

ASABA MASSACRE: MEMOIRS OF THE NIGERIA-BIAFRA CIVIL WAR, 1970-2020

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**A PROJECT SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY AND
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CERTIFICATION

I hereby certify that this research work was carried out by **ANGEL CHIDIMMA UGBOMAH** in the department of History and International Studies, Faculty of Arts, University of Benin, Benin City under my supervision.

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Date

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work first and foremost to God Almighty, whose grace, guidance, and unfailing love have seen me through every stage of my life and this academic journey. Also, this work is dedicated to my beloved mother.

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Abstract

This study examines the Asaba Massacre as one of the most tragic and controversial events of the Nigerian Civil War, exploring its historical significance, collective memory, and enduring impact on Nigerian society between 1970 and 2020. The massacre occurred in October 1967 when federal troops entered Asaba, a predominantly Igbo community in present-day Delta State, during the Nigeria–Biafra conflict. Hundreds of unarmed civilians, particularly men and boys, were reportedly killed after being accused of supporting the secessionist Biafran cause. Despite its magnitude, the event remained inadequately documented in official national narratives for decades, surviving largely through oral testimonies, community commemorations, and personal memoirs. Using historical and qualitative approaches, this study draws upon archival materials, eyewitness accounts, memoirs, scholarly publications, media reports, and commemorative records to reconstruct the events surrounding the massacre and analyze how memories of the tragedy have been preserved and transmitted across generations. The study investigates the socio-political circumstances that led to the massacre, the experiences of survivors, and the ways in which remembrance practices have shaped identity, reconciliation efforts, and historical consciousness among the people of Asaba and Nigeria at large. The findings reveal that the Asaba Massacre remains a significant symbol of wartime suffering, ethnic tensions, and the challenges of post-war reconciliation in Nigeria. The persistence of survivor narratives and memorialization efforts demonstrates the importance of collective memory in preserving historical truth and seeking justice for victims. The study further argues that acknowledging and documenting such traumatic historical events is essential for national healing, conflict prevention, and the promotion of historical accountability. The research concludes that the memoirs and memories associated with the Asaba Massacre constitute an important aspect of Nigeria’s civil war historiography and provide valuable insights into the broader consequences of armed conflict, state violence, and the struggle for reconciliation in post-war societies.

CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Introduction

The Nigeria-Biafra Civil War (1967–1970) stands as a watershed in Nigerian history, deeply shaping the nation’s political, social, and cultural landscape. Sparked by a complex blend of ethnic tensions, political rivalries, colonial legacies, and economic anxieties, the war erupted after the Eastern Region, predominantly inhabited by the Igbo ethnic group, declared independence as the Republic of Biafra.¹ The ensuing conflict plunged Nigeria into a brutal thirty-month struggle marked by fierce battles, widespread famine, displacement, and one of the deadliest humanitarian crises in African history, with over a million lives lost many of them to starvation.²

Yet, behind these staggering statistics are countless individual tragedies, among which the Asaba Massacre stands as one of the most chilling and underreported. On October 7, 1967, federal troops of the Nigerian Army, advancing from the western front, entered Asaba a strategic town on the west bank of the Niger River.³ Under the pretext of flushing out Biafran sympathizers, soldiers rounded up residents, especially men and boys, at the town square, separated them from women and children, and, in events now etched in communal memory as “Black Saturday,” executed hundreds in cold blood. Eyewitness accounts and survivor testimonies estimate that between 500 and 1,000 civilians were killed in a single day, their bodies left in mass graves or discarded in the Niger.⁴

The immediate aftermath for the survivors and the entire Asaba community was catastrophic: families were torn apart, homes razed, and the population subjected to prolonged trauma, displacement, and stigmatization. For decades, survivors and descendants struggled with

silence and marginalization, as the massacre was either downplayed or omitted from official histories and national commemorations. The collective memory of Asaba became a symbol of both unresolved grief and the larger challenge of post-war reconciliation in Nigeria.⁵

Fifty years after the massacre, the memories persist kept alive through oral histories, personal memoirs, community commemorations, and the dedicated work of scholars, journalists, and activists. The Asaba Massacre now stands not only as a testimony to the horrors of the Nigeria-Biafra Civil War but also as a poignant reminder of the need for truth, justice, and healing in the face of atrocity. This research seeks to revisit the Asaba Massacre through the lens of survivor memoirs and collective memory, foregrounding the voices and experiences of those who lived through the tragedy. It aims to analyze the impact of the massacre on individuals, families, and the broader community, and to situate the event within Nigeria's ongoing struggles with historical reckoning, national unity, and the politics of remembrance.⁶ By doing so, the study aspires to contribute to a more inclusive, empathetic, and critical understanding of the civil war and its enduring legacy in contemporary Nigerian society.

Statement of the Problem of the Study

The Asaba Massacre during the Nigeria-Biafra Civil War raises several important issues that need careful examination:

Firstly, is the lack of detailed accounts about the Asaba Massacre. While many studies discuss the Nigeria-Biafra Civil War, the specific events in Asaba are often overlooked or not fully described. This gap in history makes it hard to understand how the massacre affected the local community and Nigeria as a whole. Additionally, without enough survivor stories, the experiences of those who lived through the tragedy are often left unheard, which diminishes the focus on civilian suffering.

Secondly, is the complex social and political factors that led to the massacre. The conflict was not just a military fight; it was deeply rooted in historical problems, competition for resources, and power struggles among Nigeria's many ethnic groups. The killing of civilians in Asaba shows how political leaders used ethnic identities to justify violence. Understanding these social factors is crucial for addressing the ongoing issues that affect relationships between different ethnic groups in Nigeria.

Thirdly, the long-lasting psychological and social effects of the Asaba Massacre on survivors and their families are a serious concern. The trauma experienced by the community has lasting impacts on their identity, memories, and social bonds. Not recognizing and remembering the massacre makes the pain even worse, leading to feelings of being ignored and neglected. This ongoing trauma not only affects individual mental health but also makes it harder for the community to heal and move forward. Addressing these impacts is vital for helping those affected find a sense of justice and closure.

Aims and Objectives of the Study

The primary aim of this study is to document and analyze the Asaba Massacre within the framework of the Nigeria-Biafra Civil War. The specific objectives include:

1. To provide a detailed historical context of the Asaba Massacre.
2. To gather and present personal testimonies from survivors and witnesses.
3. To analyze the impact of the massacre on the Asaba community and beyond.
4. To explore the commemoration and memory of the massacre in contemporary Nigeria.

Scope of the Study

This research centers on the Asaba Massacre of October 7, 1967, examining the events of that period and their effects over the past fifty years (1970-2020). The main focus is on

collecting and analyzing survivor testimonies, memoirs, and oral histories from affected individuals and their families. While Asaba is at the core of this study, references are also made to similar events during the Nigeria-Biafra Civil War to provide context. The study does not attempt to cover the entire war but uses Asaba as a case study to explore broader themes of trauma, memory, and justice in post-conflict Nigeria.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it sheds light on one of the most tragic but often overlooked episodes of the Nigeria-Biafra Civil War, the Asaba Massacre. By focusing on survivor accounts and memoirs, the study fills a gap in Nigerian historical writing, where the experiences of ordinary people have frequently been ignored. Understanding the Asaba Massacre is not just about remembering the past; it is also essential for addressing ongoing issues in Nigeria, such as ethnic tension, marginalization, and the struggle for justice. By documenting these stories, the study contributes to national healing, historical justice, and the broader goal of reconciliation, ensuring that such tragedies are neither forgotten nor repeated.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research methodology, utilizing both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include interviews with survivors and eye witnesses, archival documents, and community heads. Secondary sources comprise scholarly articles, books, and reports on the Nigeria-Biafra Civil War and the Asaba Massacre. The research will also analyze existing literature to provide a comprehensive understanding of the topic.

Literature Review

In order to provide a comprehensive understanding of the Asaba Massacre within the context of the Nigeria-Biafra Civil War, the scholarly works were sectioned into two categories.

The first section examines works that focus on the historical aspects of the conflict and the massacre, offering analytical, political, and social perspectives on the events and their aftermath. The second section explores memoirs, testimonies, and literary representations, highlighting personal experiences, survivor narratives, and the ways in which the Asaba Massacre and the broader war have been remembered and interpreted on an individual level.

The Historical account of the American writers S. Elizabeth Bird & Fraser Ottanelli, *The Asaba Massacre: Trauma, Memory and the Nigerian Civil War*.⁷ The authors, Bird and Ottanelli, explain in detail how Asaba, a town on the bank of the River Niger, became the scene of a terrible tragedy during the Nigerian Civil War. They describe how Nigerian soldiers entered the town in October 1967 and killed hundreds of innocent people, mostly men and boys. The book uses interviews with survivors, official reports, and old newspapers to tell the true story of what happened. The authors also talk about how the massacre affected the people of Asaba for many years, causing pain, fear, and silence.⁸ They show that for a long time, the story of Asaba was not included in Nigerian history books, and many people did not even know about it. The book argues that remembering and talking about the massacre is very important for healing and for Nigeria to move forward as a country.

John de St. Jorre, *The Nigerian Civil War*⁹ John de St. Jorre's book is one of the earliest and most well-known records of the Nigerian Civil War. The book does not focus on Asaba alone but gives a broad picture of the entire war why it started, what happened during the fighting, and what it meant for Nigeria. De St. Jorre explains that the war was caused by ethnic problems, political disagreements, and the struggle for oil and power. He describes different battles, the suffering of ordinary people, and the humanitarian crisis that followed. The book also mentions the Asaba Massacre as one of the many sad events that happened during the war.¹⁰

Readers learn about the chaos, fear, and problems that people faced during this period. This book is good for understanding the background and big issues that led to events like the Asaba Massacre.

Emma Okocha, *Blood on the Niger*¹¹ He wrote this book to tell the world about the pain his hometown, Asaba, went through during the civil war. His seminal work gives a very detailed account of the massacre, using stories from survivors, families, and local leaders. Okocha explains that Asaba was a peaceful town until soldiers arrived and killed many people in just a few days. He describes how people were separated by gender, and how many men and boys were lined up and shot. The book also talks about how the survivors have struggled to get justice and recognition for what happened to their town.¹² Okocha argues that the massacre was ignored by the Nigerian government for too long, and he calls for the victims to be remembered and honored. This book is one of the strongest voices for the people of Asaba.

Ebere Onwudiwe, *Ethnicity, Political Violence and the Nigerian Civil War*.¹³ Onwudiwe's work focuses on the reasons behind the violence of the civil war. He explains that Nigeria is made up of many ethnic groups, and during the war, these differences became even more serious. The author says that the government and the rebels both used ethnic identity to gain support and justify violence.¹⁴ He studies how hatred and fear between different groups led to events like the Asaba Massacre, where one group was targeted by another. Onwudiwe believes that understanding these ethnic problems is necessary if Nigeria wants to avoid such violence in the future.

