

imperial estates. In the case of Borno, these modern historical accounts of a once-great empire were represented as an extension of British greatness. This imagined and long-cultivated history has led those who have claimed Borno affiliation to maintain a sense of exceptionalism vis-à-vis their neighbors.

In the context of post-independence Nigeria, where an intense federalism continues to fuel state fragmentation, Borno remains relatively intact. Hiribarren argues in Chapter Eight that it is the culture of exceptionalism that allows the patronage networks to remain stable, even after Borno became peripheral within the Nigerian state, especially in economic terms. Political parties continue to curry favor with the Bornu's historic ruling elite in order to maintain a sense of political coherence in the North. However, Boko Haram threatens to destabilize this region. How well will the current Nigerian state and the Kanuri ethnic communities of Bornu be able to maintain the integrity of this imagined community over the coming century? It remains to be seen. *A History of Borno* is a useful text for anyone attempting to gain a deep historical understanding of an ancient state that has been able to remain resilient through intense modern change.

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THE BIAFRAN WAR AND POSTCOLONIAL HUMANITARIANISM

The Biafran War and Postcolonial Humanitarianism: Spectacles of Suffering.

By Lasse Heerten.

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Key Words: Nigeria, civil war, postcolonial, human rights.

The Biafran War and Postcolonial Humanitarianism: Spectacles of Suffering, by Lasse Heerten, is a searching, diligently researched, and well-written account of the Nigeria-Biafra War (1967–70). The conflict, which shook a young Nigerian state to its foundations and riveted (and divided) international attention because of the visceral suffering of the Igbo, is not exactly lacking for consideration, scholarly and otherwise. The chief distinction between this book and most writings on the Nigerian Civil War lies in its questions and conceptual locus. Whereas much of the historiography, even when posted under scholastic auspices, has been morally partisan, seeking to either excoriate or exculpate Lagos or Biafra, this book is interested in the making of 'Biafra' as an international humanitarian spectacle. In so doing, the author makes an original contribution that radically transforms our perspective on the Nigeria-Biafra War, especially our understanding of Biafran international mobilization, Western agency, the role of the international media, and the interplay of socio-historical and cultural forces that shaped the actions of politicians and military tacticians, especially on the Biafran side of the conflict. Given this contribution, the book seems less about the Biafran conflict *per se* and more about the birth of

‘the iconography of human distress’ that enfolded with the ascendant regime of human rights and humanitarianism in the global 1960s (174).

Timing is a crucial aspect of Heerten’s argument. Whereas the Nigeria-Biafra conflict eventually became a global media spectacle, it was not always in the spotlight, at least not at the beginning. Heerten shows that, until mid-1968, and for a variety of reasons, the conflict ‘held limited, regional interest’ (17). How, given this initial limited interest, did it become internationalized, and through what channels? Heerten answers this question by arguing that — crucially from the Biafran perspective — the Nigeria-Biafra War had to be transformed from a political conflict into a humanitarian problem. As Heerten explains, ‘rather than the rhetoric of the right to self-determination, which was at the core of the Biafran program, it was a dystopian vision of postcolonial catastrophe and the death of innocents that turned the conflict into a global media event’ (18).

It is one thing to attempt to mobilize the moral outrage of the international community, which, effectively, is what the Biafran leadership (faced with mounting, if predictable, losses on the battlefield) hoped to accomplish; it is a different thing to be successful at it. That the Biafran leadership succeeded in internationalizing the conflict and making Biafran peoples a spectacle of suffering was due, Heerten argues, to the auspiciousness of the global moment, whereby the demise of one version of human rights, ‘the right to self-determination, and the rise of another notion, the right to intervention, interconnected’ (339). This propitious global moment combined with the Biafran leadership’s astuteness in deploying ‘the suffering minority trope’ and ‘the pictorial staging of compassion’ (197).

