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Review of The Asaba Massacre During the Nigerian Civil War

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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. Indeed, the British had designed Nigeria to favor the predominantly Muslim north and then the Yoruba in the west, and to a lesser extent the Igbo and other eastern peoples. The imperial design in Nigeria lasted as long as Britain welded these separate groups together with an iron fist, but that system began to collapse after independence in 1960. Nigeria's political elite relied on ethnocentric systems of loyalty which made integration difficult at the center, and the pluralistic structure of postcolonial Nigeria and the deep-seeded tensions among the major ethnic groups led to perpetual disagreement and conflicts. In effect, the failures of British imperial policy served as the genesis for Nigeria's postcolonial problems, including the string of military coups and the Nigerian-Biafran war.

In this book, Bird and Ottanelli offer an impressive account of the history of Asaba; they then trace the arrival of federal troops into the town, detail the massacre, and consider the immediate aftermath of the violence perpetuated on its population. The reliance on oral testimonies brings to the fore the genocidal actions of the federal troops. The extermination of Asaba men by federal troops revealed a politics of ethnic annihilation that targeted the Igbo ethnic group and some other easterners.

The authors also address Britain's historic connections to Nigeria as a colonizing power (Chapter Three), the strong ties that continued to link the countries in the postcolonial period, and the complicity of the British government in the genocidal acts perpetuated against the Asaba people and other ethnic Igbo. Particularly central to the argument in this chapter is the premeditated nature of the Asaba massacre. Evidence gathered from oral interviews indicates the parade organized by Asaba civilians to welcome federal troops served as a prelude to the massacre.

The book captures the crude and often horrific strategies the federal army of Nigeria adopted to vanquish the Biafrans, while it also reveals the indomitable spirit of a people to survive an attempt to exterminate them. The food blockade which was firmly in place by 1968 crippled the ability of Biafra's leaders to save their population from starvation or prosecute the war, but they were nonetheless very effective in public relations and in their efforts to call international attention to the war's atrocities. In its narrative about the massacre and its aftermath, the book captures what life was like under occupation, as the federal army progressively occupied the eastern region; the Asaba case may have been extreme in its brutality and death toll, but it also was not unique among the experiences of Igbo people during the war.

The Asaba episode has been glaringly suppressed by the Nigerian state. This disregard has important consequences for the healing process, for the workings of justice, and for efforts to memorialize and remember the victims. For those who experienced the trauma, the war has never really ended.

The Asaba Massacre is an indispensable addition to the growing literature on the Nigeria-Biafra War. It illuminates the intersection of history, politics, and ethnicity in Nigeria's postcolonial history, and it is particularly eloquent in its exposé of the memories of those who experienced the Asaba massacre. The story that the book tells is unambiguous. Yet the Asaba massacre is but one episode: the story of the war and the Biafra experience has still not yet been completely told.