Nigeria, at 154 million, is the most populous nation in Africa and was one of the first countries on that continent to be granted independence from European rule. In the years following World War Two until the independence of October 1960, a program of Nigerianization was instituted allowing for a Western-educated Nigerian elite to take positions in the civil service. Thus, a native ruling class steeped in the ideology of a united Nigeria was ready to govern the new country. Many problems awaited this new ruling class however. Chief amongst those was what form the new country would take.

Owing to the fact that Nigeria is a vast nation with a much varied geography, polity, culture, and economy, founding fathers like Benjamin “Zik” Azikiwe, the country’s first governor general, were aware that allowances had to be made to accommodate the country’s many interests and yet they also saw the need to have a strong central government in place. The result was the creation of a federal government in Lagos and houses of assembly for the three regions present; Northern, Eastern, and Western. A Federal Territory of Lagos was also formed that was directly administered by the central government. In 1963, Mid-West Region was carved from the Western Region.

There are three principal ethnic groups in Nigeria in addition to hundreds of smaller ones. Yoruba people are a majority in the West and were represented by the Action Group party (AG) during the First Republic. The North has a Hausa majority populace that preferred the Northern People’s Congress (NPC) and the East was Igbo dominated by way of leadership provided by the National Convention of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC).

Nigeria’s first republic came to an end in January 1966 through a military coup. All three regional premiers were arrested. The Northern and Western Premiers and the federal Prime Minister were killed as well as many northern military officers. Major General John Aguiyi-Ironsi, commanding officer of the Nigerian army, assumed control of the Federal Military Government (FMG). Ironsi outlawed political parties and placed military governors in each of the regions. Also, a unitary government replaced the now abolished federal government.

Whether by coincidence or by design, the majority of victims of the January 1966 coup were northerners and so in July of 1966 Northern military officers launched a counter-coup. Ironsi was killed and Lieutenant Yakubu “Jack” Gowon was chosen to take his place. Meanwhile in the north, resentment towards what was seen as an Igbo-contrived coup in January of that year led to massacres against Igbo people that led to the deaths of tens of thousands. An exodus of Igbos to the south and east thus ensued during late 1966 and early 1967.
Colonel Chukwuemeka Ojukwu, the military governor of the Eastern Region appointed by Gowon, declared independence for the east on May 30, 1967 after failed talks with the FMG. Ojukwu claimed that since Gowon was not the most senior officer in the army, his rule was not legitimate. Ojukwu also stated that as a result of the pogroms against Igbos elsewhere, they were not safe outside of the east. Colonel Ojukwu called on Igbo people to return home and for northerners in the newly created Biafra to leave for their own safety.

After two and a half years of war, the Army of Nigeria defeated that of the Republic of Biafra. Over one million lost their lives in that war, most of those from the east by way of starvation. Perhaps the most atrocious part of the Nigerian Civil War occurred during the recapture of the strategically important town of Asaba, located on the western bank of the River Niger and opposite of the Biafran capital of Onitsha. It is the massacre of many of the town’s Igbo inhabitants that will be the focus the following interviews as part of the Asaba Memorial Project. Below are some of the people, places, groups, and events that will be mentioned in the oral histories related to this project.

**Notable Persons**

**Aguiyi-Ironsi, Major General Johnson (1924-66)**
Major General Ironsi became Nigeria’s first military head of state after the coup of January 15, 1966 and at the same time was appointed General Officer Commanding the Nigerian Army. He was killed during the counter-coup enacted in June of that year.

**Asiodu, Chief Philip Chikwuedo (1934-)**
Chief Asiodu’s career began in Nigeria’s Foreign Service followed by employment in the British High Commission for Australia and then New Zealand. He was part of the British Mission to the United Nations at independence (1960), at which time his role changed to that of a member of the Nigerian Mission. Later, he was Permanent Secretary for ministries including Ministry of Health (1965-'66), Ministry of Industries (1966-'71), and Ministry of Mines and Power (1971-'75)

**Azikiwe, Benjamin Nnamdi “Zik” (1904-96)**
Benjamin Nnamdi Azikiwe was founder of the National Council of Nigeria Citizens (NCNC). Azikiwe became the first indigenous governor general of Nigeria in 1959 and its first ceremonial president in 1965. He was ousted from that position in the coup of January 15, 1966.

**Balewa, Alhaji Sir Abubakar Tafawa (1912-66)**
Balewa was named the first prime minister of what was then the Federation of Nigeria for 1957- '59. He was reappointed as prime minister from 1959-'66 and was killed during the coup of January 15, 1966.
Bello, Sir Ahmadu, the *Sardauna of Sokoto* (1910-66)
Bello was a founding member of the Northern People’s Congress (NPC) and became the premier of the Northern Region in 1954-‘66. He was killed in the coup of January 15, 1966.

Gowon, General Yakubu (1934-)
General Gowon served as chief of staff of the Nigerian army under Aguiyi-Ironsi and as Nigerian head of state from June 29, 1966 until June 29, 1975.

Mohammed, General Murtala Ramat (1938-76)
Mohammed was a participant in the July 29, 1966 coup and served as a field commander in the civil war. He and his forces captured Asaba and the Biafran capital of Onitsha for the Federal Military Government. Mohammed served as head of state and commander-in-chief for the armed forces after the July 29, 1974 coup. He was assassinated on February 13, 1976.

Nzeogwu, Major Patrick Chukwuma Kaduna (1937-67)
Major Nzeogwu is credited the leader of the first military coup of January 15, 1966. He was imprisoned and then released just before the secession of the Eastern Region as the sovereign state of Biafra. He fought on the side of the Biafrans and died in battle on July 26, 1967.

