

The History and Legacy of the Asaba, Nigeria, Massacres

S. Elizabeth Bird and Fraser Ottanelli

Abstract: In early October 1967, four months into the Nigerian Civil War, federal troops massacred hundreds in Asaba, a town in southeast Nigeria on the west bank of the Niger. While ethnically Igbo, Asaba was not part of Igbo-dominated Biafra. Through the reconstruction of this event, the article fills a significant gap in the historical record and contributes to the discussion on the impact of traumatic memory at the local and national levels. It also suggests that the Asaba massacres speak to larger issues of potential reconciliation that extend beyond Asaba and Nigeria.

Résumé: Au début du mois d'Octobre 1967, quatre mois après le commencement de la guerre civile au Niger, les troupes fédérales ont massacré des centaines de personnes à Asaba, un bourg au sud est du Nigeria sur la rive ouest du Niger. Bien qu'ayant une majorité ethnique Igbo, Asaba n'appartient pas géographiquement au Biafra, dominé par les Igbo. Avec la reconstruction de ce massacre, cet article comble un vide significatif dans les archives historiques et contribue à la discussion sur l'impact de la mémoire traumatique au niveaux local et national. Il indique également que le massacre d'Asaba recouvre des questions plus larges de réconciliation potentielle s'étendant au-delà d'Asaba et du Nigeria.

On the afternoon of October 5, 1967, four months into the Nigerian Civil War over the secession of the predominantly Igbo region east of the Niger

African Studies Review, Volume 54, Number 3 (December 2011), pp. 1–26

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River, Nigerian federal troops entered Asaba, a town on the west bank of that river.¹ As one witness recalled,

We had been expecting their arrival with fear and trembling since Biafran troops started withdrawing on the third of October. We remembered vividly the fate of our people in Northern Nigeria in May, July and September 1966 and the threat that Ibos were going to be wiped out. When the Federal troops arrived some people had fled across the Niger, some into the bush but some remained in their homes, waiting for what fate would bring.²

When the troops appeared, the worst fears of the ten thousand townsfolk were realized. Over the next few days, up to one thousand Asabans died at the hands of the federal soldiers, the majority in a single, systematic massacre of men and boys on October 7.

The killings at Asaba, as well as smaller events at other towns in the Midwest, remained little known outside Igbo communities for many years, largely because they went unreported in the press at the time and subsequently received scant attention in histories of the Civil War. Our goal here is to reconstruct the history of the events, primarily using survivor accounts in the absence of other primary documents.³ We suggest that a fuller accounting of the Asaba massacres not only fills a significant gap in the historical record, but also helps us understand more completely the subsequent development of the Civil War. In particular, we argue that the unsuccessful Biafran incursion west of the Niger, and the subsequent atrocities committed against civilians by federal troops, became a major factor in confirming the rhetoric of genocide that hardened Biafran resolve and disastrously prolonged the war. In addition, our work will contribute to scholarship on the impact of traumatic memory at the local and national levels.

Background to the Civil War

Although a full history of the Nigerian Civil War is beyond the scope of this article, a brief overview is needed to place the Asaba events in context. The origins of the war lie in the country's colonial past. Starting at the end of the nineteenth century and over a period of forty years, the British took control of previously independent territories with distinct languages, religions, and customs, from the Bight of Benin along the coast, to the fringes of the Sahara Desert in the north. In 1914 the Colonial Office decided to amalgamate this complex ethnic mosaic into a single entity called "Nigeria" by joining the British colony of Lagos with the Protectorates of Southern Nigeria and Northern Nigeria. British rule did not foster a pan-Nigerian identity; colonial authorities promoted the development of distinct regional identities defined by common ethnicity and religion (mainly

Christian in the south and Muslim in the north). When Nigeria achieved independence in 1960, it was a three-region federal state. The south had been divided into the Yoruba-dominated Western Region, separated by the Niger River from the Igbo-dominated Eastern Region; the Hausa/Fulani dominated the Northern Region. (Nigeria also includes more than two hundred other ethnic groups in addition to these three largest groups.) A fourth region, the Midwest (which is the most ethnically diverse region) was carved out of the Western Region in 1963. This administrative structure promoted the formation of distinct, regionally based political parties. Fears that one region could prevail over the others and gain control over federal assemblies and the allocation of the country's resources led to contested census counts, as well as elections marred by fraud and intimidation in 1964 and 1965. In the end, the combination of regional tensions and corruption of the electoral and political process opened the way for the overthrow of civil rule by a group of military officers, mostly of Igbo descent, on January 15, 1966.⁴ One of their first actions was to suspend the constitution and consolidate the regions in an attempt to impose national unity.

Northerners saw the coup as an attempt by the Igbo to use the army to impose their domination over the country. They also seized this opportunity to express a long-festering animosity toward the Igbo who, because of their early exposure to European-style education and entrepreneurial practices, as well as their knowledge of English, had become a visible presence in business activities throughout the country. Baker (1980) writes that by 1966, across Nigeria,

Ibos filled urban jobs at every level far out of proportion to their numbers, as laborers and domestic servants, as bureaucrats, corporate managers, and technicians. Two-thirds of the senior jobs in the Nigerian Railway Corporation were held by Ibos. Three-quarters of Nigeria's diplomats came from the Eastern Region. So did almost half of the 4,500 students graduating from Nigerian universities in 1966. The Ibos became known as the "Jews of Africa," despised—and envied—for their achievements and acquisitiveness. (1980:76)

The Igbo presence outside of their region was not always welcomed, in spite of the crucial roles that they played, and in the north they were forced to live in segregated *Sabon Gari*, or strangers' quarters.⁵

In northern and western Nigeria, the unrest following the coup led to a series of bloody riots against the Igbo in May 1966. These attacks escalated into systematic massacres (which the Igbo commonly referred to as "pogroms") of easterners living in the Muslim north, after a countercoup led by northern officers killed the Igbo head of state, General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi, and replaced him with Colonel Yakubu Gowon, a Christian northerner, on July 29, 1966.⁶ In at least some cases, soldiers actively joined civilian mobs; on October 2, 1966, Lloyd Garrison reported in the *New York*

Times (1966a) that soldiers, defying the orders of their officers to keep the peace, opened fire on a large group of Igbos trying to board an airplane at Kano. These Igbos were attempting to join the estimated one million who, fearing for their lives, were fleeing to their ancestral homes in the east, which included both the region east of the Niger and portions of the Midwest Region, such as Asaba. Later in October the same reporter (Garrison 1966b) wrote that Nigeria “had reached the brink of dissolution and despair” as the massive population movements continued—not only were Igbo fleeing east, but non-Igbos living in the east were rushing home. Garrison pointed to the “lonely task” of Gowon: “to reestablish discipline among his northern troops who not only joined civilian mobs in the anti-Ibo massacres, but defied their own officers to the point of mutiny.” This “breakdown of the army as a responsive cohesive force” was to have further bloody ramifications in the year to come.

