

Shedding Light on Asaba Nightmare

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Participants listen intently during the speeches at the Asaba Memorial Project conference Saturday Oct. 10, 2009 at the University of South Florida.

Photo by Candace C. Mundy/Focus from the Heart

TAMPA, Fla. (Oct 12, 2009) They were unprepared for the flood of emotions that engulfed them when survivors of the 1967 massacre in Asaba, Nigeria, solemnly stood at the podium and told their stories.

Without tissues on hand, tears streamed down the faces of the men, soaking the collars of both Western suitcoats and traditional Nigerian bubas.

For some in the audience, this was the first chance in 42 years to learn the fate of their loved ones.

"This is the first time in my life that I've been told the story of what happened, and my own father was killed in that war," said

Michael Nwanze, a political science professor at Howard University in Washington, D.C. "I buried my father but I was never able to mourn him because I didn't know the truth."

The survivors of the Oct. 7, 1967, massacre in Asaba, Nigeria, had been waiting more than four decades to shed light on the nightmare that haunts them still and to tally and honor the dead – estimated by some accounts to be from 500 to 2,000 men and boys. The massacre occurred during Nigeria's bitter civil war, and those targeted were of Igbo ethnicity.

Helping the Nigerian people piece together the puzzle of the long-buried tragedy is anthropology professor Elizabeth Bird, assistant anthropology professor Erin Kimmerle and Fraser Ottanelli, chairman of the department of history, who are working with the USF Libraries Holocaust & Genocide Studies Center and a Tampa Police Homicide Det. Charles Massucci.

The researchers are gathering documents, recording oral histories and this spring will travel to Nigeria to examine mass graves in the hopes of creating a memorial to the decades-old slayings.

The Oct. 9-10 Asaba Memorial Project symposium at USF kicked off the effort that included launching the [Asaba Memorial Project website](#). The site will serve as an international record of the massacre, including archive images, oral histories, official records, newspaper articles and other materials the USF team gathers.

It will be no small task. Memories of the massacre are hazy and details



Dr. Dora Obi Chizea presents her book, *They Killed Us Twice*, during the speeches at the Asaba Memorial Project conference.

Photo by Candace C. Mundy/Focus from the Heart

conflict. Nevertheless, Ottanelli said it's the oral histories - the voices of the people - that will make the events of Asaba come alive.

"It humanizes what we've been reading," he said. "It takes an event so far away and puts a human face to it. The testimony is very powerful. We're honored and humbled by this awesome responsibility."

For the survivors, a public acknowledgement of the deaths and a permanent memorial to their lost loved ones will bring a measure of justice that has been elusive for more than four decades.

"We can forgive but we should never, ever forget," said Chinelo Egwuatu, 53, a 15-year Tampa resident who survived the Biafra-Nigerian civil war and post-war famine, although two of her siblings perished. "This is a good thing USF is doing. There is no way you can bring the people back, but you can at least acknowledge that it happened."

Up until now, little has been recorded about the Asaba massacre. Details were hidden from the international press. Nigerian government officials refused to comment publicly. And an international observer team was accused of conducting a hasty, haphazard investigation in which it concluded no genocide had occurred.

This left survivors, particularly eyewitnesses to the event, with no sense of closure.



Joseph Nwajei, Ifeanyi Uraih and Lawrence Ejoh share an emotional moment during a break at the Asaba Memorial Project Symposium.
Photo by Candace C. Mundy/Focus from the Heart

Asaba, a key Nigerian town populated by civilian government employees, doctors, lawyers, engineers, athletes and scholars of the influential Igbo ethnic community, was loyal to the Nigerian federal government. Nevertheless, the town was targeted by a faction of that same military government for annihilation.

No one is sure who gave the orders or why. Nor is anyone certain how many lives were lost when soldiers opened fire on the men and boys in town.

For Egwuatu, the war is embodied in the face of a little boy who was once her playmate. She was only 11-years-old in 1967 and, although she wasn't a witness to the Asaba massacre, she remembers seeing body parts strewn on the village streets. She also recalls coming across the body of her friend.

"I'll never forget the look in his eyes," she said, rifling through her handbag for something to staunch the flow of tears. She pulled out a Little Caesars pizza napkin and dabbed her face.

"It was terrible. This was barbaric. You never expected human beings to behave like that. It was evil."

