



They Died in Vain

Celestina Isichei-Isamah

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The horrors of the Nigerian Civil War in the late 1960s are dramatically retold in this personal account by Celestina Isichei-Isamah, who, as a college student, witnessed the brutal murder of family and countrymen.

Her political innocence turns to bewilderment as tensions rise at her Catholic college, and the people of Ibos return to their villages. She can't understand why classmates from other ethnic backgrounds have turned against her. Her dreams of graduating and becoming a teacher fade as the war approaches her hometown of Asaba. Her father naively and foolishly believes that his family will be safe in its compound. Isichei-Isamah and other women go into hiding to avoid being raped or brutalized by soldiers.

The family's failure to leave town results in the murder of Isichei-Isamah's beloved brother, Osi, which she witnesses; another brother, Emmanuel (known as Emma), is killed in a massacre of menfolk.

Isichei-Isamah and her sister-in-law risk their lives to learn the fate of Emma and the author's father. When they arrive at the site of the genocide, Isichei-Isamah is still trying to fathom what kind of people could be responsible for genocide. Then she sees a flock of vultures eating corpses. "The vultures must have feasted so much that they were too heavy to fly. I tried to cry, but I could not."

Isichei-Isamah finds the remains of her brother and other relatives. She desperately wants to bury both brothers, but was only able to bury Osi, with the help of an enemy soldier.

In one of the most gripping moments of her narrative, Isichei-Isamah recounts the terror of her wedding night. A firebomb is thrown at the building where the wedding party is staying, and a voice outside asks them to prove they are not enemies. Isichei-Isamah is afraid that her husband, Peter, like her brothers, will be killed, so she gathers her wedding dress and a bunch of wilted flowers in her arms and courageously goes outside to face the soldiers. "Experience convinced me that the soldiers only killed men," she writes. No one is shot, but the soldiers storm the house and eat leftover wedding food. It is the beginning of more trouble; neither side of the conflict can be trusted.

Isichei-Isamah, who eventually emigrates to London with her husband, believes that Nigeria has learned nothing from its civil war. "If the victims of the war were to rise from their graves and see the country as it is now, they would quickly dive back in," she laments. Her message is clear: Their deaths were in vain.

The book is charged with emotion, graphic descriptions, and the almost unbelievable ordeal of innocent bystanders in a senseless, brutal war. Isichei-Isamah eventually becomes a teacher in Nigeria, until political instability again forces her to flee her native land.

Her story is heart wrenching and chilling, yet inspirational as it takes readers beyond the headlines into the life of one young woman, who survived the horrors of her country's civil war with grace and courage.

LINDA SALISBURY (May 10, 2011)

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