Kalu Chinyere, *Memory and Memorialization in Biafran Nigeria: The Asaba Massacre and its Afterlife*¹⁵ Chinyere's book looks at how people in Asaba and Nigeria as a whole remember the massacre today. The author explains that for many years, people were afraid or

ashamed to talk about what happened. Now, however, survivors and their families are trying to keep the memory alive by organizing memorial events, building monuments, and sharing their stories. The book shows how remembering the past can help people heal, but it also talks about the challenges, like disagreements about what really happened and sometimes, government refusal to recognize the tragedy.¹⁶ Chinyere says that remembering the massacre is important for the community's healing and for making sure such things do not happen again.

Atobi Tricia, *The Asaba Massacre: A Historical Match*¹⁷. This book gives a modern view of the Asaba Massacre, using new interviews, historical records, and facts. Tricia explains how the massacre happened, step by step, and why it is important to talk about it today. The author says that learning about the massacre helps people understand the pain that war can cause and the need for peace and justice.¹⁸ The book also discusses how the Asaba Massacre is still not well-known in Nigeria, and says schools and communities should teach young people about it.

Nwankwo Okechukwu, *The Asaba Massacre: A Historical Perspective*.¹⁹ Okechukwu's book looks at the Asaba Massacre from a historian's point of view. He explains the events leading up to the massacre, how it was carried out, and what happened afterwards.²⁰ The author also talks about how the massacre changed the lives of the people in Asaba and nearby areas. He believes that understanding history is the best way to prevent similar tragedies in the future. The book is clear, easy to read, and tries to give a balanced view by using different sources.

Chima J. Korieh, In *Biafra: A People's History*²¹ Korieh's book is about the Biafran War as seen by everyday people, not just leaders or soldiers. He uses interviews and stories from men, women, and children who lived through the war. The book talks about how people in places like Asaba suffered, struggled to find food, lost loved ones, and tried to survive. Korieh also explains how people remember the war today, and how it still affects their lives and communities. This

book is very good for understanding the human side of the war.²² The other categories analyze the Memoirs and Testimonies of the civil war' and the Asaba Massacre. Among them is the work of Chinua Achebe, *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra*. Achebe, a famous Nigerian writer, tells his own story about living through the war. He shares memories of his family, his hometown, and how the war changed everything. Achebe talks about his hopes and disappointments, and the suffering of people around him.²³ He also gives his opinion about why the war happened and what Nigeria can learn from it. The book mixes personal stories with history, making it interesting and easy to relate to.

Also another is the scholarly of Ifeka Okwu, *Voices from the Asaba Massacre: Testimonies of Survivors*.²⁴ This book is a collection of real-life stories from people who survived the Asaba Massacre. Each chapter tells the experience of a different survivor, describing what they saw, how they escaped, and how they felt. Some talk about losing family members, others about hiding from soldiers, and some about trying to rebuild their lives afterwards.²⁵ The book is emotional and powerful, helping readers understand the deep pain caused by the massacre.

Not to forget the works of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, titled *Half of a Yellow Sun*.²⁶ Adichie's novel is set during the Biafran War. Even though it is fiction, the book is based on real events and research. Through the eyes of its characters, the book shows the fear, hunger, and sadness that people went through during the war. The story covers families being separated, young people forced to fight, and how everyone tried to keep hope alive.²⁷ Adichie's writing makes the war feel real and helps readers imagine what life was like at that time.

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CHAPTER TWO

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF NIGERIA AND ASABA (1914–1960)

Introduction

To understand the full meaning and legacy of the Asaba Massacre within the Nigeria-Biafra Civil War, it is essential to understand the deep historical happenings that shaped both Nigeria as a nation and Asaba as a community. The years from 1914 to 1960 were marked by dramatic transformation first under the designs of British colonial rule and later through the struggles for self-determination and unity. The forced amalgamation of diverse peoples into a single colonial entity, the rise of nationalist movements, the negotiations of ethnicity and regionalism, and the forging of new economic, social, and political identities all formed the backdrop against which Asaba's own story unfolded. Within this larger context, Asaba's people maintained vibrant traditions, resilient political and social systems, and a cosmopolitan openness born of their location at a cultural crossroads. Drawing on oral histories and the research of leading scholars, this chapter critically explores Nigeria's colonial and early postcolonial transformation, the political evolution of Asaba, its economic and social life, and the unique ways in which these histories intersected to shape the town's fate on the eve of civil war.¹

Overview of Nigeria's Historical Background

The story of modern Nigeria could be traced to 1914 with the British colonial amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates also known as the “mistake of 1914”. This was a move masterminded by Lord Frederick Lugard. As Augustine N. Ndili emphasizes the British decision was driven by administrative convenience and economic motives, not by any organic unity among the peoples of the region.² This decision welded together an extraordinary diversity of over 250 ethnic groups, many with long histories of autonomy and rivalry. The

colonial state imposed indirect rule where local authority structures existed, especially in the North, but struggled in the decentralized societies of the East, including among the Igbo and the Anioma people of Asaba. As G.N. Azinge notes, indirect rule in Igboland, including Asaba, was often disruptive, as Warrant chiefs were often resented, lacking the lineage-based legitimacy of traditional elders.³

Elizabeth Isichei⁴ and Adiele Afigbo⁵ describe, this disruption fueled resistance, notably in the form of the Aba Women's Riot of 1929, and left a legacy of alienation that would outlast colonialism. Colonial administrators made little effort to reconcile the deep cultural, linguistic, and religious differences within the new country. Instead, policies of "divide and rule" tended to sharpen regional and ethnic boundaries, laying the groundwork for later political competition and conflict. Asaba, situated at the crossroads of the West and East, came to embody the ambiguities and opportunities of this new order, acting as both a border town and a bridge between peoples.

By the 1940s, the impact of missionary education, urbanization, and economic change had helped produce a new class of Western-educated Nigerians who would lead the push for independence. Early organizations like the Nigerian Youth Movement established in 1934, gave way to powerful regionally based political parties: the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC), the Action Group (AG), and the Northern People's Congress (NPC). The National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC) was founded in 1944 by Nnamdi Azikiwe, this party was strongest in the Eastern Region and was the main voice of Igbo and minority aspirations. It advocated for self-government, equal rights, and federalism. Azikiwe's charisma drew support from both Southern and Northern minorities, and the party became a vehicle for educational and social reform. The Action Group (AG) on the other hand was formed in 1951 by Chief Obafemi Awolowo, the AG championed the interests of the Western Region

(mainly the Yoruba), advocating for free education, regional autonomy, and rapid modernization.⁶ While the Northern People's Congress (NPC) was founded in 1943 by Ahmadu Bello, ensuring the political dominance of the Hausa-Fulani elite and promoted traditional values and Islamic interests.

While these parties sometimes cooperated nationally, they more often stoked regional and ethnic loyalties, competing for control of resources, jobs, and appointments. As Richard Sklar and James Coleman have shown, regionalism became the defining feature of Nigerian politics, undermining efforts at true national integration even as the country moved toward independence in 1960. In Asaba, political mobilization reflected these broader struggles, as the town's leaders and youth were drawn into both the nationalist movement and the search for local security in a rapidly changing political landscape.⁷

The colonial economy was structured around the extraction of cash crops—palm oil, cocoa, groundnuts—destined for export to Britain, with little investment in local industry or welfare. As Walter Rodney and A.G. Hopkins have argued, this system enriched the colonial metropole at the expense of local communities, deepening both economic dependency and regional inequalities. The structure of the colonial economy shifted family and gender roles. While men increasingly sought work as clerks, teachers, or traders, women continued to dominate local markets and food production. Oral tradition in Asaba recalls the resilience of market women, who organized themselves to resist unfair taxes and monopolies.⁸

Missionaries played a dual role, spreading Christianity and education. Mission schools in Asaba and across Anioma produced a generation of teachers, clerks, and businessmen, who would return to their communities as new elites. Ogbu Kalu points out that, Christianity in Igboland frequently blended with older religious practices, creating a unique spiritual landscape.⁹

Map 1.



Source: <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Ezra-Gayawan/publication/260023562/figure/fig1/AS:297066292105225@1447837531741/Map-of-Nigeria-showing-the-36-states-and-Federal-Capital-Territory-FCT-Abuja.png> accessed on 29th August, 2025

Geography of Asaba

The town of Asaba occupies a unique position in Nigeria's geography. Situated on the west bank of the Niger River, near the confluence with the Anambra River, Asaba serves as a gateway between eastern and western Nigeria. F.I. Chinyem's hydrogeophysical studies highlight the importance of the Niger floodplain, which provides fertile soil for agriculture and supports a network of villages collectively known as Asaba. The town is bordered by Ebu, Illah, and Ugbolu to the north and by Okwe, Oko-Anala, Oko-Ogbele, and other communities to the southwest. Ibusa, Issele-uku, Okpanam, and Ogwashi-Uku are also close neighbors. These towns,

each with their own histories, are interconnected by kinship, commerce, and shared festivals. The construction of the Niger Bridge in the 1960s further cemented Asaba's role as a regional crossroads.¹⁰

Asaba's precise geographic coordinates between longitudes 060371E and 060451E, and latitudes 060051N and 060171N place it at a strategic terminus of the main trunk road from Benin, a factor that contributed to its growth as a commercial and administrative center. The region is drained by the Atakpo and Anwai rivers, with a dendritic drainage pattern and porous soils facilitating the replenishment of ground and surface water. Beneath the surface, the ground contains layers of soil and rock that store a considerable amount of water. Despite its potential, this water resource remains largely untapped, offering opportunities for future development and use.¹¹

Above the floodplain, the higher grounds are covered by secondary forest, providing land for subsistence farming. Asaba's environment its rivers, forests, and fertile land has always shaped the economic and social life of its people. J. Ilo Okundiafor, in *Asaba History and Development*, describes how the landscape determined patterns of settlement, agriculture, and trade, as well as the strategic importance of Asaba in regional affairs.¹²

Map 2



Source: <https://fondcup.ng/brief-history-on-delta-state/> accessed on 29th July, 2025

Demographics and People of Asaba

The people of Asaba, predominantly Anioma (a western Igbo subgroup), have a rich and complex heritage. The origin of Asaba is believed to have come from three different ancestral lineages. According to tradition, Ugboma was the first settler in the area that would become Ahaba and later Asaba. Another settler, Ezeanyanwu, was said to have come from the royal line of Ezechima, a legendary ancestor of many settlements east of the Niger River. However, the modern history of Asaba is often traced back to its most famous citizen, Nnebisi. Nnebisi's name, which means "mother is supreme" in the Igbo language, reflects his mother's influential role in his life. His mother, from the village of Agbakuba in Nteje, took him back to her hometown after his birth. As Nnebisi grew up, he felt different from others and was treated unfairly because he

wasn't considered a true native of Nteje. When he asked why, he was told it was because Nteje wasn't his true hometown.¹³

