

Reclaiming the Past, Building the Future: The Legacy of the Asaba Massacres

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Ladies and gentlemen, we are honored to be with you again on this solemn and important occasion. Through the video you have seen, and the work we have written and published, we have tried to tell the story of what happened here over 40 years ago, in a straightforward way. We have done this through the eyes of witnesses and survivors, as well as from a comprehensive review of scholarship on the civil war, historical archives, and media. We think we have discovered things about what happened that were not known before. Yet above all, and as we have said before, this is your story,

We began this research three years ago, and in that time, we have interviewed over 50 people – those who saw exactly what happened, those who lost loved ones, and those who spoke about the terrible impact the massacres had on their families, friends, and the community of Asaba. Throughout this work, we have been assisted and guided by many people – whose names we have been acknowledged in our publications, the credits in our documentary and in the exhibit. Today we would like to recognize the members of our Community Advisory Board under the chairmanship of Dr. Ify Uraih, along with Chief Dr. Louis Odogwu and the Asaba Development Union, and we especially acknowledge the gracious support of HRM Prof. Joseph Chike Edozien, the Asagba of Asaba.

Back in the United States, we are often asked – why Asaba? Why do you care about this one place that suffered, when people have died in their thousands in terrible

events. Indeed, millions died in the Nigerian Civil War alone. So why Asaba? The more we have learned about the killings at here, the more we are able to begin answering that question.

Perhaps most important, Asaba's position in the Civil War put the town in a unique position – caught between the Biafrans to the east, and the federation of Nigeria to the West. Asabans were kin to Biafrans, but basically committed to Nigeria. The great Wole Soyinka, who was imprisoned at that very time, wrote in his prison memoir that the Midwest Igbos were “the most vulnerable Nigerians,” -- that's why we chose that title for our video and museum exhibit. The Biafrans put Asaba at risk when they crossed into the Midwest, and then retreated, leaving the vengeful troops in Asaba. The federal troops, instead of protecting the innocent civilians who stood in their way, rampaged among them, killing, looting, and burning – and taking revenge for what they saw as past injustices.

Even government statistics tell the story. Before the war, Asaba was officially listed as a town, with perhaps 20,000 inhabitants. In 1969, it had disappeared from the official town listings – there were not enough homes or people left. And yet, the story of Asaba was not told, except by those who experienced it. Government newspapers either described a triumphant victory, or ignored the advance through Asaba altogether. Foreign reporters were absent, and only vague reports emerged. One reporter from the *Times* of London took a roll of film in Asaba about a week after the massacre, recording the devastation. We use these photos in our video and exhibit. The reporter himself, however, had no idea about the massacre – he simply believed the townspeople had

fled. In Britain, letters sent to authorities, reporting what happened, were denied and not investigated.

This is a reason why telling the story of Asaba is important. This atrocity happened, and yet it has been suppressed. And as experts tell us, in order to have reconciliation, resolution, and justice, there *must* be some official acknowledgement of victimization. Only then can suffering be validated and education may begin. So perhaps above all, it is important that Nigeria and the world realize that this event truly happened. The dozens of testimonies we have collected, as well as those made earlier at the Oputa Panel and elsewhere, provide indisputable evidence.

Secondly, it is important that the recovery of the truth serves to create a spark for peaceful dialog and future action. There is now an opportunity for true transitional justice for Asaba, where the 2001 Oputa Panel failed. What can be accomplished by telling the story? Many atrocities have happened around the world, and many scholars have written about what these terrible events have in common. One writes that atrocities result in “the destruction of remembrance ... and lives and dignity.” Another argues that reclaiming history is a form of liberation because “suppressing open debate actually lays the foundation for further societal violence.” Yet another notes that communities in which there is formal validation of memory (as we are doing today) are stronger than those in which silence prevails.

At one level, telling the story simply offers acknowledgement, as many people we interviewed said. Another important outcome is the lessons that can be learned about the destructive consequences of violence. The Asaba massacres were ultimately a product of the same ethnic hostility that simmers today in Nigeria. But they were not

inevitable -- they resulted from the decisions of leaders, individuals and communities.

We have heard so many stories of brutality and cruelty. And at the same time, we have heard some stories of a different kind. Those who work in the transitional justice field speak of “Upstanders.” Upstanders are those people who make difficult and dangerous decisions, often at great cost to themselves. There were upstanders among the perpetrators in Asaba. We were told of many soldiers who rose above the horror happening around them. Some warned people to escape, some were shot when they refused an order to kill, some took whole families out of harm’s way, or stayed with them as guardians. These stories make us think. Why is it that some people have the strength of character to resist, and not be swept up in the hatred and greed that carried their fellow-soldiers along? There are always people who stop and say – “No More!” even when those around them continue the slaughter.

As we look to the future, this is what we should contemplate. And this is being done all over the world – in Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Cambodia, Indonesia, El Salvador. Transitional justice groups, such as the New York-based “Facing History and Ourselves, are working to bring those together who have been enemies, and explore universal themes of human behavior, choice, and decision making.

We believe that confronting the violent past is a critical step in the process of transition to a more just society. More than 40 years after its Civil War, and the denial of Midwest Igbo suffering, Nigeria still struggles with the legacy of violence. But it is never too late to address historical misrepresentations and invite dialog. Again, we invoke the great Wole Soyinka. He speaks about the importance of creating what he calls a transitional space after violence: "At such rare moments, memory ceases to be a

burden. It becomes a stock taking, an affirmation of existence in the present and a resolve in defense of unborn generations”

Today, we need to remember, grieve, and acknowledge past sufferings and injustices. And we also need to look toward the young people who are the future, not only in Asaba, but around the world. They must remember their heritage - but we must give them the tools to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past.