Ojukwu, Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu (1933-)
Colonel Ojukwu was named the military governor of the Eastern Region after the coup of January 15, 1966. He refused to recognize the coup of July 29, 1966 and led the Eastern Region in secession from Nigeria as the sovereign state of Biafra. He was pardoned in 1982.

Okochi, Emmanuel “Emma” (1961-)

Okonkwo, Albert
Albert Okonkwo became administrator of the short-lived Republic of Benin, a republic declared by Biafrans occupying the Midwestern State during the civil war.

Taiwo, Colonel Ibrahim
Colonel Ibrahim Taiwo was an alleged 10/07/67 perpetrator and participant in the 1975 coup.

**Political parties (in order of inception)**

Northern People’s Congress (NPC)
Founded in 1943 as the Bauchi General Improvement Union and renamed as the Northern People’s Congress in 1949, the NPC was intended to be a safeguard of Northern unity and to protect against Southern “domination”. This organization was relatively conservative in nature and sought to work within the existing political structure. They sought for a decentralized government with regional autonomy.

**National Convention of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC)**
Founded in 1944 as the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons by then journalist Zik as a conglomeration of ethnic and social unions, the NCNC promoted pan-Nigerianism and self-governance. The party has its main base of support in the East. They advocated for a strong, central government in the years leading to independence from Great Brittan in 1960.

**Action Group (AG)**
Headed by Awolo, a Northerner, the AG was centered in the Western Region. They formed part of the NPC-NCNC coalition of the late 1950s but became the opposition party after the 1959 election.

**United Progressive Grand Alliance (UPGA)**
The NCNC, AG, and minority parties from the Northern Region formed the UPGA to both remove the NPC from the federal government and to reintroduce the AG as the dominant party in the Western Region.

**Regions before May 27, 1967**
- Eastern
- Federal Capital Territory of Lagos
- Mid-West
- Northern
- Western

**States after May 27, 1967**
- Benue-Plateau
- East-Central
- Kano
- Lagos
- Mid-Western
- North-Central
- North-Eastern
- North-Western
- Rivers
- South-Eastern
West-Central
Western

Cities

Asaba
Scene of 1967 massacres and now capital of Rivers State, Asaba’s strategic location opposite of the Biafran capital of Onitsha across the River Niger made it a prime target for the Nigerian Army. The predominately Igbo population was the target of a massacre that left at least hundreds dead during October of 1967. Asaba comprises five quarters or “Ebos” namely Umuezei, Umuagu, Ugbomanta, Umuaji and Umuonaje. Within these Ebos are several sub-units or familiar villages.

Benin
This city was the capital of the former Mid-West State, capital of the short-lived Republic of Benin created by the Biafrans, and now capital of Edo State. Benin is the center of Nigeria’s rubber industry and is known for its institutions of higher learning.

Ibadan
Ibadan was the administrative center of the former Western State and is now the third largest city in Nigeria and the capital of Oyo State.

Ishiagu
This is a town near Asaba and is alleged to have mass graves dating from the civil war.

Jos
Capital of Benue Plateau State, later Plateau State, Jos is a major center of trade and is the location of large tin deposits.

Kaduna
Kaduna is the capital of Kaduna State in north-central Nigeria and is a major trading and transport hub. The city experienced Christian/Muslim rioting during February 2000 that left over 1,000 people dead.

Kano
Kano is a major city and capital of Kano State in northern Nigeria. It serves as a major trading hub and was the administrative center of northern Nigeria under British rule.

Lagos
Lagos was the capital of Nigeria at time of the Asaba massacre and is the most populous city in the country.
Ogbeosowa
Located in the greater Asaba environs, about ten minute’s walk from author Emma Okocha’s house. He names it as the biggest killing field during the 10/07/67 massacre.

Ogwashi-Uku
This town, just west Asaba, was first captured by the Biafran army early in the civil war and was then recaptured by Nigerian forces en route to Asaba.

Onitsha
Onitsha was the capital of the Republic of Biafra and is located on the eastern bank of the River Niger opposite of Asaba.

Opanam
Opanam is nine miles north of Asaba and was home to Major Patrick Nzeogwu, leader of the January 1966 coup.

Port Harcourt
Port Harcourt is the center of Nigeria’s oil industry and is the capital of Rivers State.

Sapele
This is a major port city currently in Delta State and was Biafran warfront location.

Sokoto
Sokoto was the capital of the former Northwestern State and is now the capital of Sokoto state in northwestern Nigeria.

Ughelli
Ughelli is currently in Delta State and was a Biafran warfront location.

Warri
Warri was in the former Midwestern State and is now in Delta State. Biafran forces captured it during Nigeria’s civil war. Warri is a major oil city and is known for its unique Pidgin English.

Places within Asaba

Asaba Capital Territory
This was an area app. 50m-wide area during colonial times.

Cable Point
Cable Point is a neighborhood Asaba and the scene of mass killings by Federal troops during the civil war.
Inland Town
Inland town is an ancient central neighborhood of Asaba.

Niger Bridge
Niger Bridge was the scene of fighting during the civil war and was blown up by the retreating Biafrans in order to keep Federal troops from advancing across the River Niger to the Biafran capital of Asaba of Onitsha.

St. Patrick’s College
This is a secondary school in Asaba and the scene of mass killings during the civil war.

Etc...

Asagba
An Asagba is a traditional king/ruler in Asaba. The position is rotary amongst the five quarters of Asaba.

Sardauna of Sokoto
The Sardauna of Sokoto is a spiritual leader of Muslim inhabitants in the north of Nigeria.

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