These tragic events, followed by the collapse of negotiations at a summit held in Aburi in Ghana, allowed the Igbo governor of the Eastern Region, Lieutenant Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, to argue that easterners were not safe within Nigeria, and they provided the justification for the decision to secede from the rest of the country and establish the sovereign state of Biafra on May 30, 1967. Interviewed in 1999, Ojukwu stated that “it was not so much a declaration of independence. It was more a demarcation of a line—this far, no further.”⁷ Nevertheless, within a few weeks of the declaration, he made the decision that eventually placed the Midwest Igbos in jeopardy—crossing the Niger and occupying the region—an occupation that lasted barely two months.

Asaba in 1967

The town of Asaba, once the seat of the Royal Niger Company, was part of the Midwest Region, and had never been part of Ojukwu’s Biafra (see Isichei 1969). Asaba people, though ethnically Igbo, consider themselves distinct from those in the Eastern Region, preferring the identity of “Anioma” (see Ohadike 1994). Their Midwest Region officially supported the government’s ideal of “One Nigeria,” although many distrusted the government, believing that it had supported previous atrocities against the Igbo. Compared to the bustling and much larger (Biafran) market center of Onitsha, directly across the Niger River, Asaba was a quiet town known mostly for high levels of education and for producing many high-ranking members of the civil service. Its population was probably around ten thousand before the war, but like many Igbo towns, these numbers were swollen during the war by the arrival of refugees fleeing the killing in the north and west. Typically, Igbo people have a deep attachment to their family town of origin, returning for all important life transitions (see Smith 2004); Asaba “indigenes” include many who were born elsewhere. In the situation

of crisis this tendency was magnified, and villages throughout the Igbo territories experienced population surges. A contemporary account describes the return of indigenes to the eastern (Biafran) town of Enugu:

Many had not been in their home villages for ten, twenty years. Some did not know where to find family land. Few had houses to go to. However the extended family took in its remotest members, fed and clothed them and found them space to lie down. There were no refugee camps in 1966. There were no beggars and people took this achievement quite calmly in absorbing this tremendous rush of people. (Rumelo 1974:28)

Many of the survivors whom we interviewed described being part of the move back to Asaba. Joseph Nwajei was fifteen years old and living with his parents in Ibadan when the war began. In June 1967 his father sent his wife and school-age children back to Asaba, where they lived in a family compound with Joseph's grandfather, two uncles (one of whom, George Nwajei, was a public service commissioner of the Midwest Region), and their families. "The compound was filled with kids," he said. "Because there was nothing we could do, we just played all day long" (personal interview, Oct. 10, 2009). The calm of everyday life was shattered when the war came to Asaba early in the morning of August 9. Under cover of darkness, Biafran troops in a surprise move advanced across the Niger Bridge from Onitsha into Asaba, beginning the invasion of the Midwest. Although it was sudden, the arrival of Biafran troops in Asaba was fairly uneventful. According to Nwajei,

It was very early in the morning. We just heard rumblings, so we knew something was up in the road. So, we all came out. . . . We saw soldiers. We saw troops and tanks, singing joyously and advancing, going towards Benin. That was all. And after they passed, we continued with school. Nothing happened.

The Biafrans quickly spread west, occupying the towns of Warri, Sapele, Ughelli, Agbor, Uromi, and Ubiaja, overrunning Benin City, and advancing as far as Ore, only about one hundred miles from Lagos, where they were halted after key bridges in their path were blown up. The purpose of the invasion of the Midwest Region was to draw advancing federal troops away from Biafra's capital at Enugu and undermine the image of Nigerian military supremacy. However, after six weeks of Biafran occupation of the Midwest, federal forces regained the initiative. On September 20, the Biafrans had declared the succession of the "independent and sovereign republic of Benin," but the hastily organized Second Infantry Division, under Colonel Murtala Muhammed, retook Benin City on September 21. Within ten days they had pushed the Biafrans all the way to Asaba with their back to the

Niger. On October 4 the Biafrans made their way back to Onitsha across the Niger Bridge, blowing up two spans behind them, cutting Biafra's road link to the Midwest and the rest of southern Nigeria, and leaving the federal troops angry and frustrated at their inability to pursue their enemy across the Niger.⁸

In his Civil War memoir, Wole Soyinka (1972) describes the Igbos of the Midwest as "the most vulnerable Nigerians" in that conflict (75). Many of their compatriots profoundly distrusted all Igbo, and after the Biafran incursion the Midwest Igbos were considered to be a major security risk. For their part, while many Midwestern Igbos had sympathy for the Biafran cause, most were either neutral or believed their best interests lay in remaining Nigerian. They hoped that a July statement issued by a group of their leaders in support of "One Nigeria" and condemning secession would shield them from retaliation from returning federal forces (*Daily Times*, 1967). Some must also have been aware of the "Operational Code of Conduct for the Nigerian Army," signed by Gowon and issued by the federal government in July 1967, which specifically instructed troops to treat civilians and captured enemy soldiers humanely and according to the Geneva Conventions.⁹

Nevertheless, by the time federal troops were approaching Asaba, many had reason to be fearful, especially as reports reached them of what had happened during the "liberation" of Benin City in late September, when troops stood by as local mobs went on a bloody rampage against the city's large Igbo community. Emmanuel Nwanze, an Asaba indigene, was eighteen years old and living with his aunt in Benin when the Nigerian troops arrived. He joined a crowd that assembled to welcome the soldiers, but the mood against Igbos turned ugly, and he ran home:

I went into the back of the compound knowing that the house was no longer safe because everything had been vandalized. . . . The windows torn open, our foodstuff and the stove brought out and spread all over the ground. And then you could hear from around the corners—youths with soldiers . . . hounding and hunting people out and you could see the people being dragged, even on the streets. Nude. They'd take them out for, uh, slaughter, we'll call it now. (Personal interview, Dec. 16, 2009)

Many Igbos fled Benin or went into hiding; Nwanze was initially protected by a Yoruba neighbor who claimed to soldiers that he was his son. Eventually, after spending time in prison camps, he made his way back to Asaba several months later.

What happened in Benin was repeated as troops advanced east: non-Igbo civilians attacked Igbos who had stayed behind, often those with the fewest resources, and the attackers were tacitly and actively supported by troops (see de St. Jorre 1971:164). In one of the few press accounts of the federal advance, Alfred Friendly Jr. of the *New York Times* (Friendly 1967a)

described the situation in Benin as Igbos were attacked and their homes and businesses looted. Later he reported that in Warri, four hundred to five hundred Igbos were killed by “civilian mobs,” with a similar number slaughtered in Sapele (Friendly 1967b). Retaliation against civilians was not one-sided. Reports surfaced that Biafran troops, retreating along the Benin–Asaba road, killed scores of non-Igbo-speaking Midwesterners in the towns of Abudu and Agbor Boji Boji as well as near Asaba, where they were rounded up, taken in two trucks to a rubber plantation on the outskirts of town, and killed (see Orobator 1967:379).