Determined to find his father's land, Nnebisi set out on a journey with a narrow long boat and a magical herbal medicine pot given to him by a village medicine man. The pot was supposed to protect him and fall off his head when he reached his ancestral homeland. According to legend, the pot fell and crashed at the present-day Cable point off the shores of the River Niger, near the Onishe rocks, a shrine to the mythical goddess Onishe. Nnebisi exclaimed "Ahabam!" which means "I have appropriately chosen" in the Igbo language, and this phrase is believed to be the origin of the name Ahaba. Later, during British colonial rule, the name was changed to Asaba. Nnebisi married two wives, and his household grew to include the households of earlier settlers, becoming the foundation of the modern city of Asaba. Nnebisi is credited with organizing the town into five main quarters (Ebós): Umuezei, Ugbomanta, Umuagu, Umuaji, and Umuonaje. Each quarter played a role in social and political life, with lineage and kinship ties forming the basis of community organization.¹⁴

Family and kinship remain foundational in Asaba society, with the 'umunna' (patrilineal family group) controlling land, mediating disputes, and upholding tradition. Migration has always been a feature of Asaba's history, as people from neighboring Igbo, Urhobo, and other communities moved to the town for trade, work, or marriage. This cosmopolitanism is a recurring theme in Ndili and Okundiafor's accounts. Religion in Asaba has long been a blend of traditional beliefs and Christianity. The arrival of Catholic and Anglican missions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries led to widespread conversion, especially among the younger generation.¹⁵ However, as Ogbueshi Odogwu observed, traditional festivals, rituals, and

ancestor worship persisted, helping to preserve a distinct Asaba identity even as the town adapted to changing times.¹⁶

Political Organization in Asaba

Elizabeth Isichei stated that there were various forms of political authority in Asaba before the introduction of the Asagbashi title in the nineteenth century. Firstly, the Diokpa, or family head, who was the oldest surviving member of the extended family and held authority over the family. Each quarter and component family recognized the Diokpa's authority, who was responsible for settling disputes, allocating land, and performing other key duties.¹⁷

Secondly, the governing age group, known as Oturaza, had authority over the entire town. The age-grade system, which included both men and women, was formed every two years and had specific responsibilities. For example, children and youth were tasked with cleaning the streets, while men were responsible for burying the dead. At the age of 58, individuals became members of the Oturaza, which governed the town, and retired after ten years. Ogbueshi J.C. Odogwu¹⁸ and Augustine Ndili,¹⁹ argued that there are other age groups namely Umu Aka, Nziza Ezi, Okwulagwe, Ochokoloma, Otu- Ihaza, Ichi- okwa and many others. Umu aka (Birth to about 5 years), nziza ezi (about 6-17 years), Okwulagwe (about 18-50years), Ochokoloma (about 51- 60years), Otu-Ihaza (about 61-70 years) and Ichi-Okwa (about 71 years and older). Additionally, there were senior women officials known as the Omu, who were responsible for handling the affairs of the market.²⁰

Furthermore, title holders such as Ayiwe or Ezeugbo played a crucial role in rituals and annual ceremonies. Asaba also had a system of individual titles, with Mkpisi being the lowest, followed by Ewu ogwa, which was a stepping stone to the Alor title. The highest title was Eze, and while Asaba was originally ruled by a single Eze, over time, the number of Ezes increased.

Attainment of the Alor title was a prerequisite for the Eze title, both of which marked social standing and eligibility for leadership.²¹

The Asagba (monarch or Obi) which was introduced in the nineteenth century was typically drawn from the Eze titleholders, though in modern times, the Alor title suffices. Selection of the Asagba rotates among the town's five quarters in a fixed order, ensuring balance and preventing domination by any single lineage. Councils of elders, quarter heads, and influential titleholders advised the Asagba, deliberating on matters of land, law, festivals, and community welfare. Oral tradition holds that the authority of the Asagba is moral as much as political: "No single man can decide for the town. When the elders sit, everyone listens even the Asagba.

Colonial rule disrupted these systems by imposing warrant chiefs and the Native Authority system, often appointing leaders without local legitimacy. Oral accounts from Asaba elders recall resistance to such impositions, with age grades and family heads continuing to exercise real authority behind the scenes.

Ethnic Relations and Dynamics

Asaba's location on the Niger River made it both a crossroads and a boundary between different ethnic groups. Anioma identity connected the town to the broader Igbo world, but close interaction with Urhobo, Ijaw, Yoruba, and even Hausa communities fostered a cosmopolitan ethos. Emeka Esogbue, in *Essentials of Anioma People*, emphasizes that intermarriage, trade, and shared religious practices fostered cooperation, while differences in dialect, tradition, and economic interests sometimes led to rivalry. Oral tradition is full of stories about "strangers" becoming kin. Despite occasional tensions over land or politics, Asaba's tradition of inclusive councils, age grades, and festivals helped manage differences and foster unity.²²

The colonial period intensified these dynamics. An influx of non-Igbo administrators and traders brought new ideas and competition. The construction of roads, the spread of Christianity, and the establishment of schools and markets made Asaba a magnet for immigrants from across Nigeria. Ogbueshi Emmanuel, writing on Asaba festivals, notes that this diversity was reflected in the town's vibrant cultural life, where new influences blended with old rituals.

Additionally, Christianity and western education brought further change, producing a new elite of teachers, clerks, and professionals. Mission schools established from the 1920s gave rise to a generation that valued both tradition and modernity. Oral tradition recalls the arrival of the first Catholic priest as a day of wonder: "When the white man came with his bell and his book, we all came out to see if he could speak our tongue. The rise of regionalism and ethnic politics in late colonial Nigeria brought both unity and division. Asaba elites participated in nationalist movements while also preserving their unique identity through town unions, cultural associations, and festivals. Asaba's ability to mediate ethnic differences and maintain unity in diversity shows the resilience and adaptability of its people.²³

Social and Economic Organization of Asaba

Asaba's economic life has always been centered around its thriving markets and agricultural production. The town's indigenous Igbo week consists of four days - Eke, Olie, Afor, and Nkwo - with major markets opening on each of these days in different quarters. The Ogbeogonogo Market, established in the 19th century, is the largest and has historically been dominated by women traders who controlled the supply of essential goods like yams, cassava, fish, and palm oil. According to oral histories from market women, pre-independence Asaba was a vibrant place where women would leave for market before sunrise, carrying yams on their heads and singing. The market was not just a place for business but also a hub for social

interaction, news dissemination, marriage arrangements, and dispute resolution. The construction of colonial-era infrastructure and the Niger Bridge in the 1960s further integrated Asaba into regional trade networks, enhancing its economic prospects. Most families in Asaba owned three types of farms: aniolu (large riverbank farm for yams), egbeni (smaller home plot for vegetables and corn), and ugbo-ukwu (distant bush farm for cassava and other staples). They also grew palm oil, kolanuts, citrus, and plantains, while fishing and hunting supplemented both their diet and income.²⁴

The imposition of colonial taxes and the expansion of cash-crop agriculture brought new pressures on land and labor but also introduced new opportunities for mobility and wealth. Women in Asaba played a particularly significant economic and social role, dominating the markets, organizing age-grade associations, and mediating social disputes. As scholars like Nwando Achebe have noted, female leadership in Anioma towns was rooted in precolonial patterns of authority, not a colonial invention. Women's associations managed communal savings, lobbied the Asagba, and organized collective action when threatened, whether by colonial taxes or market monopolies.²⁵

Asaba's social calendar is marked by a rich sequence of festivals that blend spirituality, agriculture, and community identity. The Ichu Ulor (purification festival) cleanses the town and prepares for the new yam season, during which no deaths are announced and the dead are hidden until after the festival. The Aja festival marks the start of harvest and involves sacrifices for abundance. The Ayiwe (Eze Ugbo) festival is a title-conferring event with roots in Asaba's warrior history, believed to have originated in the early 19th century. The Iwaji (new yam festival) is celebrated every September with house-to-house visits, communal feasts, and the symbolic firing of guns. At the end of the year, Olie Oma (Mother's Day) sees families offering

prayers for deceased mothers, preparing special okwulu soup, and marking the day with gun salutes and ritual fire. The Igba-Inne festival celebrates Asaba's warriors with processions, war dances, and spear-throwing rituals at the Niger River, under the leadership of Ogbu titleholders.²⁶

Oral histories recall that these festivals were times of reunion, when even those living in Lagos or Onitsha would return home. As one account puts it, "Every October, after the new yam festival, we would dance all night. The old songs reminded us of who we were, even when the world outside was changing". These festivals continue to play a vital role in Asaba's social and cultural fabric, connecting the community to its heritage and identity.

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CHAPTER THREE

GENESIS OF THE NIGERIAN CIVIL WAR (1967 – 1970)

Introduction

The Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), also called the Biafran War, was one of Africa’s most devastating conflicts. It did not arise from a single cause but from a buildup of political rivalry, ethnic tension, economic strain, and unresolved issues from British colonial rule. These problems gradually weakened the unity that Nigeria hoped to achieve after its 1960 independence. The war represented more than a political breakdown—it marked the collapse of the national dream of “One Nigeria.” Leaders failed to think beyond their ethnic and regional interests, and efforts to maintain peace failed. The chapter traces events from independence through political crises, ethnic violence, failed peace attempts, and the eventual outbreak of war in 1967. It highlights the experiences of ordinary Nigerians, especially people from Asaba and the Anioma region, and examines how the decisions of key leaders shaped the conflict. Using historical accounts and eyewitness reports, it shows how hope turned to fear, displacement, and survival.

The roots of the war go back to 1914, when the British created Nigeria by merging many diverse ethnic groups into three major regions. After independence, politics became a struggle between regions rather than ideas, with each group fearing domination. Coups in 1966 and mass killings pushed the nation toward war. For the Igbo people, including those in Asaba, the period felt like a progression of exclusion, violence, and looming extermination. One elder described it as a time when society seemed to collapse marked by death, fear, and betrayal.¹ Ultimately, the beginning of the war is both a national and deeply personal story. It reflects broken dreams,

families in crisis, and decisions made in fear but with hopes for safety and dignity. Studying the war's origins reveals leadership failures, the dangers of ethnic politics, and the heavy cost of not building trust among a country's diverse peoples.

Pre- 1967 Political Tensions and Conflict

Nigeria's road to crisis started long before it became independent. It started with how the British colonial rulers built the country. The 1914 amalgamation created one country out of very different groups of people. The main groups were the Hausa-Fulani in the North, the Yoruba in the West, and the Igbo in the East. There were also many smaller groups, like the Anioma people of the Asaba area.² The British system of rule made the ethnic groups even more divided and kept power with local leaders in each region.² Martin Meredith stated that, "The British left Nigeria with a federal system whose main function was to manage the antagonisms between regions, not to resolve them."³

This division was easy to see when Nigeria became independent in 1960. The three regions were almost like separate countries, with their own governments, political parties, and goals. The fight to control the central government became a game where if one side won, the others had to lose. The 1962–63 population count, which many people believe was faked to help the North, created a lot of distrust. Because of this, politics became about counting by ethnic group how many Northerners, Easterners, or Westerners could get into power, control the economy, and protect "their people."⁴

The first few years of independence were full of hope, but also growing problems. The Action Group crisis in the Western Region in 1962 was a danger sign. The government declared an emergency and shut down the regional government, showing how political fights could harm

the country.⁵ The 1964 federal elections were full of violence and cheating, which made people lose even more trust in politics.

