

THE NIGERIA CIVIL WAR AND THE QUESTION OF GENOCIDE

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Abstract

The Nigeria Civil War (1967–1970), also known as the Biafran War, remains one of the most contested conflicts in African history, particularly regarding the question of genocide. This paper critically examines the claims and counterclaims of genocide against the Igbo ethnic group during the war, interrogating the legal, historical, and political dimensions of mass violence and humanitarian catastrophe. Drawing on archival sources, eyewitness accounts, and international legal frameworks, the study explores the extent to which the policies of the Nigerian government—such as economic blockades, mass killings, and forced starvation—align with the definition of genocide under the 1948 Genocide Convention. Additionally, it evaluates the role of global actors, including the United Nations, Western powers, and humanitarian organizations, in shaping narratives around the war. The paper argues that while the conflict exhibited clear elements of ethnic persecution and mass atrocities, the legal classification of genocide remains contentious due to political and diplomatic considerations. By engaging with both historical evidence and contemporary legal debates, this study contributes to broader discussions on post-colonial African conflicts, international justice, and the enduring legacies of the Biafran struggle.

Keywords: Nigeria Civil War, Biafra, genocide, mass atrocities, humanitarian crisis, post-colonial Africa.

INTRODUCTION

Background to the Study

The Nigeria Civil War, which raged from 1967 to 1970, remains one of the most significant and contentious events in the history of Nigeria and, indeed, Africa as a whole. This conflict, often referred to as the Biafran War, was rooted in a complex interplay of ethnic, political, and economic factors that culminated in a struggle for self-determination by the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria. As the war unfolded, it not only resulted in a staggering loss of life and widespread suffering but also raised profound questions regarding the nature of the violence perpetrated during this period. Central to these discussions is the contentious issue of genocide—a term that evokes strong emotions and carries significant legal and moral implications. This publication seeks to explore the multifaceted dimensions of the Nigeria Civil War through the lens of genocide, examining the actions and policies of the Nigerian state and the responses of various actors involved in the conflict. By analyzing historical accounts, survivor testimonies, and scholarly interpretations, we aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the events that transpired during this tumultuous period. Furthermore, we will investigate the implications of labeling the conflict as genocide, considering the impact this designation has on collective memory, reconciliation efforts, and international responses to similar crises. In doing so, this publication will contribute to the ongoing discourse surrounding the Nigeria Civil War, offering insights that are not only relevant to historians and political scientists but also to policymakers and human rights advocates. As we delve into the complexities of this conflict, we hope to shed light on the lessons learned and the enduring legacies that continue to shape Nigeria's socio-political landscape today.

Conceptualizing Genocide

How and why does genocide occur? According to Mann, there are four sources of power that need to be mobilized: ideological power (referring to values, norms, myths and imagination), economic power (there is an economic interest in the annihilation, such as land and mineral resources, military power (careers in violence) and political power (centralized territorial regulation of social life and most importantly rival claims to political sovereignty).

That the subject of Biafra and genocide is in the air is also indicated by the publication of Chinua Achebe's blend of memoir and history, *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra*, a few months before he died in March 2013, two years after the death of the wartime Biafran leader, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu. The famous novelist had worked for the Biafran cause during the war, and the genocide issue appears throughout the book. Commenting on Achebe's views, another famous Nigerian Author, Wole Soyinka, whose imprisonment during the war by the Federal Military Government (FMG) is recorded in his book, *The Man Died* (1971), concurred that Biafrans had indeed been victims of genocide even though he did not support Biafran secession¹.

Note that throughout the hostilities, federal aircraft shelled towns and other targets on Biafran territory, frequently inflicting numerous civilian casualties. The population in the war zone was particularly threatened in moments of instability produced by military advances and setbacks. In August 1967, Biafran forces launched a major offensive, crossed the Niger and marched through the Midwestern State towards Lagos. But, failing to capitalize on the momentum, the Biafrans came to a halt 100 km east of the capital and then withdrew after federal forces retaliated. Violence against civilians broke out in border towns that experienced double occupation. Ethnic minorities in Asaba, for example, considered themselves relatives of the Igbos were treated as sympathizers of the ‘rebels’; they became victims of massacres and rape by federal soldiers. As Elizabeth Bird and Fraser Ottanelli show in this volume, the memory of the Asaba massacres is still alive although the Nigerian state has repressed publication of the terrible events and its commemoration »; for many in Asaba, the memory of the massacre remains painful and stands in the way of interethnic reconciliation².

In his book, *The Biafra Story*, by Fredrick Forsyth, which sold out in weeks, the staunchly pro-Biafran journalist and later author of bestselling crime novels explained that Britain was culpable for supporting Nigeria’s genocidal persecution of the Biafrans that resembled the treatment of the Jews in World War II. Auberon Waugh, argued that the ‘mass starvation to death of innocent civilians’ was ‘the most hideous crime against humanity in which England has ever been involved.