As federal troops advanced toward Asaba, the town was rife with accounts of the killing in the north and midwest, and this news fueled fears that the war was one of genocide against the Igbo. Many perceived the federal army as composed mostly of the same northerners who had recently killed so many Igbo, and feared that their arrival would lead to another, even greater, “pogrom.” For some, the fear became so strong that they decided to leave, among them the Asagba (traditional leader) of Asaba, Obi Umejei Onyetenu, who fled to the east.¹⁰ According to Emmanuel Chukwura, at the time of these events,

The tension was so much. Every place you see people gathering, discussing what was happening. . . . My mother-in-law. . . was then at Onitsha, and I decided I should take my wife and my children [there]. . . . I was with my most senior brother, Christian Chukwura, and my senior brother, Edwin Chukwura, we were drinking along the road here when I took that decision. (Personal interview, Dec. 16, 2009)

The decision to leave saved Chukwura’s life; both his brothers and his parents were dead within days.

The Asaba Massacres

The progress of federal troops toward Asaba could be measured by the approaching sound of heavy guns and the rattling of machine-gun fire. Okafor (2002:295) describes twenty-four hours of “ferocious” shelling, during which Asaba suffered its first victims. According to Emmanuel Chukwura (personal interview, Dec. 16, 2009), his mother, Mgboke, whom he had left behind while taking his wife and children to safety, was the first person killed, when shells hit the family home. He discovered her death when he returned to Asaba to check on the rest of his family on October 5. Other accounts name the first casualties as two elderly pensioners, Chief Ezeoba Njoteah and Eunice Chukwumah (testimonies of Anyibuofu Onya-Onlanwah and John Kanayo Hudson Oddittah, Ohaneze Petition, 1969). Federal troops reached the outskirts of town and occupied the grounds of St. Patrick’s College boys’ school on October 4, finally entering Asaba the afternoon of October 5.

As troops took control of the town, groups of soldiers went from house to house looting, raping, rounding up boys and men accused of being Biafran sympathizers, and demanding money from those who were spared (testimony of Francis Dike Okwudiafor, Ohaneze Petition, 1969). Males who had been singled out were either shot on the spot or taken to the police station on Nnebisi Road (Asaba's main street), the High Court on the Okpanam road, the soccer field, or the riverbank, where they were executed. Witnesses remember seeing the streets littered with corpses. Many families fled, while others hid in the ceilings of their houses. Patrick Okonkwo recalled that his compound was crowded with extended family members who had fled to their home community to escape the violence elsewhere. Soldiers entered and shot his two brothers, a cousin, and two other relatives. His father buried them in shallow graves in the compound (personal interview, June 27, 2010).

Fabian Oweazim, who was twelve years old at the time, describes being at the home of *Ogbuishi* (Chief) Leo Okogwu, secretary of the senior age grade council, when troops arrived. Another leading citizen, Chief Michael Ugoh, had arrived at the home seeking refuge with his wife, and the troops proceeded to harass and humiliate the family:

"You have money, Okugwu. Bring me money." Mrs. Ugoh went somewhere where she had kept some money... and brought a can of Ovaltine beverage that she had stuffed money in... and gave it to the guy. The guy stuffed them in his bag. One of the soldiers with him—he had two—was literally crying. He said, "Boss, it's okay. Let's go. Let's go. Let's go." He curled his whip on the face of the guy and told him to shut up. At this point, he told Mr. Ugoh... to roll on the ground... The man rolled on the ground... When he stood up, he must have been dizzy. He fell. (Personal interview, Oct. 10, 2009)

Emmanuel Chukwura, who had already moved his family to Onitsha, fled to join his family. But Patience Chukura, the wife of his brother Edwin, twenty-seven years old and pregnant with their fourth child, described what happened on October 6:

Somebody came looking for my brother-in-law and said that the Federal troops have come into Asaba, and they were burning houses... You open the door and tell them that no Biafran troop was there—then the house would be burnt, everything would be burnt.

People who went into the streets were stopped, and soldiers gathered men together:

My husband and brother, and all those—about 400 people who were following them, they were shot in front of the police station at Asaba. That

made me hysterical. . . . I held onto the person I saw, the soldier, I said, "Why did you kill my husband?" . . . The man with the butt of the gun hit me on the chest and said, "Woman, if you're not careful, you'll get killed as well." . . . Papa—that's my father-in-law—when he heard that his two sons were killed, he went out. . . . They shot him. They killed him. . . . We were in fear that they were going to wipe out everybody in Asaba, especially male children. (Patience Chukura, personal interview, Dec. 10, 2009)¹¹

When Emmanuel eventually returned to Asaba, he learned that he had lost both parents and four brothers (Eddie, Christian, Dennis, and Samson). Many other survivors also gave vivid accounts of acts of brutality carried out against individuals and groups in the days immediately after the troops' arrival:

On the main road, I just heard one young boy, a secondary school student, he was . . . begging. He was saying things like, "Please, come and tell them I'm not a soldier, come and tell them I'm not a soldier." . . . Then I heard this shot, pop, and the boy screamed . . . and said in our language, "They've shot me, they've shot me" . . . and they were kicking him, lying on the ground . . . with a gunshot wound. The next thing I heard was, uh, something like [*indescribable noise*]. And I looked again, and the lorry had gone over him. (Gertrude Ogunkeye, personal interview, Dec. 11, 2009)

In an attempt to bring violence to an end, the Asagba-in-Council, a group comprising members of the most senior age grades (approximately 50–70 years old), along with the town's chiefs, met in order to discuss the best ways to impress on the troops that Asaba had played no role in the Biafran incursion and that the community welcomed the return of federal forces.¹² The leaders decided that each of the town's five quarters would raise a levy of £50 for the troops, while the Omu of Asaba, the most important women's leader, would present a traditional woven cloth to their commander (testimony of John Kanayo Hudson Oddittah, *Ohaneze Petition*, 1969). An initial donation of £50 to pay for drinks was delivered immediately to a federal officer, who expressed regret for the number of civilians killed by what he called "stray bullets" (testimony of Francis Dike Okwu-diafor, *Ohaneze Petition*, 1969). Early on the morning of October 6, four men from another quarter were dispatched to deliver their contribution, and when they failed to return, a second group of four was sent to find out what had happened. They also vanished (testimony of Anyibuofu Onya-Onianwah, *Ohaneze Petition*, 1969).