The problem with ‘spectacles of suffering’ is that, although they may work in rerouting attention and resources to the stager, they tend to freeze into ‘the lenses through which the West observes the postcolonial world. Bespectacled with the humanitarian lens, Third World societies *only become visible in the Western gaze if they display a suffering which seems to be of a different quality than that in primarily political conflicts*’ (341, emphasis added). In order to garner international attention, the Biafran leadership had to reframe its entire ‘conceptual bricolage’, wagering, accurately as it happens, that ‘world interest could be aroused more easily by evidence of suffering than by political arguments’ (304, 305). Heerten does not impeach this strategy so much as show its complex and unforeseen aftermath. That it bought international attention and moral support to the Biafran cause is beyond question. For instance, ‘visual metaphors comparing Biafra to the Holocaust’ earned Jewish-American sympathy, whereas in Germany, ‘a sense of responsibility because of the country’s past intertwined with a Christian sense of concern for Biafra’ (197, 199). Several other groups jumped on the ensuing humanitarian train because a flood of images of emaciated Biafran babies and mothers tugged at their heartstrings.

Yet, in the long run, Heerten argues, the strategy may have been counterproductive. First, the shift from self-determination to genocide and suffering had the untold effect of ‘decontextualizing’ the Biafran struggle. Even more damagingly, the rebuttal of the genocide allegations ‘invalidated the Biafrans’ narrative about the conflict, which had aroused substantial international sympathy’ (289). Second, as humanitarian representations of Biafra’s suffering morphed almost seamlessly into a casting of the secessionist republic as ‘a place of civilizational disorder’, and as humanitarian agents themselves became foot soldiers of ‘the old civilizing mission in a postcolonial world’, all the ghosts that

have notoriously haunted metropole-colony relations suddenly crawled out of the woodwork (167, 174).

I cannot praise Heerten's work enough, and strongly commend it, not just to students of the Nigerian Civil War, but also those who focus on the interrelated fields of history, human rights, humanitarian intervention, media studies, postcolonial theory, and global history. The prose is elevated, often sensuous, and the theorizing is never less than provocative. Nor could its publication be more timely, given the recent renaissance of Igbo agitation for self-determination in Nigeria. Although Heerten refuses to judge, his book nonetheless abounds in multiple didactic moments. Thus, this is a book from which Igbo leadership, as dissolute and undisciplined as it is (as are its counterparts in other regions of the country) might just learn a lesson or two.

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THE ASABA MASSACRE DURING THE NIGERIAN CIVIL WAR

The Asaba Massacre: Trauma, Memory, and the Nigerian Civil War.

By S. Elizabeth Bird and Fraser M. Ottanelli.

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Key Words: Nigeria, civil wars, memory, ethnicity.

The Asaba Massacre: Trauma, Memory, and the Nigerian Civil War, by S. Elizabeth Bird and Fraser M. Ottanelli, recounts a chilling episode during the Nigeria-Biafra War, that is, the bloody massacre of the civilian population in the eastern Nigerian town of Asaba by federal troops in 1967. This event took place when those troops entered the town in pursuit of Biafran soldiers who had retreated from the midwestern part of the country into its core eastern areas, which is where Asaba is located. Led by Colonel Murtala Muhammed and his deputy Colonel Taiwo, the federal troops embarked on a systematic carnage of men and boys whom they suspected of being sympathetic to the Biafran soldiers. Although regarded as one of the more gruesome massacres in postcolonial Africa, this book captures for the first time this history in detail. The book constitutes an interdisciplinary account of the massacre; it also analyzes attempts by the government to suppress its memory, while further addressing ways in which its surviving victims remember the event. The strength of the book lies in its use of a range of sources and its interdisciplinary perspective: it draws together historical narratives, critical understandings of Nigerian political dynamics and their relationship to imperial Britain, and testimonials and literature that relate to trauma, memory, and memorialization.

The roots of the war lay in the structure of colonial Nigeria. The British colonial system of administration forced the different regions of Nigeria into a union in 1914, a process that fostered competition and suspicion among Nigeria's three major and distinct peoples.