THEOREICAL FRAMEWORK

When analyzing the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970) and the question of genocide, two theoretical frameworks that align with this research topic are the “Just War Theory” and “Genocide Studies Theory”.

Just War Theory

Just War Theory provides a moral and legal framework for evaluating whether war is justifiable and how it should be conducted. This theory can be applied to the Nigerian Civil War to assess whether the actions of the Nigerian government and Biafran forces adhered to ethical and legal wartime principles.

- **Jus ad bellum (Justice before war):** This aspect of the theory examines whether the Nigerian government’s military action against Biafra was justified. The Nigerian government argued that it was preserving national unity, while Biafra claimed self-determination.
- **Jus in bello (Justice during war):** This aspect evaluates whether the war was conducted ethically, particularly regarding civilian casualties and war crimes. Reports of mass starvation due to the blockade of Biafra and targeted killings raise questions about whether the Nigerian government’s actions constituted genocide or were legitimate war tactics.

Genocide Studies Theory

Genocide Studies Theory explores the conditions, motivations, and legal definitions of genocide. It helps analyze whether the Nigerian government’s actions, particularly the blockade that led to mass starvation, qualify as genocide under international law.

- **The UN Genocide Convention (1948):** Defines genocide as acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group. Some scholars argue that the Nigerian government’s blockade and military actions targeted the Igbo ethnic group, making it an act of genocide, while others contend that it was a consequence of war rather than a deliberate extermination.
- **Structural and Intent-Based Analysis:** This framework differentiates between acts of war and genocide by analyzing whether there was a systematic intent to exterminate the Igbo people or if the mass deaths were an unintended consequence of war strategies³.

By applying these two frameworks, one can critically assess the moral, legal, and historical debates surrounding the Nigerian Civil War and whether it involved genocide.

The Asaba Massacre

In October 1967, a few months into the Nigerian civil war, federal troops entered Asaba, a small town on the west bank of the River Niger, in pursuit of the retreating Biafran army. Over the next few days, at least a thousand civilians were killed, and the town was left in ruins. News of the atrocities was suppressed by the federal government and, consequently, subsequent histories of the war barely mention the massacre⁴.

In an earlier article, the authors, Bird and Otanelli, drawing on three years of interviews with survivors and witnesses of the killings, pillaging and rapes, reconstructed the history of the Asaba massacre, using their accounts and available archival sources. In so doing, they describe the details of the events that unfolded over a few weeks, while suggesting longer-term consequences. The scholars drew on additional interviews and sources, focusing on the short- and long-term impact of the Asaba killings, providing new insight into the nature of the war as well as into the legacy of ethnic suspicion that continues to reverberate in Nigeria today⁵.

Before the war, Asaba was a quiet town known mostly for high levels of education; estimates of its population in 1967 vary from 5,000 to 30,000. Although linguistically Igbo, Asabans consider themselves distinct from their cousins in the east, often claiming the identity ‘Anioma, and their region officially favoured the government’s idea of ‘One Nigeria’. The Biafran troops had passed through Asaba without incident; however,

as federal troops advanced, reports were reaching the townspeople of killings of Igbo by other ethnic groups in the midwest, and people were anxious. Many in Asaba undoubtedly held sympathy for Biafra and distrusted the government, justifiably believing that it had condoned previous atrocities against the Igbo; some, including the Asagba (Traditional Ruler of Asaba), fled to the east or elsewhere.³² Nevertheless, Asaba's population also included many current and retired high-ranking civil servants, who had a strong allegiance to a unified Nigeria. They believed in the professionalism of the country's armed forces and some were no doubt aware of General Gowon's 'operational code of conduct' which was supposed to guide the proper treatment of civilians by the military. Some of those civil servants had fled back to Asaba when non-Igbo civilians took the opportunity to slaughter many Igbos in midwest cities like Benin and Sapele after these cities were retaken by federal troops. In spite of witnessing that horror, many still believed that government troops would not attack civilians. As interviewee Gertrude Ogunkeye notes⁶:

The Sunday before the horrible events of October, at Mass, in the church, the Reverend Father had said people were to stay calm and remain in their houses and just stock food and water because if there's going to be a war, it might take a while for things to calm down ... wait for the war to pass through Asaba and then your life can continue as normal.

