *Look*, 26 November 1968, p. 74).
- 85 Wole Soyinka, *The man died: prison notes* (London: Rex Collings, 1972).
- 86 Alessandro Portelli, 'What makes oral history different', in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds.), *The oral history reader* (London: Routledge, [1979] 2006), pp. 32–42.
- 87 Portelli, 'What makes oral history different', p. 37.
- 88 For a recent review of oral history as method, see Alistair Thomson, 'Four paradigm transformations in oral history', *Oral History Review*, Vol. 34, No. 1, 2007, pp. 49–70. For a useful discussion of the field of memory studies, see Karen E. Till, 'Memory studies', *History Workshop Journal*, Vol. 62, 2006, pp. 325–341.
- 89 Michael Ogbogu, 3 May 2012.
- 90 See www.asabamemorial.org.
- 91 For a discussion of the importance of formal apology, see Trudy Govier, *Taking wrongs seriously: acknowledgment, reconciliation and the politics of sustainable peace* (Amherst, NY: Humanity, 2006).
- 92 Wulf Kansteiner, 'Finding meaning in memory: a methodological critique of collective memory studies', *History and Theory*, Vol. 41, No. 2, 2002, pp. 179–197.
- 93 Chinua Achebe, *There was a country: a personal history of Biafra* (London: Allen Lane, 2012).
- 94 A. Odoemene, 'Remember to forget: the Nigeria-Biafra war, history, and the politics of memory', in Chima J. Korieh (ed.), *The Nigeria-Biafra war: genocide and the politics of memory* (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2012), p. 169.
- 95 Uhoka Ukiwo, 'Violence, identity mobilization and the reimagining of Biafra', *Africa Development*, Vol. 34, 2009, pp. 9–30.

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