

Elizabeth S. Bird and Fraser M. Ottanelli. *The Asaba Massacre: Trauma, Memory, and the Nigerian Civil War*. Cambridge UP, 2017. Pp. xvii, 239. Paperback. US\$29.99.

The Asaba Massacre: Trauma, Memory, and the Nigerian Civil War is a study focused on a silenced national history discounted by everyone but the victims. Returning to the festering effects of a massacre in the small town of Asaba during the Nigerian Civil War (which lasted from 6 July 1967 until 15 January 1970), Elizabeth S. Bird and Fraser M. Ottanelli demonstrate how scholarly collaboration and community engagement can form, inform, and then reform public memory to create an intelligible understanding of a nation's troubled history while enabling possibilities of reconciliation (xvii). Employing field research, which involved conducting interviews with witnesses and survivors and finding existing archival materials, the authors sprinkle theoretical frameworks from trauma and memory scholars like Veena Das, Susannah Radstone, and Herbert Hirsch, among several others, into their work. The lack of dependence on existing theory does not undermine this work; the project aims to foreground the survivors' interviews. In addition, in recreating and memorializing an "absent event,"¹ the authors demonstrate the value they place on oral history for negotiating disagreements about public memory.

In their commitment to root their research in the discipline of anthropology, Bird and Ottanelli show the potential for academia and the community to reimagine memorialization and memory. Furthermore, their reconstruction of this event also demonstrates that power dynamics, especially the ownership and control of the media, influence the construction of public memory. It is important to mention that their position interrogates the causes, consequences, and crisis of identity that follows the absence of collective memory. Of interest is how the authors' research not only connects them to the stories of the survivors but also involves them in the enactment of different forms of memorialization that seek to offer restorative justice to the indigenes of Asaba.

In their collaboration with the town, the authors have also created a commemorative website documenting the construction of a cenotaph that lists the names of the dead and participated in a day of remembrance by presenting “a museum-styled exhibit” that aims to “address the [event’s] complexities and ambiguities as well as explore the possibilities for reconciliation” (205). The authors are particularly successful in introducing the reader to the intimate pain of a disregarded communal loss, as they connect interviews into a narrative that moves beyond an account of the community where individuals’ inadequacies are attributed to the traumatic event in their past. Commendable is Bird and Ottanelli’s acknowledgment that they are intervening as outsiders, and that they want to “assemble and present an accurate account of the atrocities in Asaba” (160) and construct a platform for building a “transitional justice” (201). At the center of this pursuit is their argument that the massacre prolonged and complicated the war.

Trauma, memory, and memorialization require a dynamic use of language that does not get lost in a maze of abstractions. Bird and Ottanelli succeed in communicating a distilled narrative of the event that captures their own core arguments, which examine the veracity of the story of the Asaba massacre in the civil war narrative. The authors then use the outcome of their interrogation to further position their work as a community-based collaboration on a memorialization process that offers a form of justice for the Asaba community. In their book, Bird and Ottanelli examine problems from the war, like rape, the influence of foreign powers, and the complications that arise from turning the memory of a traumatic event into a tactic for amplifying pity for the victims. However, despite their argument that oral history may be a way to rectify how traumatic memory constructs identity because it projects the voice of the survivors and alters that of the all-knowing historian, they fail to adequately explore how this might be possible. The book’s approach is practical and specific to the event, which would make a replication of some of the processes used here for the reconciliation with the past difficult to apply in other cases.

Investigating the politics of memory alongside the contestation of traumatic experience and the major participants in it, Bird and Ottanelli offer insight into the unconscious source of collective suffering that followed the Asaba massacre. Although the massacre was “unlike anything that had happened to this point” (72), it proved to be a unique and organized killing led by prejudice and hatred that would influence how the people of Asaba saw themselves. By examining this event, the book raises one of the central questions in memory studies—the relationship between identity and memory. By establishing the weight of the Asaba massacre on the collective memory

and culture of the region, Bird and Ottanelli shift focus from literary representations to the lived experience of trauma, the symptomatic results of the war, and the subject of memory and memorialization. The authors bring together communal and individual experiences to function beyond the mere acknowledgement of the violent acts against the community, or the survivors' attempt to live with their experiences. Bird and Ottanelli offer and interpret communal and individual experiences into testimonies, which in turn affirm the survivors as witnesses to a traumatic event. In doing so, they give an immediate and visceral snapshot of the hitherto unspeakable emotional valences that silenced the memory of the traumatic event among the people. The survivors' narratives show that the Asaba community today recognizes its burden of honoring the memory of an assault on its collective peace while also acknowledging its complicated identity in the Nigerian nation.

Significantly, the authors understand the sensitivity involved when foreigners examine African history. As they mention, certain privileges of access may allow a closer study of the subjects, but even if Nigerian scholars took up this work, they would themselves likely disagree over how to interpret the narratives of the event. Memory is always subject to debate. This book is indeed an outsider's perspective, which aims to supplement the testimonies of those who survived with the support of archives—memory captured as it is told and found. One observation is that the authors' tone conveys a sense of intimacy with the Asaba massacre, giving the impression of an emotional investment that might have motivated the practicality of the research methodology. Nevertheless, this tone is appropriate because its effort is to turn memory work into a community-based memorialization project, and the authors' background is in anthropology. Regardless, this book is a valuable foundation for those who want to extend the scholarship on witnessing, identity formation, memory, and trauma in the Nigeria civil war beyond abstract theorization.

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Works Cited

LaCapra, Dominick. "Trauma, Absence, Loss." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 25, no. 4, 1999, pp. 696–727. *JSTOR*.

Note

- 1 I create the term "absent event" here to echo LaCapra's explanation of "absence" as transhistorical in his essay "Trauma, Absence and Loss." In the essay, LaCapra argues that absence cannot be perceived as in the past, present, or future because it continues to haunt in the present.