"Evil" also is the word Ifeanyi Uraih used to describe what he witnessed that day.

He was living in Asaba with his parents and nine siblings when the federal troops came to town.

"They ordered everyone to come out to the town square. (Col. Ibrahim) Taiwo said it was time to dance around town and join our brethren, and he warned that everyone should come along," he recalled.

The people did as they were told, thinking they were being invited to a victory party. They didn't realize it was a ruse to coax all the men out of hiding. Suddenly, the celebratory atmosphere evaporated. Taiwo's troops began separating the men from the women.

"They were honest with us," said Uraih. "They told us they were going to kill us. They took us to the mounted machine guns. Then it dawned on us that it was true."

Uraih estimates that 2,000 men stood in the killing field that day.

"I was standing with my older brother at the edge of the crowd. He was holding my hand. He had always taken care of me. We shared the same bed. He was the first to be dragged away by the soldiers. He let go of my hand and pushed me into the crowd. He was shot in the back. I could see the blood gushing from his back. He was the first victim of the massacre. Then all hell let loose."

Uraih survived because he was buffered by bodies that were shot and fell on top of him.

"I lost count of time," he said. "To this day, I live with the smell of the blood of my brethren that night. Even the heavens wept for the victims of this holocaust. Finally the bullets stopped.

Decades later, Uraih was in the reception room of a doctor's office in London when Gen. Yakubu Gowon, head of the Nigerian military government at the time of the massacre, happened to walk in for an appointment.

"We talked and he said he sincerely regretted what occurred that day, that it was one of his greatest regrets," said Uraih, adding that he believed Gowon. "I cannot tell this story without tears in my eyes, but I have no bitterness in my heart."

Chief Philip Asiodu, who hailed from Asaba and was a member of Gowon's cabinet at the time of the genocide, said he too has no room for bitterness despite the fact that his brother, Sydney Asiodu, a promising Olympic hurdler, long jumper and runner, was a victim of the massacre.

Asiodu, who later became chief economic adviser to the Nigerian president and minister for petroleum, said Asaba should have been the last village targeted by federal troops because it was populated by current and former Igbo civil servants loyal to the federal government.

It's been reported that Taiwo had a master list containing the names of prominent citizens and civil servants targeted for death. Some believe that Gen. Murtala Mohammed, commander of the Second Division of the federal troops and Taiwo's superior, wanted to rid himself of opposition so he could launch a coup. Mohammed later toppled Gowon to become head of state.



Ifeanyi Uraih presents his discussion on Ogbesowah: *The Rise from the Dead*. Photo by Candace C. Mundy/Focus from the Heart

Like fellow Nigerians assembled at USF for the symposium, Asiodu said he's supporting the Asaba Memorial Project because he believes the people need to know what happened.

"Once we do, I still have faith we can change the ethics of our current government and become the vanguard for African progress," he said.

The truth may be a long time coming, however. Like those killed in the Asaba genocide, documents have long been buried or unavailable. "There will always be debate," said Elizabeth Bird, USF professor of anthropology. "The official records are woefully inadequate."

Bird pointed to the importance of the book *Blood on the Niger* as the first publication that drew attention to the massacre. Its author, Emma Okocha, himself a survivor, was crucial to the project – initially contacting Kimmerle, and bringing together the network of scholars, activists, and community members who attended the symposium.

Last year, Kimmerle and a research team traveled to Lagos, Nigeria where they investigated methods for human identification in collaboration with John Obafunwa, provost of the College of Medicine at Lagos State University. Kimmerle has done human rights work throughout the Balkans, Peru and Nigeria and her research team is working on new methods of identification, research for investigations of "cold cases" and forensic science education.

Kimmerle and her team also traveled to Asaba to meet with community leaders and began interviewing witnesses to the massacre. The work will involve more fieldwork over the next few years and is part of an effort to develop new methods and technologies to solve cold cases both in the United States and abroad. The project is supported financially by the National Institute of Justice.

Once the project is completed, the people of Asaba can consider what type of memorial they would like to erect "so our children and our children's children never forget what happened and so it will never happen again," said Nwanze. "I'll do whatever it takes to make sure this program succeeds. If you don't honor the dead, what becomes of the path of the living?"

Story by D'Ann Lawrence White

A journalist for more than 25 years, White is a freelance writer reporting on behalf of USF.