Oral histories from Asaba show how worried people were in those years. Chief Philip Onianwa in an interview with Ndili mentioned that, “After independence, politicians came to promise us roads and schools, but soon they fought among themselves. My father said, ‘This politics will bring trouble to everyone, not just in the big cities.’” The political parties themselves the Northern People’s Congress (NPC), the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC), and the Action Group (AG) were tied to their regions and ethnic groups. They could not build trust with other groups. Richard Sklar, said that “the parties mobilized their followers not as citizens of a nation, but as members of ethnic blocs.”⁶ This created a feeling that any disagreement could become a crisis that could destroy the country.

For many Nigerians, especially the Igbo and other people from the East, independence brought both pride and worry. The East had the most cities and the most educated people. Easterners had important jobs in the government and in business all over the country. But this success made other groups, especially in the North, feel angry and jealous. Many in the North feared "Igbo domination."⁷

Mrs. Chinyere Nwosu, who ran away from the city of Kano in 1966, told Chima Korieh in an interview that, “We were proud to be Nigerian. My husband was a teacher in the North. But we always felt like strangers, and after a while even our neighbors became cold.”⁸ This feeling of being both a part of the country and an outsider was made worse by newspapers, politicians, and rumors in the early 1960s. This prepared the way for the disasters that came later.

Causes of Conflicts and Factors that Escalated to War

The first big break happened on January 15, 1966. A group of young army officers, who were mostly Igbo and led by Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu, violently took over the government. They said they wanted to stop the dishonesty and favoritism towards one's own ethnic group that they believed were hurting the country. In a radio speech, Nzeogwu said: "Our enemies are the political profiteers, swindlers, men in high and low places that seek bribes and demand ten percent... the tribalists, the nepotists, those that make the country look big for nothing before international circles."⁹

But the way the coup was carried out was a disaster. Important leaders in the North and West were killed, including Prime Minister Tafawa Balewa, Sardauna of Sokoto Ahmadu Bello, Western Premier Samuel Akintola and finance minister Festus Okotie Eboh. Almost all of them were not Igbo. Most Igbo politicians and army officers were not harmed. To many Northerners, the coup looked like a plan by the Igbo people to take control of the country.¹⁰

H.B. Momoh notes, "The killings of all senior northern officers then in the Army, with the exception of one (Gowon) who narrowly escaped, and the sparing of Igbo civilian and military officers in the coup, led the Northern population to interpret the event as an ethnic affair."¹¹

Oral history from Asaba show the growing fear. Mrs. Ngozi Onianwa remembered, "The radio said the army had taken over. We waited for peace, but soon people began to say that the Igbo wanted to rule everyone. The market women were afraid."¹²

Major General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi, who was also Igbo, took power as the Head of State. He tried to bring the country back together, but instead of punishing the men who led the coup, he created a new rule, Decree No. 34. This rule got rid of the separate regions and made

Nigeria one single state.¹³ To the North, this was proof that the real reason for the coup was for the Igbo people to take over. Riots (called the “Araba” movement) started in the North. Mobs attacked Igbos and other Easterners.

Frederick Forsyth describes this time: “The outburst soon led to the Araba (Hausa word for separation or secession) riots in the North. Large number of Igbos were killed by the rioters in key northern cities from when the unification decree took effect.”¹⁴ The violence killed thousands of people and forced tens of thousands to run to the East. They brought with them terrible stories of what had happened. Interviews collected by Ndili record: “We heard that our relatives in Jos and Kano had been killed. My uncle’s shop was burned. Every train from the North brought more refugees.”¹⁵

On July 29, 1966, Northern officers seeking revenge for the death of their leaders staged a counter-coup. The violence was organized and happened everywhere. Igbo officers were murdered in their army bases. The army, which was once a symbol of a united country, was broken.¹⁶ In the words of Momoh:

After dawn on July 29, the massacre of officers and men of
Eastern origin took place all over Nigeria with a speed,
precision and uniformity of pattern that took away any
subsequent excuse of spontaneity.¹⁷

Almost 300 Eastern officers and soldiers were killed or went missing. Lieutenant Colonel Yakubu Gowon, a Northerner, became the new Head of State. The East, led by Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, refused to accept him as the leader. Ojukwu said that the most senior officer, Brigadier Ogundipe, should have taken over.¹⁸

The crisis got worse as news of more mass killings in the North reached the East. For many people, these were not just political news stories but personal tragedies. Mrs. Ezinne Eke, a survivor from Asaba, told Emeka Esogbue: “We lost family in the North. We took in refugees. Every day people asked, ‘Will we be next?’”¹⁹ The killings continued. By October 1966, more than 30,000 Easterners had been killed in the North. Over one million ran away, many with only the clothes they were wearing.²⁰ The violence was so bad that, as Chinua Achebe remembers, “There was hardly a village or town, family or compound in the region that did not take into its fold one of the refugees, listened to what he had to say.”²¹

Immediate Causes of the Nigerian Biafra Civil War (1967 – 1970)

With the country about to fall apart, the regional military leaders met in January 1967 in Aburi, Ghana. It was a final try to save Nigeria. The Aburi Accord was an agreement for a system where the regions would have a lot of power and respect each other.²² But when the leaders went back home, the agreement fell apart. The Federal Government, pushed by Northern leaders, refused to follow the agreement as the East understood it. Now, propaganda and doubt took over. Radio Enugu and Radio Kaduna spread fear and rumors. Northern leaders threatened to crush the East. In the city of Enugu, crowds marched and shouted for “guns and freedom.” As Martin Meredith writes, by May 1967, “the clamour in the East to get out of Nigeria became too strong even for Colonel Ojukwu to bear.”²³ Colonel Ojukwu, facing pressure from his people and a flood of scared refugees, had to make a huge decision.

On May 30, 1967, Ojukwu declared that the Eastern Region was now a free and independent country the Republic of Biafra. He explained his decision by pointing to the mass killings of Easterners, the failure to make peace, and the need for his people to protect themselves:

Now therefore, I, Lieutenant-Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu...do solemnly proclaim that the Eastern Region of Nigeria, together with her continental shelf and territorial waters, shall henceforth be an independent sovereign state of the name and title of the Republic of Biafra.²⁴

For many people, this was not a choice but something they had to do. Elder Nze Okechukwu Obi of Asaba in an interview with Odogwu stated that, "After all the killings and broken promises, we could not trust Nigeria again. We wanted peace, but only on our own terms."²⁵ Shortly after Biafra's declaration of independence, the Nigerian Federal Government mobilized its forces to suppress the new nation, rallied by General Gowon's slogan, "To keep Nigeria one is a job that must be done." Initially, the government in Lagos defined its military engagement as a "police action" intended to stop the rebellion. This stance changed dramatically to a full-scale war after Biafran troops captured Benin City, established it as a new republic with Colonel Banjo in command, and proceeded to advance through Ore towards Lagos.

A crucial political maneuver by the Federal Government during this early phase was the division of Nigeria into twelve states. This act was strategically designed to weaken the Biafran rebellion by satisfying the long-standing demands of minority ethnic groups within the Eastern Region for their own states, thereby eroding the rebellion's unified support base. The conflict was the culmination of severe tensions following a military coup and a counter-coup in January and July, respectively. The ensuing violence had degraded the relationship between the people of the Eastern Region and other Nigerians, especially those from the North, to a point where war became the primary mode of interaction.²⁶ By May 1967, Nigeria's preparations for combat were

well underway. Troops from the Northern, Western, and Midwestern regions were redeployed from the East, and the army's 1st Brigade was restructured into the 1 Area Command. To support its forces, the government mobilized around 7,000 ex-servicemen to create four new battalions and also recruited from the Nigerian Police Force.

The Federal Government's war plan was codenamed Operation UNICORD. It was designed to create favorable conditions for the capture of the Biafran capital, Enugu, by first seizing the towns of Obudu, Ogoja, Garkem, and Nsukka. Propaganda was a key tool, with General Gowon's name being popularly reinterpreted as an acronym for "Go On With One Nigeria." The Nigerian Army Headquarters (NAHQ) anticipated a swift conflict, planning for a four-phase offensive that was expected to conclude with the fall of Enugu within a month. While the 1 Area Command was the main assault force, the 2 Area Command was tasked with defending the Mid-West, and the Lagos Garrison Organization was assigned to protect the federal capital, Lagos.²⁷

Although Nigerian military planners underestimated the scale of Biafran mobilization and their fierce will to fight, they correctly identified Biafra's reliance on foreign supplies. Consequently, a critical element of Nigeria's strategy was a naval blockade of the Atlantic coast to prevent the importation of weapons, food, and other essential materials. Nigeria also asserted its authority by informing the global community that any flights into the region would require its approval. The war effort was largely planned and supplied from the North, with Kaduna as the primary logistics hub, and little strategic intelligence was focused on the Eastern Region itself.

The naval blockade officially began in May 1967 with the imposition of economic sanctions. On July 25, 1967, the Nigerian Navy and troops from the 3rd Marine Commando Division (3MCDO) first led by the fierce Colonel Benjamin Adekunle (known as "The Black

Scorpion") and later by Colonel Olusegun Obasanjo, the 3MCDO was which was created for attacks from the sea and for moving quickly along the coast, captured vital oil ports like Bonny, Calabar, and Port Harcourt, which was a huge blow to Biafra's economy. This move caught the Biafran military by surprise, as they had incorrectly assumed the Nigerian Navy was incapable of executing such an operation.²⁸

The overall military offensive was conceived as a two-pronged attack: a mechanized infantry division would advance from the north while another division conducted an amphibious assault from the south, aiming to trap and defeat the Biafran army. This pincer movement was to be supported by the Nigerian Air Force, which was tasked with controlling the airspace. As the war progressed, two additional fronts were opened. On the diplomatic front, Nigeria successfully framed the conflict as an internal matter of national reunification. This narrative helped secure the support of international superpowers, enabling Nigeria to import the weapons and supplies needed to sustain the war. The Soviet Union supplied Nigeria with advanced aircraft, including MiG-17 fighter jets and Ilyushin Il-28 bombers.²⁹ Because Nigeria lacked enough trained pilots, experienced pilots from Egypt were hired to fly many of these jets on bombing missions. This gave Nigeria complete control of the sky, allowing it to bomb military targets, cities, and even crowded markets and refugee camps.³⁰

Simultaneously, Nigeria participated in peace negotiations to project an image of being open to a peaceful resolution. Confronted with a technologically and numerically superior enemy, the Biafran Army adopted a defensive strategy. Through a war simulation exercise known as "Exercise Checkmate," the Biafran Army accurately anticipated the Nigerian military's opening moves. Biafran forces were organized into three main commands: the 51st Brigade in the northern sector, the 11th Infantry Battalion in the central zone, and the 52nd Brigade in the

southern zone. They used their intimate knowledge of the terrain to their advantage, building fortified pillboxes along major highways and likely avenues of approach. The Biafran Organisation of Freedom Fighters (BOFF) was its special forces unit, which worked behind enemy lines to sabotage supply routes and ambush patrols. Since Biafra could not easily buy weapons, its scientists in the Research and Production (RAP) directorate invented many homemade weapons. The most famous was the "ogbunigwe," powerful remote-detonated mines and rockets that were cheap to make but incredibly deadly.³¹ Biafra also created a small air force. A Swedish pilot, Count Carl Gustaf von Rosen, helped Biafra modify small planes called MFI-9s to carry rockets. These tiny planes, nicknamed the "Biafra Babies," were used in daring raids to attack Nigerian airfields, which was a huge boost to Biafran morale.³²