In the evening of October 6, in the hope of bringing violence to an end, leaders ordered town criers with gongs to summon everyone to assemble the next day to welcome federal troops and offer a pledge of loyalty to "One Nigeria." People were encouraged to wear *akwa ocha*, the ceremonial white woven clothing that signifies peace. It is unclear exactly who had

come up with the idea of the assembly; Fabian Oweazim recalls that he was ordered to bring a typewriter to a man named Mr. Oguh, who typed the welcome address to the troops and had it sent to a leader in another quarter (personal interview, Oct. 10, 2009). Another witness recalled that criers informed him that “announcement was made at the order of the vandals” (a term used by Biafrans to refer to Nigerian troops) (testimony of John Kanayo Hudson Oddittah, Ohaneze Petition, 1969). Whatever the origin, many believed this would be “the last painful sacrifice that we would be called upon to make” (testimony of Francis Dike Okwudiafor, Ohaneze Petition, 1969).¹³

The Events of October 7

Although there was much trepidation, and some refused to participate, hundreds of men, women, and children—including some who had originally fled to the bush—assembled for a parade. With community elders in front, up to four thousand townspeople participated. Many gathered by a large tree on Nnebisi Road, where they were joined by groups coming out from houses throughout the five quarters of Asaba. With many singing, dancing, and chanting “One Nigeria,” they advanced past St. Joseph’s Church and continued east. Any expectation that these gestures of goodwill would appease the troops was quickly dashed. Marchers were flanked by federal soldiers to prevent them from fleeing, and witnesses report that the soldiers also selected males at random and executed them in full view of participants. Survivors recalled seeing dozens of bodies, including that of one of the town criers, along with the mangled bodies of the four who had been sent earlier to deliver money (testimonies of John Kanayo Hudson Oddittah and Anyibuofu Onya-Onianwah, Ohaneze Petition, 1969). Once the crowd reached the corner of Ogbogonogo and Ogbeke markets, troops separated out women and small children, who were corralled into the maternity hospital on Nnebisi Road, while the men were channeled between two rows of soldiers down the side road that led to the square at Ogbeosowa. According to Peter Okonjo (personal interview, Dec. 14, 2009),

Women who came with their sons were removing their skirts and gloves to disguise—so that their male children . . . they are no longer men, but women. So when I saw this scenario going on and I felt something is wrong. If these women can disguise their children, and my mother is not here, what do I do? And I looked at the whole place, there is nowhere for escape.

Once the women had gone, machine guns, both mounted on trucks and free-standing, were revealed, and mass shooting began. Ify Uraih, then thirteen years old, had joined the parade with his father and three older brothers, Paul, Emmanuel (Emma), and Medua.

Some people broke loose and tried to run away. My brother was holding me by the hand; he released me and pushed me further into the crowd. . . . They shot my brother in the back, he fell down, and I saw blood coming out of his body. And then the rest of us . . . just fell down on top of each other. And they continued shooting, and shooting, and shooting. . . . I lost count of time, I don't know how long it took. . . . After some time there was silence. I stood up . . . my body was covered in blood, but I knew that I was safe. My father was lying not far away; his eyes were open but he was dead. (Personal interview, Oct. 9, 2009)

Exactly how many died is not clear; between five hundred and eight hundred seems likely, in addition to many who had died in the previous days.¹⁴ Sporadic shooting went on for several hours, until it was growing dark and the soldiers began to disperse. Survivors lay still under the heap of bodies for a long time before feeling it was safe to wriggle out and run into the nearby bush. Ify Uraih lost his father and his brothers Emma and Paul; Medua was shot repeatedly, but recovered.¹⁵ Community elders had been at the front of the parade, and large numbers of the leading age grades, including Michael Ugoh and Leo Okogwu, were among those who died. With all the surviving men in hiding, it was left to women and children to attempt to find the bodies of their fathers, brothers, husbands, and other relatives and then drag them home for burial (testimony of Francis Dike Okwudiafor, Ohaneze Petition, 1969). Joseph Nwajei had escaped into the bush from the family compound earlier; when he returned a few days later, he learned of the death of his uncle, George Nwajei, killed in the family compound by occupying soldiers, as well as of his two brothers, ages twelve and seventeen, who died in the October 7 mass shooting.

Mum told me that in the evening hours of the 7th, she had to go look for their corpses at the mass place where they were shot. . . . Mum, in the evening, was able to identify their corpses, took them in a wheelbarrow, pushed them to the family house, where they were buried. So, I never saw their corpses, I never saw their bodies. (Personal interview, Oct. 10, 2009)

Most victims, however, were dumped in mass graves or thrown into the Niger. When it was safe to move about, Frank Ijeh, a local Red Cross worker, enlisted surviving men to dig hurried, shallow graves wherever they found bodies around the town, without observing crucial ceremonial practices: "There are so many, I cannot remember. So many, so many, so many" (personal interview, Dec. 13, 2009). In spite of these efforts many lay unburied for several days. One eyewitness interviewed in 1977 reported that "for nearly two days . . . the soldiers wouldn't let us come near . . . without opening fire. It was only when the stench of decaying corpses was all over the place that the soldiers relented . . ." (Isichei 1982:183). She retrieved her husband's body, but not that of a Catholic lay brother, Ignatius Barmah, who had died beside him. She was able to put *tinyele' a*, a white cloth, over

him—an important ceremonial act usually done by close relatives. Graves were dug once people began to trickle back into town, such as thirteen-year-old Patrick Obelue, who recalls:

Some were already decomposing, where you can poke somebody, and their head would roll off. And we just put them into one grave, there was no coffin, nothing, nothing. . . . We were the youths of the village. Just dug shallow graves, and then put them there. . . . Everywhere was stinking. . . . We knew it was our duty at that time to bury the dead. (Personal interview, Dec. 12, 2009)

Emeka Okonkwo was a small child in 1967, but he recalls that his father also helped bury the dead: “He left the house with shovel, and he took this scented leaf and put it in his nostrils. That would enable them to stand the stench” (personal interview, June 28, 2010).

Following the events of October 7, the worst killing stopped. However, federal soldiers remained in Asaba, waiting to cross the Niger into Onitsha. Some were billeted in the houses of families whose menfolk they had executed, and individual acts of violence and particularly rape continued (Medua Uraih, personal interview, Dec. 13, 2009). Gertrude Ogunkeye (personal interview, Dec. 11, 2009) recounted how soldiers abducted a young woman for a week before they brought her back to her father:

When she came back, she was a different girl. . . . She wouldn't talk to anybody, she was very weepy. . . . You see, we come from a culture where, where talk like rape is taboo, you know, a girl says she's been raped, getting married is like an impossibility.¹⁶

Just as mothers had tried to shield their sons from execution by dressing them as young girls, now families tried to protect their daughters by disguising them as older women. Victoria Nwanze (in her early teens in 1967) recalled, “I carried my younger brother at the back, and my grandmother gave me her dress . . . so that I would look like an old woman. The same thing with my sister and my cousin” (personal interview, Dec. 16, 2009). Martina Osaji (personal interview, Oct. 4, 2011) also reported that the family protected her older sister (then age eighteen) by disguising her as an older woman.

By the second week of October most Asabans had found refuge in nearby bush, or in small towns in the area; others had gone to Biafra and did not return until the war ended in 1970. The once thriving town now had a ghostly appearance with empty streets, most houses burned, and everything of value stolen.

Asaba in the Public Record

The 1967 killings are virtually absent from the published record. Contemporary Nigerian news reports made no reference to the massacre, and the international press provided only limited coverage. African leaders feared that the breakup of the continent's most populous country might inspire secessionist movements in other recently independent and fragile states. Western powers, for their part, were more concerned with the outbreak of the Six-Day War in the Middle East. Furthermore, unlike events in Congo a few years earlier, neither the United States nor the Soviet Union saw Nigeria as vital to their strategic interests, making the Nigerian Civil War the first post-World War II conflict that did not evolve into a confrontation between the two superpowers (see Stremmlau 1977).