Troops entered Asaba on 5 October; citizens were shocked when soldiers began going from house to house looting, demanding money and rounding up boys and men accused of being Biafran sympathizers, then shooting them on the spot or taking them in groups to execute elsewhere. In some cases, soldiers were seeking specific individuals, who were executed, while others report indiscriminate group killings, and a horrific episode when youths were lined up, ordered to dig a grave, stand in it and be shot. Several hundreds of people seem to have died in small groups all over the town. On 6 October, in an attempt to end the violence, Elders and traditional leaders met to plan a show of support for the government, in which money and gifts would be presented to the commander of the Nigeria troop.³⁸ This strategy had been used in other midwest towns. The next morning, hundreds (but some witness estimates, thousands) of men, women and children assembled, with elders in front, singing, dancing and chanting 'One Nigeria', they moved up the main street, picking up many more on the way. As the crowd reached a major junction, troops removed women and small children and began channeling men and boys of around twelve years and above on to the square at Ogbe-Osowa, a village in one of Asaba's quarters. Machine guns were revealed and shooting began. Witnesses report panic as the assembled hundreds were mowed down, starting with elders at the front. Some managed to break loose and run into the bush, while others were shielded by the bodies of the dead and survived. Exactly how many died in this incident is unclear; between 500 and 800 seems likely⁷. Sporadic shooting continued for hours, until darkness caused the soldiers to disperse. Some families were able to retrieve bodies for traditional burial in their compounds, but with surviving people fleeing, many more went unclaimed and were later buried in mass graves or thrown into the Niger. Witnesses report seeing piles of bodies in the street before it was considered safe to begin burial.

After 7 October, 1967, the worst of the killings stopped, although federal soldiers remained barracked in Asaba for many months, and acts of violence continued. By the second week of October many civilians had found refuge in nearby bush or small towns in the area; others with family elsewhere had fled to Lagos or crossed the Niger into Biafra, not to return until the war ended in 1970. The once thriving town was largely deserted, with most houses burned and everything of value stolen. The records of relief organizations, several of which came into the area in the months following and at the war's end, indicated the exceptional and long-lasting nature of Asaba's suffering, one noting in 1969: 'UNICEF reports the midwestern region normalized, except for Asaba'. 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 Nwandu describes her return to Asaba after a few weeks in the bush:

We have no home to enter. Our house was burnt down. Everything.
In fact, you know, the bags they put rice and beans, that is what we
tied, because there was no clothes, there was nothing for us to hide our
nakedness.

The family lived as refugees in their own community:

We suffered ... later we saw some Christian organizations,
they give us salt ... you just put your finger in the salt like this
(swirls finger) and then put it in your soup so you can get
that taste. A lot of children suffered from kwashiorkor, people
were dying just like that. We ate rat, lizard, all these things⁸.

More than five decades since the events of 1967–68, the trauma is still felt, leaving a pervasive sense of unresolved grievance. At one level this is personal—surviving individuals still mourn the loss of so many loved

ones. At another level, there is anger that this trauma has gone so long unrecognized. Many interviewees told us they rarely spoke of the massacres outside their families, because they would not be believed:

"I kept it all buried in my heart. When I went to school in Lagos and the war had ended ... I was talking about the civil war with a group of Yoruba classmates, and I told the story. One of them, whose father was a magistrate, looked me in the eyes and said I was a liar, that it could never have happened. I took a knife, and I almost killed him. I was going to be expelled from my school because his mother ... thought the principal brought in some ex-Biafran soldiers to kill their children Fortunately for me, the principal was a Catholic reverend father, and he happened to have known a little bit about what happened. So, he managed to solve the problem"¹⁰

Acceptably, it is important to state categorically that the Asaba experience which was clearly an act of genocide is only one among many stories of suffering left by the civil war. However, it presents singular characteristics that had a major and unique impact not only on the progression of the war but also on the deeply entrenched ethnic hostility that continues to linger today. Asaba, while suffering one of the worst systematic killings and genocide of civilians by federal troops, was in the Midwest region, which had not joined secessionist Biafra. Indeed, all those who died in the massacre of October 7, were killed while pledging support for 'One Nigeria' and condemning secession¹¹.

The Arguments

Herbert Ekwe, a professor of History and International Studies and an expert in genocide studies has alluded that supporters of Biafran position in the war point not only to the outrageous war time rhetoric of the Nigerian side but to the actual series of atrocities and real crimes against humanity that occurred on the battlefield and as a result of the food blockade policy of the federal government of Nigeria. He asserted that:

"The international Committee in the investigation of crimes of genocide carried out exhaustive investigation of the evidence, interviewing 1,082 people representing all actors in the dispute (the two sides of the civil war and international collaborators). After a thorough painstaking research, the Committee concludes, through its Investigator (Dr Mensah of Ghana) 'Finally, I am of the opinion that in many of the cases cited to me, hatred of the Biafran (mainly Igbos) and a wish to exterminate them was foremost motivational factor'¹².