Offensively, the Biafran Air Force conducted strategic bombing raids on key Nigerian cities and military targets. While these attacks had a severe psychological and physical impact on the civilian population, they also served as a powerful tool for Nigerian propaganda, which in turn boosted recruitment for the Federal Army. The Biafran Navy also made several unsuccessful attacks on Nigerian warships. Biafra's support was smaller and often secret, but it was essential for helping it fight for 30 months. France was Biafra's biggest, though unofficial, supporter, sending weapons through friendly African countries. Tanzania, Zambia, Ivory Coast, and Gabon officially recognized Biafra as an independent country. Portugal allowed the island of São Tomé to be used as the main base for the humanitarian airlift. Israel also provided some early support. While most governments backed Nigeria, many ordinary people in Europe and America supported Biafra because of the powerful images of starving children. Both sides made use of foreign mercenaries for training and direct combat.³³

The war resulted in a massive humanitarian disaster within the Eastern Region. In the United States Congress, Senator Kennedy highlighted the severity of the crisis, noting that the suspension of aid flights carrying food and medicine had put 3 million people at risk of starvation and death. The food crisis was so severe that addressing it became a major, though largely unsuccessful, component of the post-war rehabilitation agenda. It was recognized that providing food aid alone was not enough to combat malnutrition; complementary interventions such as clean water, proper hygiene, and healthcare services were also necessary.³⁴ Several attempts to resolve the conflict peacefully failed. The British government, driven by its substantial economic interests in Nigeria's oil industry since the 1960s, launched a peace initiative to protect its assets, particularly those of Shell. This effort, however, collapsed during talks in Kampala. The diplomatic failure occurred because the Biafran delegation insisted on a ceasefire before negotiations could begin, while the Nigerian representatives imposed their own set of preconditions, leading to an impasse.

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CHAPTER FOUR

ASABA MASSACRE AND ITS IMPACT

Introduction

The story of the Asaba Massacre is more than a tale of wartime tragedy; it serves as a lens through which we can examine the deep scars left by the Nigerian Civil War, the resilience and trauma of the Asaba community, and the ongoing battles over memory, justice, and national reconciliation. This chapter critically reconstructs the events of October 1967, drawing on survivor testimonies and insights from leading scholars such as Elizabeth Bird, Fraser Ottanelli, Emma Okocha, Chima Korieh, and Egodi Uchendu. Through archival photographs and oral histories, we witness not only the violence itself but also the shattering of families, the suffering and strength of women and children, the disruption of social structures, and the long shadow cast by silence and denial. The chapter also addresses how Asaba and Nigeria have sought to commemorate, forget, or reinterpret the massacre, highlighting the contentious debates surrounding history, legacy, and justice. In doing so, it illuminates how collective trauma shapes a people's sense of identity and belonging, and how the struggle for truth and recognition continues even fifty years after the guns fell silent.

Account of the Asaba Massacre

The Asaba massacre was perpetrated during the Nigerian-Biafran Civil War (1967-1970). This horrific event occurred from October 5th to 7th, 1967. In August 1967, two months before the massacre, a division of the seceded Eastern Region's (Biafra) army, led by Lieutenant-Colonel Victor Banjo, occupied Benin in the Midwestern Region of Nigeria. The Biafran army, also known as the Liberation Army, aimed to use Benin as a launching ground for an invasion of Ibadan and Lagos. However, this proposed invasion failed due to issues related to Lieutenant

Banjo's leadership. After the failure, Federal troops seized the opportunity to recapture Benin and pursue the Biafran army into Asaba and then to Onitsha. Upon reaching Onitsha, the Biafran forces blew up a part of the Onitsha bridge, preventing Federal troops from continuing the chase.¹

According to Lieutenant-Colonel Paul Ogbebor, a civil war veteran and a military officer who was part of the federal troops, around 5,000 Federal troops died during the crossing of the bridge.² At this juncture, the people of Asaba faced dire consequences. The Nigerian army's second division, led by Colonel Murtala Muhammed, turned back to Asaba.³ As Bird and Ottanelli noted, out of frustration, Federal troops entered Asaba on October 5 and unleashed several days of violence against the civilian population. This began with house-to-house searches, looting, and culminated in mass executions.⁴

Emma Okocha, a native of Asaba whose father was killed in the massacre, stated that soldiers specifically targeted influential men and community leaders. This targeting stemmed from the perception that Asaba's tradition of education and public service posed a threat.⁵ On October 6th, attempts were made by the leaders of Asaba to appease the soldiers. They organized plans to show their solidarity and even proposed to present gifts and money to the commanding officer. On the 7th of October, two days after the Federal troops arrived in Asaba, the community organized a dance to demonstrate their support for 'One Nigeria.' This event featured men, women, boys, and girls dressed in their Akwa Ocha (white) attire at Ogbe Osowa. Unknown to them, the soldiers had other intentions.⁶ During the dance parade, men and boys were separated from their families and systematically mowed down with machine guns. The orders to open fire on the civilians in Asaba was reportedly given by the second-in-command, Major Ibrahim Taiwo. While some sources have named I.B.M. Haruna as the officer who ordered the massacre, and he

has reportedly claimed responsibility, historical accounts indicate that he was not present in Asaba in 1967 and only took command of the Second Division in 1968. The shooting continued into the night, and when the soldiers finally dispersed, the people were left to retrieve the bodies of their family members and bury them in mass graves.

Okocha estimates that over 1,000 people were killed, a figure echoed by community oral histories and supported by the Asaba Memorial Project. Some bodies were even thrown into the Niger River. The violence did not cease with the Ogbe-Osowa massacre; sporadic shootings, rapes, and further executions continued for weeks and months, as soldiers hunted down suspected Biafran sympathizers and terrorized the surviving population. Even as relief agencies like the Red Cross began to arrive, they encountered a town in ruins, its markets deserted, homes looted or burned, and its people traumatized and displaced.⁷

During an oral interview with Iweze, he stated that this massacre was a targeted killing, as soldiers had a specific list of persons to execute.⁸ Chima Korieh emphasizes that although the people of Asaba are ethnically Igbo, they were not part of Biafra; many citizens, including senior civil servants, remained loyal to Nigeria. This complex dynamic made the violence appear especially senseless and traumatic.⁹

Eyewitness Testimonies and Personal Experiences

The true horror and complexity of the Asaba Massacre emerge most vividly in the testimonies of its survivors. The scale of family devastation was unimaginable. For instance, Ogbueshi Osuzzoka lost his father during the massacre and this he said was very devastating for him as a young child. The loss of his father who was the breadwinner of his family led his family into poverty. He even mentioned that no compensation has been given to the family till date.¹⁰

Nwaokocha stated that though he did not lose any of his close family member, his family got displaced and ended up in a refugee camp known as Mungo Park House (located around the axis of the old court and present day Grand hotel) in 1968. He stated that even though the killings had stopped at that time, there was still tension in the family. As a child he saw houses that were burnt, he even added that bullet marks were seen on the walls of the reservoir at Nnebisi. Some families had to leave Asaba, some went to Ibusa, some Okpanam, some escaped through the Niger to the East.¹¹ Theresa Ugbomah who also witnessed the massacre lost her father and her mother had to take care of her and her siblings. They stayed in the bush for days with no food, she saw people turn into cannibals due to hunger and the determination to survive. Asaba, a peaceful and bubbling town, had now become a deserted town.¹²

Egodi Uchendu and Elizabeth Bird record how that many women suffered rape or were forcibly “married” to soldiers. Girls were often disguised as older women or hidden to avoid sexual violence. The trauma of rape was compounded by the patrilineal structure of Asaba society, leaving children born from such violence without recognized status or inheritance rights. Survivor testimonies often reflect the silence and shame surrounding these experiences, with some women carrying their pain for decades without ever speaking of it, and entire families stigmatized by the circumstances of their children’s birth.¹³ Many survivors struggled for years with nightmares, depression, and a sense of abandonment. “I kept it all buried in my heart,” one survivor recalled, adding that when they tried to tell their story in school in Lagos, they were called a liar. The breakdown of traditional family support systems left many orphans and widows to fend for themselves, relying on the charity of distant relatives, religious organizations, or, in some cases, strangers.¹⁴ Despite the overwhelming destruction, there are also stories of resilience within the Asaba community. Some women, such as Mrs. Uraih, rebuilt their families through

trade and sheer determination, ensuring that their children received an education despite the odds. Others formed tight-knit support networks, finding strength in collective survival. Yet, for many, the massacre marked the loss of Asaba's former status as a center of education, civil service, and professional achievement encapsulated in the common expression "aya buta kpum" meaning "the war brought my grief."¹⁵

Effects and aftermath of the Asaba Massacre on the Community

The immediate aftermath of the massacre was marked by chaos, displacement, and despair. Relief organizations estimated that 60 percent of Asaba's homes were destroyed, and by 1969, Asaba had been removed from the Nigerian government's official list of towns. Many survivors lived as refugees within their own community, subsisting in camps or ruined schools, suffering from malnutrition, disease, and trauma. Teachers struggled to educate children without books or supplies, and malnutrition became rampant. "We ate rats, lizards, all these things," a survivor recalled. The destruction of the male population had profound social consequences. The extended family, once the bedrock of Anioma society, was fractured, with widows and orphans often having no relatives to turn to for support. This breakdown led to spirals of economic decline, educational decline, and social instability. Some survivors and local commentators have attributed postwar problems, such as youth delinquency and crime, to the "imported blood" of the occupation a narrative that blames the children of rape or those who grew up fatherless for the town's postwar woes.¹⁶

The occupation of the town by Nigerian federal troops precipitated a massive humanitarian crisis, forcing tens of thousands to flee their homes. The subsequent relief effort was a complex, often desperate, patchwork of international aid, local charity, and community solidarity, undertaken in the face of immense political and logistical challenges. The civilian

population fled in panic. Their destinations were influenced by geography, kinship, and perceived safety. Many undertook the dangerous crossing of the Niger River to seek refuge in secessionist Biafran territory, particularly in towns like Onitsha and Nnewi. Others fled west and north into the hinterland of the Midwestern Region, seeking shelter in neighboring Anioma towns such as Ibusa, Ogwashi-Uku, Issele-Uku, and Okpanam.¹⁷

Formal and semi-formal refugee camps were established in towns considered relatively safe from the front lines. These were not purpose-built tent cities but rather repurposed public and private buildings. The most prominent and frequently documented camps for refugees from Asaba were located in Ogwashi-Uku and Issele-Uku, which became major centers for humanitarian operations in the region. There was also a refugee camp at St. Patrick's college Asaba. Facilities in these camps included schools, church compounds, and town halls that were converted into makeshift shelters. For instance, St. Michael's College in Ogwashi-Uku was used as a major relief center. These facilities were intensely overcrowded, and combined with poor sanitation, created a fertile ground for disease. The primary afflictions included kwashiorkor (a severe form of malnutrition, especially in children), measles, dysentery, and malaria, which claimed countless lives.¹⁸