Eventually in Western countries, coverage of the war increased when, following the retreat of the Biafrans back across the Niger, the federal government imposed a blockade, effectively starving the east into submission between 1968 and 1970. The international memory of Biafra is thus dominated by military defeat and heartbreaking images of starving children (see Bartrop 2002; Cookman 2008). But the intense, post-1968 media coverage contrasts dramatically with the dearth of attention in 1967, when the Midwestern Igbos suffered most. The international media relied mostly on official Nigerian sources and hearsay accounts (see Bird 2011); the British press, which is especially influential in Nigeria, was largely silent. The only mention of killing in Asaba appeared almost four months after the event in an article by Colin Legum in the *Observer* (1968), in which the widely respected Africa correspondent acknowledged credible reports of previous massacres and confirmed that federal troops had taken part in the killing. However his (second-hand) account claimed that a group of “implacably hostile” Igbo had attacked troops by surprise as they relaxed while watching the welcome dance: “The soldiers’ instinctive reaction was to scent ‘Ibo duplicity and perfidy,’” and “in this blind mood of anger all Ibo males were rounded up and shot” (Legum 1968). The *Times* of London reported in 1968 that “international observers . . . found that Ibo people were afraid of Federal soldiers because of Biafran propaganda” (Wolfers 1968) but that these fears were unfounded. A year later the *Times* reported that a Polish member of an international observer team claimed that “we have been unable to find one single trace of mass killings of Ibos” (Mounter 1969).

The U.S. press offered significantly more coverage of the early days of the war, notably in the dispatches of Alfred Friendly Jr., who reported directly from Benin when federal troops retook the city (Friendly 1967a). On October 22 the *New York Times*, in an uncredited story (“Race Hatred in Nigeria”), printed second-hand reports of the deaths of Igbos in Benin City, Warri, and Sapele a month before, and also mentioned, with no explanation, that few people remained in Asaba, where women “refused to go out

into the surrounding forests and coax their husbands back to the shattered town." An earlier *New York Times* story had reported that all ten thousand people in Asaba had fled as federal troops advanced: "the bodies of two that did not leave in time lay near the main road. Vultures picked at the skeletons sprawled amid the pathetic rubble of panicky flight: empty, battered suitcases, and ruined bedding. Bullet scars pocked the façade of every house on the main street" (Friendly 1967b). The picture here is of an abandoned town with a few unfortunate deaths, rather than the devastation that had occurred. Beyond these two stories, no accounts of the fate of Asaba can be found.

Book-length accounts of the war written close to the time, whether pro-federal or pro-Biafra, typically make no reference to the Asaba massacre (or any other large-scale civilian deaths) or barely mention it.¹⁷ Descriptions of the early stages of the war in 1967 are also sketchy in scholarly publications. Even Kirk-Greene (1971), in his exhaustive analysis of original sources on the war, includes almost nothing about that period. While Perham (1970:237) dismisses Asaba as an "isolated incident" unavoidable in times of war, de St. Jorre, drawing from Legum's news stories, describes it as a reaction to "a Biafran attempt to kill a Nigerian officer" and blames the killing on a "bitterly anti-Ibo Midwesterner" (1972:285). Niven comments that "deaths among the civilian population are still a matter of conjecture" (1970:vi). Little has changed with the passage of time. While Orobator's (1987) analysis of the Midwest campaign does not mention civilian massacres, O'Connell repeats de St. Jorre's account that the Asaba killings were "a reprisal for an attack on Federal troops after a ceasefire" (1993:203). Finally, Kantowicz acknowledges killings at Asaba and Onitsha, but describes them as "exceptional and . . . not ordered by the Nigerian commanders" (1999:244), an interpretation to which we will return.

In 1970, when the war ended, Gowon proclaimed that there would be "no victors, no vanquished," and no reprisals of any kind—and created a climate that discouraged the revisiting of wartime atrocities. Murtala Muhammed, commander of the division that took Asaba, became president of Nigeria after toppling Gowon in a 1975 coup, making such revisiting even more unlikely. For decades, the Asaba massacre remained officially ignored, although survivors and families of the victims kept its memory alive through oral accounts. According to Bishop Emmanuel Ckukwuma, who was present in Asaba from 1967 until his death in 2010, his church held an annual commemoration for a few years, until ordered to stop by federal authorities (personal interview, June 28, 2010).

This silence began to lift in the mid-1990s. In 1994, Emmanuel "Emma" Okocha (who lost his father at Asaba) published *Blood on the Niger*, the first account devoted entirely to the Asaba events. Okocha's book (expanded in a new edition in 2006) made a considerable impact in Asaba and among the Nigerian diaspora (see Bird 2011). Unfortunately, while quite detailed, the book is often haphazardly sourced. Interviews are not referenced and

some dramatic details appear to owe more to narrative license than historical accuracy. In spite of these shortcomings, however, Okocha's work has been crucial to keeping memory of the event alive.¹⁸ Stanley Okafor (2002), in his contribution to a volume on the war and its aftermath, offers a short personal account of his experiences as a boy in Asaba during the massacres, when he hid for two weeks in the ceiling of the family house after his father was killed. Meanwhile, in a collection of interviews with retired military officers on both sides of the conflict (Momoh 2000), a few officers briefly acknowledge the Asaba killings; Gen. Ishola Williams, for example, agrees that the civilian deaths were "unfortunate" (2000:880). In 2001, as Nigeria emerged from years of military rule, President Olusegun Obasanjo established the Nigerian Human Rights Violations Investigation Commission (HRVIC, or Oputa Panel) as a mechanism of transitional justice to consider the history of human rights abuses from 1966 to May 1999, of which civil war events were part. Evidence presented to the panel includes the Ohaneze Petition, a lengthy document describing abuses against the Igbo from the 1966 coups through the war, including detailed depositions (many of which have been quoted here) made in 1969 by several Asaba survivors. A group of survivors also testified directly, including Emma Okocha and a few we have subsequently interviewed. Although the Oputa Panel "was intended to provide a process for . . . formal reinsertion of the past into the present" (Nwogu 2007:79), ethnic wrangling limited its effectiveness (see Pegg 2002; Yusuf 2007). It was not designed to attribute blame or take action, and its report was never officially released, although it is now available on the Internet.¹⁹ However, since testimonies were broadcast on television and widely discussed in the press, the Oputa Panel brought visibility to civil war (and other) atrocities, and set the stage for more survivors to speak publically.

Why Did the Massacres Happen?