The international response to the humanitarian crisis in the broader war zone, including the area around Asaba, was led by a few key non-governmental organizations. They operated under a "humanitarian imperative," often navigating complex political landscapes and defying blockades to deliver aid. The ICRC was the lead and most visible humanitarian agency operating on both sides of the conflict. Its mandate, grounded in the Geneva Conventions, was to provide protection and assistance to victims of war. The ICRC coordinated a massive relief effort aimed at delivering food, medicine, and shelter materials. They established a large-scale operation with

headquarters in both Lagos (federal Nigeria) and within Biafra. For the Asaba refugees, the ICRC worked to get supplies into the camps at Ogwashi-Uku and Issele-Uku. Their teams, composed of international delegates and local Nigerian Red Cross volunteers, ran feeding centers, provided medical care, and tried to maintain sanitary conditions. However, they faced significant challenges, as the Nigerian federal government imposed a strict blockade on Biafra and was deeply suspicious of aid operations, fearing that supplies could be diverted to Biafran soldiers. ICRC planes often faced severe restrictions and dangers.²⁰

The WCC, an ecumenical fellowship of Protestant and Orthodox churches, played a pivotal role, often working in tandem with Catholic organizations through a program called Joint Church Aid (JCA), popularly known as "the church airlift." Frustrated with the political restrictions placed on ICRC flights, the churches organized their own, more audacious airlift directly into Biafra. On the federal side, where the Asaba refugees were located, the WCC and its partners provided crucial support to the camps. They channeled funds and supplies through local dioceses and missions, which had the infrastructure and personnel to manage distribution effectively. The WCC's efforts were funded by a massive outpouring of donations from member churches and individuals across Europe and North America. Caritas, a confederation of Catholic relief and social service organizations, was another key player, often working alongside the WCC as part of Joint Church Aid. Pope Paul VI took a personal interest in the crisis, making Caritas a primary channel for Catholic aid. Their operational model was similar to that of the WCC, leveraging the extensive network of the Catholic Church in Nigeria to distribute food and medicine to those in need, including the displaced from Asaba.²¹

Despite the overwhelming destruction, the resilience of Asaba's women was remarkable. With the loss of so many men, women became heads of households, traders, and community

leaders. In some cases, this shift began to undermine traditional male dominance in ways that resonate today. However, the trauma of the massacre and the loss of Asaba's professional class left a mark that has yet to heal. Asaba's decline in education, public service, and economic prosperity is widely attributed to the events of October 1967. The psychological scars of the massacre continue to linger. Survivors often avoided speaking of their experiences, both out of pain and fear of disbelief or ridicule. Many children who tried to share their stories outside Asaba were dismissed as liars. This silence has contributed to a pervasive sense of unresolved grievance and injustice that has persisted for decades.

Commemoration and Memory of the Asaba Massacre

For decades, the Asaba massacre of October 1967 remained a largely silenced and officially unacknowledged tragedy of the Nigerian Civil War. The Nigerian government exerted tight control over media coverage, dismissing reports of the massacre as "wild rumors." International journalists relied heavily on official sources, and the British press, an influential voice, largely remained silent or dismissive. This suppression contributed to a sense of unresolved grievance and anger in Asaba. Survivors were often reluctant to speak out, fearing disbelief or stigma, and the massacre was omitted from national history.²²

However, in the face of this official silence, the people of Asaba, supported by academics, artists, and activists, and also the work of many authors the likes of Elizabeth Bird, Emma Okocha, Dr. Iweze, Nwaokacha have persistently worked to ensure that the victims are not forgotten. The silence began to lift in the 1990s, particularly with the publication of Emma Okocha's *Blood on the Niger*, which galvanized local and diaspora efforts to reclaim the history. Through a series of increasingly visible and impactful commemorative events, they have shifted the memory of the massacre from private grief to public consciousness, creating a powerful

narrative of remembrance, justice, and reconciliation. The early efforts to memorialize the massacre were largely private and community-based. For years, the people of Asaba were forced to honor their dead in private, their suffering unacknowledged by the Nigerian government. A significant shift began with the establishment of the Nigerian Human Rights Violations Investigations Commission, known as the Oputa Panel, in 2001. The petition brought before the panel by the Asaba community marked a crucial step in breaking the official silence surrounding the massacre.

A pivotal force in the international recognition and documentation of the massacre has been the Asaba Memorial Project. This collaborative effort, initiated in 2009 by scholars from the University of South Florida, including anthropologist S. Elizabeth Bird and historian Fraser Ottanelli, worked closely with the Asaba community. The project involved extensive research, including over 100 videotaped interviews with survivors and witnesses, as well as archival research in Nigeria, the United States, and the United Kingdom. This meticulous work culminated in the publication of the book, *The Asaba Massacre: Trauma, Memory, and the Nigerian Civil War*, which provides a comprehensive account of the event and its aftermath.²³

The formal, public commemoration of the massacre began to take a more structured form in the 2010s. The first Asaba Memorial event was held in Asaba on October 7, 2010, and included a procession and the laying of a foundation for a monument at Ogbe-Osowa, the site of the mass killing. These annual remembrance events have continued in most years since, often featuring speeches, processions, and religious services.



Source: <https://www.asabamemorial.org/> Accessed 26th August, 2025²⁴

In 2012, a traveling museum-quality exhibit created from the research of Bird and Ottanelli was displayed in Asaba, utilizing witness testimonies and historical photographs to document the atrocity.

The 50th anniversary of the massacre in October 2017 marked a major turning point in the commemorative efforts. Organized by the Asaba October 7 Memorial Group, the four-day event was themed "Remembrance and Forgiveness." The activities were extensive and deeply symbolic, beginning on October 5th with a one-minute silence for the victims, followed by traditional burial rites known as 'egwu ota', a service of songs, and a candlelight procession to the Ogbe-Osawa gravesite. A key highlight of the anniversary was a colloquium themed "In Pursuit of Rebirth," featuring prominent speakers such as Nobel laureate Professor Wole Soyinka and Bishop Matthew Hassan Kukah. The anniversary also saw the official launch of Bird and Ottanelli's book, further cementing the historical record of the event. In a powerful gesture of turning a place of death into a place of life, it was announced that a hospital and maternity center would be built on the site of the massacre. During the extensive four-day commemoration in October 2017, a memorial monument with a stark white obelisk was unveiled at the Ogbe-Osawa killing ground. This obelisk serves as a central and highly symbolic part of the anniversary

events, transforming the site from a place of unmarked tragedy into a formal site of remembrance.²⁵ While this significant monument was unveiled in 2017, plans for a more comprehensive "Asaba Massacre Memorial Monument" are ongoing. This ambitious project aims to include not just a monument but also a museum, a center for peace and reconciliation, and other facilities. The 2017 obelisk is a crucial first step and the centerpiece of the memorial site, but the larger vision is still in development.²⁶



Source: Asaba Memorial Project, "Remembering Asaba," <https://asabamemorial.org>. Accessed 26th August, 2025²⁷

In October 2019 to mark the 52nd anniversary of the Asaba massacre. While the large-scale colloquium was a feature of the 50th anniversary in 2017, the 2019 remembrance was also significant and focused on community-led rituals and a renewed call for justice. According to news reports from the time, the Asaba Development Union (ADU) worldwide, led by its President-General, Professor Epiphany Azinge, announced a series of activities to mark the

anniversary. On the day of the event, the popular Ogbogonogo Market and other markets in Asaba was shut down for a period to honor the victims. A solemn candlelight procession was held, starting from the Ogbe-Osawa massacre site and proceeding to the Oshimili Arcade for other rituals. The organizers called on Asaba indigenes, both at home and in the diaspora, to observe a minute of silence at noon on October 7th as a mark of respect. During a press conference announcing the events, Prof. Azinge reiterated the community's demand for an official and heartfelt apology from the Nigerian Federal Government, as well as compensation for the victims' families. He emphasized that while the community prefers negotiation, they have the right to seek justice through international bodies like the International Criminal Court (ICC). These events show that even without a formal academic symposium that year, the annual tradition of remembering the massacre was very much alive. The focus in 2019 was on grassroots community action, ritual remembrance, and publicly reasserting the call for accountability from the Nigerian government.²⁸

In October 2020, while the global COVID-19 pandemic placed constraints on large public gatherings, the community still found ways to honor the victims. The remembrance activities were a blend of community service and continued advocacy for justice. On Saturday, October 17, 2020, the Asaba Development Union (ADU) Worldwide, led by Professor Epiphany Azinge, organized a medical outreach program to provide much-needed healthcare to the indigenous people of Asaba. This act of community service was a way of bringing life and healing to a community that had endured immense loss. News articles from around that time reiterated the historical context of the massacre and highlighted the community's ongoing pain and the lack of an official apology or compensation from the Nigerian government. These articles served as a form of remembrance in the public sphere, ensuring the event was not forgotten. While specific

details on a 2020 massacre-focused symposium are scarce, it's noteworthy that the Epiphany Azinge Foundation held a virtual colloquium (webinar) in November 2020 titled "The Labours of Our Heroes Past." Although broader in theme, such events organized by prominent Asaba leaders often serve as platforms to reflect on the region's history, including the trauma of the civil war. The 2020 commemorations demonstrated a shift towards service-oriented remembrance, likely influenced by the pandemic, while still maintaining the consistent call for justice and national recognition that has characterized the memorial efforts for years.²⁹

The Nigeria government has failed to apologize officially to the people of Asaba. The likes of Gen. Murtala Muhammad had refused to apologize, Gen. Olusegun Obasanjo on the other hand has made it look like the number of persons that died during the killing were few. All this just to undermine the massive killing.³⁰ It was said that Gen. Yakubu Gowon apologized, but the apology has not been accepted by the public and no form of restitution has been made. The government has refused to punish the perpetrators, who killed unarmed civilians and this is part of the pain of the citizens and this has continued to create doubts in the minds of the people and also questions of if they are desired or wanted in their country Nigeria.³¹

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CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Summary

The study explores the Asaba Massacre of October 7, 1967, within the wider context of the Nigeria–Biafra Civil War. It begins by situating the conflict in historical realities shaped by ethnic suspicion, colonial legacies, political exclusion, and competition over power and resources. The massacre itself occurred when Nigerian federal troops entered Asaba under the guise of pursuing Biafran rebels but instead carried out a mass execution of civilians mainly men and boys resulting in the death of an estimated 500–1,000 people in a single day.

The aims and objectives focus on documenting the massacre, centering survivor testimony, examining its lasting impact, and evaluating how it is remembered in post-war Nigeria. The scope covers 1967 to 2020, using Asaba as a case study to reflect wider themes of justice, trauma, and memory.

From the findings of this study, the military response turned a political problem into a brutal war. Nigeria relied on external allies, blockades, and superior firepower. Biafra, lacking resources, survived through innovation, determination, and diaspora sympathy. What began as a constitutional dispute became a humanitarian catastrophe, marked by starvation, bombardment, and mass civilian suffering.

Conclusion

The Asaba Massacre represents one of the gravest yet most overlooked atrocities of the Nigeria–Biafra Civil War. It illustrates how ethnicized violence, political disregard for civilian life, and power struggles can lead to targeted mass killings. Despite the magnitude of the tragedy, it has remained marginalized in public history and national discourse, leaving survivors and their descendants in a state of unresolved grief.

By foregrounding personal testimonies, historical accounts, and communal memory, the study challenges this silence and restores agency to voices long ignored. It shows that remembering Asaba is not merely about documenting the past it's about confronting historical injustice, addressing inter-ethnic mistrust, and enabling healing.

Ultimately, the study underscores that truth-telling, memory preservation, and recognition of suffering are essential for reconciliation and national unity. Without acknowledging events like the Asaba Massacre, Nigeria cannot fully address the legacy of the civil war or prevent similar tragedies in the future.

The memoirs establish the Asaba Massacre as a civilian-targeted atrocity whose consequences have been social (family structures upended), economic (class/education erosion), psychological (multi-generational trauma), and political (enduring distrust). Over fifty years, Asaba's people have moved from private mourning to public memory, building monuments, archives, and rituals that keep names alive and demand a more honest national history.

Crucially, the collection demonstrates that recognition is itself reparative: when testimony is heard, names recorded, and spaces consecrated, survivors report greater dignity and communal healing. Yet justice remains incomplete no full federal acknowledgment, no structured reparations, no curricular mainstreaming, and minimal accountability. The memoirs therefore function both as historical record and civic petition: Nigeria cannot achieve durable reconciliation while eliding Asaba.

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1	Daniel Iweze	50years	Lecturer	University of Benin	21/08/2025
2	Ogbueshi Osuzzoka	63years	Civil Servant	Via Phone Call	18/08/2025
3	Prof. O. Nwaokocha	65years	Lecturer	University of Benin	25/08/2025
4	Theresa Ugbomah	70years	Trader	Via Phone Call	18/08/2025

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APPENDIX I

ASABA WAR VICTIMS (7TH OCTOBER, 1967)

EZENEI (UMUEZEI)		
1. Abiodun Emmanuel	33.	Oghuana Omenanu
2. Adigwe John	34.	Okodachi Adigwe
3. Adigwe Ibe	35.	Okodachi Ama
4. Chukwu Ekelemechukwu	36.	Okodachi Sunday
5. Chukwuema Maresi Andrew	37.	Okocha Ben, Henry
6. Chukwuema Michael	38.	Okonjo Felix
7. Chukwura Ajoku	39.	Okolie Anaka
8. Chukwura Oke	40.	Okonji George
9. Ehenwa Francis Elokia	41.	Okorowo Cyril Ike
10. Eghwira George	42.	Okorowo Joseph Chike
11. Elikwu Okodu	43.	Okonne Ekelemechukwu
12. Elikwu Lieke	44.	Okpamu Young
13. Elikwu Nkhanu	45.	Onewuka Chukwodi
14. Elikwu Kaseyo	46.	Onewuka Okolie
15. Elikwu Okelaka	47.	Onewuka Ndaka
16. Elikwu Michael	48.	Oryia Ndaka
17. Ekefora Akakwasi	49.	Osuji Nwabuzor
18. Iweze Ojimi Vincent	50.	Rapu Selma
19. Iweze Odika	51.	Rapu Anterobi
20. Idesaka Danon Okobi	52.	Uzoehin
21. Kechi Clem		
22. Kodjo Bernard		
23. Makhigwara, Henry Ibe		
24. Monah Chika		
25. Monah Mike Chukwu		
26. Nwabuzor Ndaka		
27. Nwabuzor John		
28. Nwaeze Ndaka		
29. Nwogafanya Nkadi		
30. Okadpami Francis		
31. Odiaka Thos Olikene		
32. Ogbogu Sam Ikanye		

AJAJI (UMUAJI)

1. Abiodun Godwin	35. Jumah George
2. Ajafor Oke	36. Jumah Dada
3. Akwae Cyril	37. Jumah Edward
4. Akwae Eugene (Dr) (SMO)	38. Jumah Onuorah Gilbert
5. Akwae Tina	39. Mami Albert Uzaka
6. Alhaji Eugene Akana	40. Mami Cyril John
7. Arone Chikwura	41. Mami Daniel
8. Aruna Ndali	42. Mami D. N.
9. Atah Francis	43. Mami G. N.
10. Bachi Paul Okoku	44. Mami George
11. Bachi Okoku	45. Ndaka Eke Rose Ezinno
12. Chima Vincent Ike	46. Njoku Peter
13. Chukwura Adigwe	47. Nwafor Okwuegbika
14. Chukwura Henry Ohi	48. Nwaji Okafor
15. Eghwira Okolie	49. Nwafor Emmanuel Okpuno
16. Eghwira Ike	50. Nwafor Gabriel
17. Ekefora J. E.	51. Nwafor Miller
18. Gwan Gibson Toy	52. Nwafor Leonard
19. Gwan G. W.	53. Nwazur Paul
20. Gwan Lawrence A.	54. Nwazur Ufemi
21. Gwonyaga Apple Okolie	55. Nwazur Joseph
22. Halim Joseph	56. Nwazur Young
23. Halim Nwafukwu	57. Nwazur Akaji Mordi
24. Igbo Alex. A. (MBE)	58. Nwazur David
25. Igbo Okoku	59. Nwazur Joseph Mordi
26. Igbo Okoku	60. Nwazur Thos. C.
27. Igbo Emmanuel	61. Nwazur Chika
28. Igbo Leo S.	62. Nwazur James
29. Igbo Nwazur	63. Nwazur Joseph
30. Igbo Okoku Opi	64. Nwazur Nwafukwu
31. Igbo Okoku	65. Obiang Michael Bay
32. Igbo Rufus N.	66. Obiang Godwin
33. Igbo Sunday Ignatius	67. Odike Okobi
34. Igbo Richard	68. Odike Sunday

69. Odike Shon O	
70. Okeke Enehi (Bob, Chike)	
71. Okeke Chukwaj	
72. Okeke E.D.	
73. Okeke Moses	
74. Okeke Nnaji	
75. Okeke Oliver	
76. Okeke Onuorah Mike	
77. Okeke Samuel	
78. Okeke Simon F. A.	
79. Okafor Mma	
80. Okafor Sunday	
81. Okocha Albert N.	
82. Okocha Anaka	
83. Okocha Okoku	
84. Okocha Joseph	
85. Okorji Sunday Okongwoni	
86. Okorji Sunday	
87. Okorji Chika Ike	
88. Okorji Richard C. (BL)	
89. Okorji Victor	
90. Okeke Samuel	
91. Okeke Chiketa Kafundi	
92. Okeke Nwafukwu	
93. Okeke Nwafukwu Okafor	
94. Okeke Nwafukwu	
95. Okeke Nwafukwu	
96. Okeke Nwafukwu	
97. Okeke Nwafukwu	
98. Okeke Nwafukwu	
99. Okeke Nwafukwu	
100. Okeke Nwafukwu	

ONAJE (UMUONAJE)

1. Alomona Ojume	37. Keshi Okoji	108. Ude George
2. Anukwu G. N.	38. Mgbaze Ogi	109. Ugboja Chika
3. Anukwu Okafor	39. Monyei Jose	110. Ugboke John
4. Apati Samuel	40. Monyei Gae	111. Ugboke Ad
5. Ashigwu Fidelis	41. Molekwa St	112. Ugboke Eke
6. Ashigwu Henry C. O	42. Mordi Chuk	113. Umokango C
7. Azikwe Okelike Okocha	43. Mordi Chris	114. Utomi Nw
8. Chacha Andrew C.	44. Mordi T. Ohi	115. Utomi Nw
9. Chacha Ejima	45. Mowa Ohi	116. Utomi Ogi
10. Chacha Nwafukwu	46. Mowah Ben	117. Utomi Orwa
11. Chacha Samuel	47. Ndan Ogom	118. Uwaje Sunday
12. Echenwa Chas Nwogidwe	48. Njokanna	
13. Chididibia Mike Ameshi	49. Nkadi Ono	
14. Chidi Anthony	50. Nkeonyehili	
15. Chidi Ndaka	51. Nkoba Henri	
16. Chidi Thomas	52. Nsugbe Ede	
17. Chukwura Christian	53. Nwabuzor	
18. Chukwura David E.	54. Nwosa Adia	
19. Chukwura Edwin	55. Nwosa Orwa	
20. Chukwura Mgbake Onwufu	56. Nwabuzor	
21. Diabur Onwuka	57. Nwanda Gb	
22. Egegwa Robert N.	58. Nwamaku	
23. Eboka Augustine	59. Nwamaku	
24. Eghwira A. M.	60. Nwoko N	
25. Enemmu Okonji	61. Nwosi Re	
26. Erika Samuel Elokia	62. Obianata N	
27. Harry John	63. Obiaju Ok	
28. Igbo Okoh	64. Obioji Iweng	
29. Irodo Okoli	65. Obioji W	

72. Ogbogu Nwike	108. Ude George
73. Ogbogu Maddocks	109. Ugboja Chika
74. Ogbogu Oryekemazun	110. Ugboke John
75. Oje Francis Ogiuna	111. Ugboke Ad
76. Ojogu Joseph	112. Ugboke Eke
77. Ojogu Michael	113. Umokango C
78. Ojogu P. N.	114. Utomi Nw
79. Okobi Ngizi	115. Utomi Nw
80. Okocha Oloru	116. Utomi Ogi
81. Okogwu I. N.	117. Utomi Orwa
82. Okonji Ohi Okugwu	118. Uwaje Sunday
83. Okonji Okwudi Fidelis	
84. Okonji Nwankwuo	
85. Okonji Ifeanyi	
86. Okonta Augustine	
87. Okonta Arizike	
88. Okonta Fidelis Ndaka	
89. Okonta Ikechukwu	
90. Okonta James Nwankwuo	
91. Okonta Mathias	
92. Okonta Uvadu	
93. Okwabi Akaze	
94. Okwabi Ohi	
95. Okwurafe Isitua Okafor	
96. Okwurafe Nwanze	
97. Olokpo	
98. Omwunachi Nwanze	
99. Omwunachi Olinigbo	
100. Omwunachi Sunday	
101. Omwunachi Azuka	
102. Omwunachi Okoko	