It seems plausible that the events in Asaba were both targeted acts of retaliation and opportunistic actions on the part of undisciplined troops. According to many accounts, federal troops sought out specific individuals and executed them in reprisal for their perceived role in or sympathy for the January 1966 coup. Philip Asiodu, a member of General Gowon's war cabinet, believes there was a level of premeditation, pointing out that several Igbo officers from the area were prominently involved in that coup. Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu, regarded as one of the key coup leaders, came from Okpanam, a few miles north of Asaba, and several other officers were from neighboring communities in what had once been the colonial Asaba Division: "It's not difficult to imagine," said Asiodu, "that they must have said, 'When we reach Asaba, we shall wreak punishment'" (personal interview, Dec. 8, 2009). Similarly, Emma Okocha (2006) writes about a "master list" that was reportedly used to track down people. We did not find evidence

that such a formal “list” existed, and eyewitness testimony mentioned it only through reference to Okocha’s work, but Asiodu’s view is shared by many survivors.²⁰ Only one witness specifically recalls soldiers mentioning the coup leaders: Medua Uraih says that they started asking “‘Where’s Nzeogwu’s house? Where’s Okwechime’s [Colonel Mike Okwechime] house?’ We say, ‘No, they are not from here.’ . . . And that was when they started feeling remorse about it, say they thought that they are from Asaba” (personal interview, Dec. 13, 2009). But several people did report that when soldiers first arrived in Asaba, they went from house to house searching for specific individuals; Joseph Nwajei, for example, said troops were clearly looking for his uncle, George Nwajei, a prominent civil servant, even though other adults were present in the family compound. Indeed, as we have seen, they removed George Nwajei and summarily executed him.

The connection between the role of officers from Asaba in the 1966 coup and the massacres of October 1967 has become part of the communal memory of Asaba. However, this specific wish for retribution was not the only factor. More generally, the soldiers’ actions in Asaba can be attributed to the same hatred of Igbos that had driven the earlier massacres in the north and west, especially the resentment of Igbo education and success. One witness reported that a Lieutenant Usman berated and beat a large group of men, saying that Igbos “believe in book knowledge, that they were going to destroy that book knowledge” (testimony of John Kanayo Hudson, Ohaneze Petition, 1969).²¹ Several interviewees reported that soldiers made comments about hating Igbo people and wanting to kill them; many people in Asaba who had fled there from the north spoke Hausa and were able to understand the soldiers’ conversations, or understood the “pidgin English” that was used across the country to communicate among the multiplicity of languages. Ify Uraih, for example, described being among those gathered for the welcome on October 7, when an officer, Maj. Ibrahim Taiwo, addressed the group, accusing them of harboring Biafran sympathizers. Leaders asserted their support of “One Nigeria,” and initially the officer appeared to accept that. Later another officer spoke to the group that included Uraih, saying he was from Adamawa State, a northeast state bordering Chad: “He said he was a second lieutenant, and [I’m going to speak the way he spoke], he said . . . ‘But den born me for Adamawa. I hate all Igbos, and you be Igbo. Therefore, you must die!’” (personal interview, Oct. 9, 2009). Shortly after that, Uraih heard an order in Hausa to begin killing.

Most likely, we cannot know with certainty which commanders were directly involved in the October 7 massacre, which had all the signs of an orchestrated event. Several witnesses point to Major Taiwo as the instigator; others lay the blame directly on Col. Murtala Muhammed, who, as the highest-ranking officer of the Second Division, was ultimately responsible for its conduct.²² It seems likely he was in Asaba at the time; two witnesses report with great certainty that they saw him there.²³ Muhammed’s goal had been

to cross the river to Onitsha in pursuit of the Biafrans, and the destruction of the bridge had left the advancing troops frustrated and angry. It is certainly plausible that the troops acted with his tacit or active approval.²⁴

However, the eyewitness accounts also paint a picture of a chaotic lawlessness that prevailed in the town immediately prior to and alongside the more organized event at Ogbeosawa. Witnesses report that in general the soldiers appeared out of control. Many survivors remember the federal soldiers as rapacious and terrifying, conforming to popular stereotypical images of northern Hausa people as tall, very dark, and often bearing distinctive facial scars. They were (and still often are) referred to as *gwodogwo*, a derogatory term that suggests the soldiers were large, hulking, and almost apelike in their movement.²⁵ According to Emmanuel Obi, "Their eyes were so bloody red that you dared not look at their eyes. Whether they were all on some kind of drugs or whatever, I have no idea, but they didn't look human (personal interview, Oct. 10, 2009).

At the same time, it is clear that not all federal troops took part in or supported the killings. Several survivors recalled instances in which individual officers and common soldiers intervened directly to save and protect civilians. For instance, Francis Dike Okwudiafor recounted how he was part of a group that was marched to be executed in a field next to the High Court on the Okpanam road, when at the last moment a federal major intervened and had them escorted back to their homes to insure their safety (testimony, Ohaneze Petition, 1969). Sometimes acts of mercy happened because of past relationships. Patience Chukura, for example, reported that when ordered to shoot her husband and brother-in-law, a soldier refused, telling his colleague that he knew the men. The other man responded by executing the soldier before killing the Chukuras (personal interview, Dec. 10, 2009).²⁶ At least two witnesses (Frank Ijeh, personal interview, Dec. 13, 2009; Medua Uraih, personal interview, Dec. 13, 2009) remembered a Captain Mattias who prevented the killing of a Red Cross worker; Uraih also recalls that the officer gathered an entire family in their home and told them not to join the march to Ogbeosawa; "he asked them to wait and none of them was shot." Patrick Okonkwo (personal interview, June 27, 2010) spoke gratefully of a soldier named Joseph, who intervened when others threatened to shoot his father, who was attempting to bury the five relatives shot earlier: "Joseph was the one who challenged the other one: 'If you shoot, me, I will shoot you. Look at that man today—he lost five of his children, and you want to kill him. . . . Let that man be today.' So he spared our father." Later, Joseph returned to the compound and protected the family from further harm. These accounts complicate any narrative of a single, organized campaign of killing, painting a picture of undisciplined and semiautonomous bands of soldiers terrorizing citizens, even as some of their own members resisted this. Some of these soldiers were probably motivated by simple greed. The highly educated people for whom Asaba was known were also relatively affluent (even though many had lost a great

deal when they fled home), and it is clear that soldiers simply took the opportunity to loot, with little restraint by superiors.

That this was happening with impunity points to the serious issues of discipline in the Nigerian army in general, and the Second Division in particular. Before the war, according to Peters (1997), the Nigerian army was ten thousand strong; by the end it had ballooned to a quarter million, but the events of 1966 left it “seriously under-officered” (1997:109). Colonel Muhammed’s Second Division, which had been thrown together when the Biafrans broke through the Midwest, was poorly disciplined. In the first few months of the war, communication between central headquarters in Lagos and field commanders was lacking, which allowed the commanders to operate as warlords in their areas of operation (see Peters 1997). In 1967, the *New York Times* reporter Alfred Friendly Jr. described Colonel Muhammed as “a fire-breathing 28-year-old Northerner whose dislike of Ibos has never been disguised” (1967a). According to Friendly, he resented General Gowon’s rise to power and was one of the most independent of these “war lords.”²⁷ The lack of communication in both directions, as well as the autonomy of field commanders, was one reason that news of the massacres in Asaba spread slowly outside the area. Philip Asiodu, the member of Gowon’s war cabinet, described how hard it was to get information from the field even for high ranking government officials: “When the things happened in Asaba, there we were in Lagos. We didn’t really get proper reports. The people who perpetrated it knew what they did was criminal. . . . They must have done their best to suppress reports coming out” (personal interview, Dec. 8, 2009). Indeed, it was several weeks before Asiodu learned that his younger brother, the Olympic athlete Sydney Asiodu, had died at Asaba.

This significant gap in the record was facilitated by the Nigerian government’s tight rein over all reporting and information from the war zone, which made it illegal for anyone, including international news sources, to divulge information deemed detrimental to federal authorities (see Stremmlau 1977). In August 1967 Wole Soyinka was arrested and imprisoned for two years as a spy after he met with Ojukwu in an attempt to broker peace. Frank Ijeh, who worked for the Red Cross in Asaba, wrote to the International Red Cross describing what had just happened in Asaba (personal interview, Dec. 13, 2009). Sylvester Okocha, a senior civil servant in Benin did the same (personal interview, Dec. 15, 2009). After Okocha’s letter was intercepted by the military, he was arrested, tortured, and incarcerated in Lagos.²⁸ Exactly who was directly policing such attempts is unclear; however, it is apparent that military authorities did not want the wider world to know the tactics that were being used.

The Significance of the Asaba Massacres

What happened in Asaba is significant both for its immediate impact on the Civil War and for its longer term effect on the community itself. At the

onset of the war, fear of genocide, in the wake of the massacres of Igbos in the north and west, was an important factor in the decision to secede. However, Biafra's authorities defined secession as centrally a struggle for political self-determination. Following the failed invasion of the Midwest, the central theme of Biafran propaganda was that the war was a defensive struggle against federal troops bent on the mass slaughter of Igbo people. The rhetoric of genocide thus became one of Biafra's most effective tools to stiffen the resolve of the Igbo in the east and to obtain international support (see Stremlau 1977). Throughout the war, Gowon and his government strongly denied such a characterization, maintaining that the only goal was to restore federal authority over the entire country, and assuring the Igbo they would not be harmed if they would give up the fight. Nevertheless, this official position was undermined by reports from the field, and when news of the killings in Asaba reached the east, it "awakened in Ibo across the Niger the worst fear about genocide" (Asiodu 2006:8). Indeed, in February 1968, in a memo to United Nations Secretary-General U Thant, Biafra cited the massacres as one example proving that this was a "war of genocide."²⁹

Asaba was not the only location of civilian massacres during the first few months of the war. In late 1968, Jack Shepherd, a senior editor at *Look* magazine, reported from Nigeria that "perhaps 8,000 Ibo civilians died when the Midwest was 'liberated' by troops under Col. Murtala Muhammed" (1968:74). Shepherd pointed to an incident in which troops "cleared" the village of Ishiagu (not far from Asaba), killing men after separating them from women and children. Witnesses in Asaba also mentioned Ishiagu, as well as killing in other nearby communities, such as Ogwashi-Ukwu, Ibusa, and Igbodo, all of which were largely ignored in media and official reporting.

Most of these killings can be attributed to general indiscipline, intensified by ethnic hostility. However, the October 7 massacre in Asaba's Ogeosowa square displayed planning and coordination, from the moment that hundreds of people assembled and began to march, dance, and sing, to the removal of women and children, to the final systematic killing of men and boys. In the oral accounts of what happened, a consistent theme is outrage at a despicable betrayal; the people of Asaba had assembled to declare allegiance to Nigeria in a traditional display of dance and music, only to be slaughtered. And thus this news sent a uniquely chilling message to other Igbos in Biafra, effectively helping prolong the war.³⁰

Conclusion

At one level, the story of Asaba is important simply as a forgotten page in the history of Nigeria's bloody civil war that deepens our knowledge of how that war unfolded in its final years. The telling of the story also offers acknowledgment—even catharsis—to those who suffered. Most have not spoken outside their own circle; the stories of others have been met with

disbelief outside Asaba.

At another level, it adds to our understanding of the impact of trauma on a community, sometimes for years afterward. Four decades after the war ended, Asaba still displays many scars. These are visible in the derelict buildings that remain unrestored and on the bodies of those who survived. There are also invisible scars, fresh in the minds and lives of Asabans who have kept alive the memory of the cruel deaths of their fathers, brothers, and uncles, even as their trauma has remained unrecognized by institutionalized public memory.³¹ As one informant recounted, “Nobody seemed to know about it. Even in the . . . military history books, there’s no mention of it. It has got to be part of our history, because if you don’t have a history, you cannot go ahead in life” (Gertrude Ogunkeye, personal interview, Dec. 11, 2009). In 2002, after the veil of secrecy had been lifted at the Oputa Panel, former President Gowon (while stating that he had no knowledge of the atrocity at the time) offered a formal apology to the people of Asaba—a deeply symbolic moment that has paved the way for more Asabans to speak out, with some survivors working now to create a public memorialization.

Finally, the story of Asaba speaks to larger issues of trauma and potential reconciliation that extend beyond Asaba and Nigeria. As Francisco Ferrándiz wrote, describing the exhumation of the victims of General Franco’s troops during the Spanish Civil War, the recovery of historical memories speaks of the “resilience of traumatic memory through years of silence and fear” (2006:12). In Nigeria, the unresolved burden of memory has become a potent symbol of festering injustice that has stood in the way of meaningful reconciliation by keeping alive ethnic tensions. As Ukoha Ukiwo notes, a resurgence of both Biafran nationalism and endemic violence in contemporary Nigeria is partly attributable to the legacy of the war (2009:10); formal recognition in the sanctioned memory of the nation may help address this lingering legacy. In Nigeria, as in Spain, Argentina, Guatemala, Rwanda, and elsewhere, such stories offer “better understanding of the long-lasting consequences of violence and repression” (Ferrándiz 2006:12) and the destructive legacy of silence.

The Asaba massacres were ultimately a product of the same ethnic hostility that simmers today, yet they were not inevitable—they resulted from the decisions of individuals, and they provide us with opportunities for moral reflection (see Murphy & Gallagher 2009). Strikingly, the people we have interviewed have repeatedly spoken to the pressing need to use their experience for good; as Francis Nwajei told us (personal interview, June 28, 2010), “For Nigeria to be great, people have to be educated . . . to understand that you cannot resolve differences by conflict.”

Acknowledgments

The authors wish to acknowledge the support of grants from the Humanities Institute and Office of Research of the University of South Florida. We

thank the editors and anonymous reviewers of the *African Studies Review* for their insightful comments, which helped strengthen the paper greatly. We also acknowledge Emma Okocha, who introduced us to Asaba. We are deeply grateful to members of our Community Advisory Board in Asaba, especially E. A. C. Nwanze, Chuck Nduka-Eze, Chief Louis Odogwu, Martina Osaji, Chief Philip Asiodu, and most of all, Ify Uraih, without whom this work would not have been possible. Thanks also to doctoral student Maryann Cairns, who transcribed many interviews and offered insightful comments. Finally, we thank the many Asabans who agreed to tell their stories. More information on the research may be viewed at www.asabamemorial.org.