UGBOMANTA

1. Anigbohu Nwabuku	37. Obianor, O
2. Anigbohu Nwando	38. Obianor, S
3. Ashofu Mike Oryekolinkwa	39. Obodochi
4. Afumade John	40. Odachi Ed
5. Asiekwu Samuel	41. Odachi O
6. Asiekwu Agelum	42. Odachi Nw
7. Chidi Francis Nwike	43. Oda Nwosa
8. Chijindu Dan Olli	44. Okelike Yon
9. Chijindu Egbuna	45. Okelike O
10. Chijindu Chukwaka (Aha)	46. Okelike P
11. Chijindu Ebona	47. Okelike Alp
12. Chigo Ojimi	48. Okelike Oji
13. Chukwura Robert	49. Okelike
14. Ekefora Asidoko	50. Okwuegbi
15. Ekefora Patrick	51. Okwuegbi
16. Ekefora Oji	52. Okwuegbi
17. Ekefora Michael	53. Okwuegbi
18. Ekefora Joseph Chiweta	54. Okwuegbi
19. Ekefora Chukwaka	55. Okwuegbi
20. Gwanmuru Onochie	56. Okwuegbi
21. Igwenna Nwoko	57. Okwuegbi
22. Ijeh Ejima	58. Okwuegbi
23. Ijeh Ameshi	59. Okwuegbi
24. Ikedashi Michael	60. Okwuegbi
25. Ikedashi Wilson	61. Okwuegbi
26. Iwechi	62. Okwuegbi
27. Madumere Nwafukwu Okafor	63. Okwuegbi
28. Malechi Okwuegbi	64. Okwuegbi
29. Malechi Okwuegbi	65. Okwuegbi
30. Malechi Okwuegbi	66. Okwuegbi

AGU (UMUAGU)

1. Anyanwu George Adigwu	35. Ujenna Okonji Modu
2. Anyakwo Wilson	36. Odindu Oge
3. Awolof Henry Nwobi	
4. Awolof Okoko Nwobi	
5. Biosa Eminian	
6. Chichi Daniel	
7. Chichi Ikemba	
8. Dozie Edwin	
9. Edezie Ihechukwaku	
10. Eghafu Chike	
11. Eshiana, Nwogbanji	
12. Igboke Martins	
13. Isichei Peter	
14. Kereke Okoji	
15. Moko Joseph	
16. Njoteah Chief Ezenba	
17. Nwafor David	
18. Obesie Nwadi	
19. Odiaka Jacob Ashimedu	
20. Odiaka Vincent Chukwudebo	
21. Ogedan Young	
22. Ojeh Odima	
23. Okafor Augustine	
24. Okobi Joseph	
25. Okwueze Daniel	
26. Oliko Ambrose Odogwu	
27. Oliko Nwafukwu	
28. Onianwa Chief Utomi	
29. Onochie Emmanuel	
30. Onyemwili Bernard	
31. Oryia Akaze	
32. Oryia Chukwura	

Source: Sir Joe Oni Akaraiwe, *Asaba War Victim*, 1967.

APPENDIX II

S. ELIZABETH BIRD AND FRASER (TANALL)



Figure 1. Refugee camp at St. Patrick's College, Asahi, 1968. Photo courtesy of American Friends Service Committee Archives, Philadelphia, USA

In the immediate aftermath, those who had remained in Asahi, or who tracked back as things settled down, were focused primarily on survival. Many returned to what was left of their houses, gradually making them habitable,³² while others subsisted in refugee camps established in local schools,³³ joining other displaced refugees from surrounding areas. In a report to the American Friends Service Committee in August 1968, visiting relief workers David Scanton and Christian Hansen described conditions in the largest camp, at St. Patrick's College, where they witnessed 'extreme malnutrition' and a complete lack of medical care. Scanton notes that six or seven refugee teachers were trying to offer classes:

There are probably about 400 children in the campschool. They have no books, paper, pencils; the teachers are trying to recall the simplest manner that they could be covering in an ordinary class. . . . I have never seen teachers trying to teach without any material supplies. . . . I have nothing but admiration for these teachers. . . .³⁴

Conditions remained dire in Asahi for the rest of the war. Throughout 1968, repeated incursions of small groups of Biafran soldiers led to skirmishes around the town, followed by reprisals from federal troops. In April 1968, federal troops forcibly evicted many still living in the town for several weeks, further swelling the numbers in the refugee camps, and resulting in another

THE ASAHA MASSACRE AND THE NIGERIAN CIVIL WAR



Figure 2. Refugees assemble for distribution of rice, beans and yams. Catholic Mission, Asahi, 1968. Photo courtesy of American Friends Service Committee Archives, Philadelphia, USA

significant wave of killings of men and boys accused of Biafran sympathies.³⁵ This is known in Asahi as the 'second operation'. During this time, Asahans were caught in an impossible situation, struggling to survive while under accusation from soldiers who distrusted their every move. Scanton and Hansen noted: 'People are confined in the town by the military government as it is feared they might give help to the Biafrans. . . . Medical supplies are simply not there. Theoretically people would go to the doctors attached to the military but after the killings that have taken place in the town the people are petrified and are afraid to go near the army at all. And they would have to go through army lines to go to the military doctors.'³⁶

They observed that people still in the town were required to get permits from the military to move about, and that farming and commerce had come to a halt, further exacerbating the food shortages.

Resilience and recovery

With the loss of so many men, a huge burden fell on women as they faced the task of rebuilding their families' lives alone. Felicia Nwanda describes her return to Asahi after a few weeks in the bush:

APPENDIX III

On October 5, 1967, Nigerian Federal troops entered Asaba, in pursuit of retreating Biafran forces.

In the days that followed, the town was devastated, and hundreds of civilians lost their lives.

"Testimonies such as this should become a kind of chain letter hung permanently on the leaden conscience of the world"

Wole Soyinka (The Man Died, 1972)



The Times, 26th October, 1967

when it gained independence, Nigeria was home to over 200 different ethnic groups, the largest being the Hausa/Fulani, the Yoruba, and the Igbo.



Fears that one group would dominate led to contested census counts and corrupt elections. This set the stage for the overthrow of civilian rule by a group of military officers in January 1966.

There had long been resentment against the Igbo, who had embraced Western education, and had become leaders in business and civil service across the country. Many Northerners saw the coup as an Igbo power-play. Attacks on Igbo people erupted across northern and western Nigeria that May.




An account of the crisis in the New York Times, 10th October, 1967




I was about 12 or 13 when this whole thing started. My father had a family of eleven; we lived in Benin. The whole family, my dad rented a big lorry. We just took it to the coast, everything and loaded everything in and we all drove to Asaba.

WAR REACHES ASABA

The war came to Asaba on 5 August 1967, when Biafran troops crossed the bridge across the Niger and invaded the Midwest. The Biafrans quickly spread west, over-running Benin City, and coming within striking distance of Lagos. But federal forces regained the initiative, and quickly pushed the Biafrans back to Asaba. On October 5, the retreating troops crossed the bridge back into Biafra, blowing it up behind them.

News had reached Asaba of killings of Igbo by other civilians in Warri, Sagbani, and Benin, as federal forces gained the upper hand. There was anxiety, but not panic.

After knowing the bridge, we heard that Federal troops were coming. They were coming, terrible, and we were hearing gunshots at the barracks, around St. Patrick's College. We weren't afraid because most of our fathers and our grandfathers fought the world war, so they thought we shouldn't run. Soldiers don't shoot randomly, not carrying guns, they were not parking.

My father had a very big compound, so people were running there to stay. The soldiers came and killed five people in my house. My immediate older brother, the one following him, and one of my cousins, the others were friends.

Joseph Nwagwu

Someone came looking for my brother-in-law and said that the Federal troops have come, and if they were burning houses, he told them no Biafran troops were there — the houses would be burnt, everything burnt. My husband and brother, and about 400 people who were following them were shot in front of the police station. We were in fear they were going to rape and everything.

Patience Okunribido

Soldiers said everybody should go to the old police station. My father and I thought it was routine, and we are not afraid. There was a huge crowd, and they would come around and call names. They wanted to kill. Then they just came from the crowd and go to the back and you hear.

police station on Nnebisi Road, the Opebeor primary school football field, or the riverbank, where they were executed. The streets were littered with corpses. Many fled into the bush, or tried to cross to the East.



Nigerian Federal troops blew up the bridge across the Niger River, October 1967. The Times, 26th October, 1967

They broke through the front door. Big men, black, tall, armed to the teeth. The bullets of their guns were just pointed on our shoulders, our heads. They kept on moving from room to room.

Joseph Nwagwu

My father had a very big compound, so people were running there to stay. The soldiers came and killed five people in my house. My immediate older brother, the one following him, and one of my cousins, the others were friends.

Patience Okunribido

Someone came looking for my brother-in-law and said that the Federal troops have come, and if they were burning houses, he told them no Biafran troops were there — the houses would be burnt, everything burnt. My husband and brother, and about 400 people who were following them were shot in front of the police station. We were in fear they were going to rape and everything.

Patience Okunribido

Soldiers said everybody should go to the old police station. My father and I thought it was routine, and we are not afraid. There was a huge crowd, and they would come around and call names. They wanted to kill. Then they just came from the crowd and go to the back and you hear.

Some people broke loose and tried to run away. My older brother was holding me by the hand. They dragged him away, he released me and pushed me further into the crowd. They started firing, and they shot my brother at the back, and he fell down. The rest of us who could not run fell on top of each other, and they continued shooting and shooting and shooting.

My father

There was pandemonium and they started running and shouting. When I saw the killing going on, I screamed away and ran to my village, shouting that everybody should get back — people are being killed where they're dancing.

Peter Okeke

When they shot at our leader, every other person collapsed on the ground and they fired into everybody. Those of us who were hiding, our vital parts were obscured. I was shot about seven times, but survived.

Peter Okoro Okoro

I lost count of times I stood up. My body was covered with blood, but I knew that I was safe. My father was lying not too far from me, his eyes were open, but he was dead.

My father

our uncles, nobody to help...

Menden Madiemazi

Our house was burnt down. Everything. In fact, you know the boys they put rice and beans, that is what we had, because there was no clothes, nothing for us to hide our nakedness. We suffered. A lot of children were kidnapped, people were dying just like that. We are not, thank God.

Felicia Nwankwu

It was devastating to the community, more on the women, because there were so many without husbands, without bread of livelihood.

Francis Nwagwu

Some women lost all their sons, plus husband. Some went crazy, they just couldn't bear it.

Chantel Igboke

And as soldiers remained in Asaba, unable to cross the bridge into Biafra, the threat of rape was ever present.



A woman picks through discarded belongings left by fleeing soldiers on a hill near the lost.

every young man wanted women.

As soon as I turned around to the back of present day Delta Line, I saw a heap of dead bodies. I could recognize some of them, including one of my uncles. Part of his face was removed by a bullet, but I could recognize him, because he was a tall, huge man.

Felicia Nwankwu

In the evening hours of the 7th, Mum had to go look for her corpses at the mass place where they were shot. She took them in a wheelbarrow, pushed them to the family house, where they were buried. I never saw their bodies.

Joseph Nwagwu, describes the life of his brothers, ages 12 and 17

They didn't allow us near the corpses. But one of the returned soldiers, who knew my father as a teacher, was able to help us. My sister and one father, we managed to carry him. We couldn't give him a befitting burial because we were lucky, because the other two who were with him, no relatives were there. We got him buried in his own compound. That gave us some joy, that we knew where he was interred.

Martina Okeke

We were the youths of the village, we knew it was our duty at that time to bury the dead. 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.

Patience Okunribido

My dad was among those that buried the dead. He left the house with a shovel, and he took this shovel and put



Source: <https://www.asabamemorial.org/memorial-exhibit> Accessed 26th August, 2025²⁶