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Notes

1. We use the current preferred spelling, Igbo, but the older variant (Ibo) is still occasionally seen.
2. Testimony of Francis Dike Okwudiafor, Jan. 20, 1969, later included in "The Violations of Human and Civil Rights of Ndi Igbo in the Federation of Nigeria, 1966–1999." Ohanaeze Ndigbo, a pan-Igbo rights group, presented this petition to the Human Rights Violations Investigation Commission (known as the Oputa Panel), laying out details of anti-Igbo violations before, during, and after the Civil War. In subsequent citations "Testimony" refers to witness depositions made in 1969 and later included in this document. It is commonly known as the Ohaneze Petition, and is available online in several locations (e.g., www.scribd.com).
3. Interviews were carried out with 44 survivors and witnesses to the massacres in Tampa, Florida (October 2009), Lagos, Nigeria (December 2009), Benin City, Nigeria (December 2009), and Asaba, Nigeria (December 2009, June 2010, October 2011). Six of the eight who gave testimony in Tampa are now resident in the U.S, and were participating in a small symposium organized to launch this research project. Those interviewed in Nigeria were identified by the chair of our Community Advisory Board and a massacre survivor, Ify Uraih. A list of the interviewees quoted in this paper, along with their year of birth and interview date, appears in the References.
4. See Amoda (1972); Falola and Heaton (2008); Hatch (1971); Oyinbo (1971).
5. See Anthony (2003); Falola and Heaton (2008); Hatch (1971).
6. The term *pogrom* was first used by the Ministry of Information in Enugu, Eastern Nigeria, in 1966. A book (Ministry of Information, 1966) includes graphic photographs and first-hand accounts of attacks and killing. Thousands led or were killed in this wave of violence.
7. Audiotaped interview archived in Imperial War Museum, London, Reference 20541.
8. See de St. Jorre (1971); Forsyth (1969); Orobator (1987).
9. For the text of the Code, see Kirk-Greene (1971:455–57).
10. According to tradition the Asagba, once installed, should never leave Asaba, so his desertion was cause for great concern, even anger.
11. Patience spells the family name Chukura, while Emmanuel spells it Chukwura; such variations are not uncommon.
12. See Ndili (2008) for details of Asaba governance.
13. The survivors of the October 7 killing whom we interviewed were generally unable to give specifics about the negotiations and planning for the march, although many knew such meetings had taken place. Most were children or teenagers at the time, and thus would not have been part of the planning process, simply telling us they were summoned to participate. The Ohaneze Petition depositions written in 1969 are thus crucial in reconstructing these details, since men who were mature leaders in 1967 are almost all dead.
14. No precise number of casualties has been established. In 1981 the Asaba Development Council compiled a list of names of 373 confirmed dead, but acknowledged that many more were not included (a point our interviews have supported). Eyewitness estimates range from a minimum of 500 to more than

- 1,000. Legum (1968) notes 700 dead, although his account of the circumstances of the killing are not accurate.
15. The details of the massacre were provided by a number of witnesses during personal interviews, including Ify Uraih (Oct. 9, 2009); Peter Okonjo (Dec. 14, 2009); Osakwe Igwemma (Dec. 12, 2009); Peter Ojogwu (Dec. 14, 2009); Medua Uraih (Dec. 13, 2009); and Chris Mkpayah (Dec. 10, 2009).
 16. Many others spoke in interviews of rape, abduction, and forcible marriage, e.g., Victoria Nwanze (Dec. 16, 2009); Nakandelin Madezia (June 23, 2010); Emmanuel Obi (Oct. 10, 2009), Mabel Chizea (June 28, 2010); Josephine Onyemenan (June 23, 2010); Patience Chukura (Dec. 10, 2009), Patrick Obelue (Dec. 12, 2009), and Peter Okonjo (Dec. 14, 2009).
 17. See, e.g., Collis (1970); de St. Jorre (1972); Forsyth (1969); Hatch (1970); Niven (1970); Okpaku (1972); Oyimbo (1971); Uwuchue (1971).
 18. Okocha was also the catalyst for the initiation of the current research in 2008, when he and other Asaba leaders sought the involvement of U.S. academics in a memorialization effort.
 19. The report is available at www.dawodu.com/oputa1.htm.
 20. E.g., Emmanuel Obi, Ify Uraih, Medua Uraih, Joseph Nwajei, Fabian Oweazim, Peter Okonjo, and Emmanuel Nwanze.
 21. When interviewed for Momoh's (2000) book, Usman was asked directly whether there had been killings in Asaba and other towns; he evaded the question (2000:869).
 22. Taiwo, a close associate of Muhammed, died in 1976 in the same attempted coup that killed Muhammed, who had become president of Nigeria.
 23. Personal interviews with Patience Chukura (Dec. 10, 2009) and Grace Monyei (June 28, 2010).
 24. Against the advice of many other officers, Muhammed soon after made two abortive attempts to cross the river by boat, sustaining heavy casualties.
 25. E.g., Fabian Oweazim recalls them as appearing "like giants" (personal interview, Oct. 10, 2009). Chris Mkpayah (personal interview, Dec. 10, 2009) and Ify Uraih (personal interview, Oct. 9, 2009) describe the facial scars and the Hausa language.
 26. Obaze Nwaka, a Northern woman married to an Asaba man, told us how her brother, a federal soldier, had sent word to warn the family that the troops would be coming to kill them and that they should flee (personal interview, Dec. 10, 2009). Charles Ugboko described meeting an old school friend, now a soldier, who was rounding up men. The soldier pulled Ugboko out of the group and tried to help him find his brother, eventually taking him to a safe refuge (personal interview, Dec. 12, 2009).
 27. Another officer, Col. E. O. Abisoye, also described Muhammed as "fiery," and even "stupid," and stressed the lack of a strong central communication system (Momoh 2000:230). Gen. J. J. Oluleye commented that he "had no respect for battle procedure" (Momoh 2000:774).
 28. The authors contacted the International Red Cross to seek access to any records from the time; we were told that archival material from 1965 onward is still classified and unavailable for study.
 29. The memo, titled "War of Genocide," was written by the Government of the Republic of Biafra, Feb. 24, 1968. It cited several instances in support of the

genocide argument, including the testimony of J. Dike Ofili of Asaba, who described rapes and killings in the town. The memo is located in the Clearing House for Nigeria/Biafra Information, "Nigeria/Biafra Information Collection," Center for Research Libraries, Chicago.

30. See Uzokwe (2003) for a personal account of hearing news about relatives killed at Asaba while living in Biafra.
31. One goal of ongoing research, not detailed in this paper, is to explore the social impacts of the massacres, which are still profound after 40 years.