Dan Jacobs in his well-researched publication titled *The Brutality of Nations* made reference to a publication in the editorial of the *Washington Post* on the war on July, 1969;

"One word now defines the policy of the Nigerian military government towards secessionist Biafra: Genocide. It is ugly and extreme, but it is the only word which fits Nigeria's decision to stop the International Committee of the Red Cross, and other relief agencies from flying food to Biafra."¹³¹⁴

The lamentations of Pope Paul V was:

"The war seems to be reaching its conclusion, with the terror of possible reprisals and massacres against defenseless people worn out by deprivations, by hunger and by the loss of all they possess. The news this morning is very alarming.... One fear torment public opinion. The fear that the victory of arms may carry with it the killing of numberless people. There are those who fear about a kind of genocide".

The distinguished American historian, social critic and politician in his contribution to the dire situation of the Biafrans quoted the American President Richard Nixon in his speech on September 10, 1968:

"Until now efforts to relieve the Biafran people have been thwarted by the desire of the central government of Nigeria to pursue total and unconditional victory and by the fear of the Ibo people that surrender means wholesome atrocities and genocide. But genocide is what is taking place now – and starvation is the grim reaper. This is not the time to stand on ceremony, or to go through channels or to observe the diplomatic niceties. The destruction of an entire people is an immoral objective even in the most moral of wars. It can never be justified: it can never be condoned". Some parliamentarians from Canada had alluded to the fact that whoever or anybody who say there is no evidence of genocide is either in the pay of Britain or being a deliberate fool. This was said following a visit to the war-torn region¹⁵.

Genocide in Biafra: Fact or Fiction?

On November 9, 1968, the International Observer Team under the leadership of General W.A. Miliroy of Canada visited Asaba to verify allegations of genocide against the people. When this observer team interviewed Rev. Fr. Osia, he told them: 'A year ago my people were massacred. I don't know whether you call it genocide or atrocity.' Fr. Osia's words attracted public attention in Nigeria. His priest colleague who was Chaplain in the Nigeria Army, Col. Pedro Martins, contacted him and cautioned him to 'learn to be diplomatic, for your remark was not well taken by General Gowon'.

While some are of the view that starvation was the most devastating means of genocide against the people of Biafra, Professor Chika Anyasodo of the Centre of Historical Analysis, Rutgers, the State University of New

Jersey, Brunswick reckons that air bombardment was the most dreadful. He cited one of the scenes he personally witnessed:

“There was this amorphous Nigerian bomber aircraft with a white pilot which comfortably flew very low on Afo-Umuohiagu market; that was in 1969. In this raid more than 3,000 lives were destroyed, about 90 per cent of them were women who went to the market to find some food for their children. They were mostly women because all the able-bodied men were in the war front. I supervised the mass burial of the victims of this heavy bombardment as Captain commanding the Engineering Squadron. I gave the order that the caterpillar assigned to erect obstacles along Aba-Owerri road be used first to bury these dead bodies. The sight was too awful for words.”

In their publication in the New York Times of July 10, 1969, Americans for Biafran Relief (ABR) alerted the American people and the world about the unprecedented atrocity taking place in Africa, the Biafra genocide¹⁶:

“The war in Biafra has brought out a ‘sophisticated’ aspect of human nature that must make God sick. Horror, accompanied by good manners, is acceptable behavior. To use the gas ovens or the Hbomb to kill 1½ million women and children would be unthinkable. The word ‘Blockade’ makes it all right. Starvation is approved military strategy ... That no one has called it ‘the final solution’ and that the gas oven isn’t needed has somehow made all this acceptable to the world ... This noble war has killed more children than soldiers.”¹⁷

Other eye witnesses put the number that died of starvation in Biafra during the war at more than two million people, 70 percent of them children under the age of five. If claims of genocide against the people of Biafra were mere propaganda, what other convincing evidence of Biafra genocide was more eloquent than life pictures of millions of children, young people and women being starved to death? Is it not true that starvation is a cheap tool of genocide? What is a more convincing evidence of genocide than market places, hospitals and churches being regularly decimated by bombs? If repeated bombings of targets of no military significance such as marketplaces, hospitals, schools, and churches causing thousands of civilian deaths are not genocide, then what is genocide?

It must be noted and rightfully too that on the issue of genocide, international community seems to operate on different mathematical calculations. For example, while a British Government may consider as genocide the massacre of a few hundred of English people, that figure may rise to a few thousand in relation to other European nations and a few million for Asian and African nations. This calculation may change when the government of Britain wants a regime change in Asia or Africa. In such a situation an Asian or African leader who kills about 500 people from an ethnic group may be accused of committing genocide against the group. In modern history, the British Government has had a rare opportunity to put the world on a righteous course, the moral trajectory, where morality was the over-riding factor, but it has chosen instead, the economic consideration and has thus entrenched a man-eat-man culture in international relations¹⁸.

Professor Herbert Ekwe-Ekwe in a paper presents in a conference in Buenos Aires, Argentina titled “Igbo Genocide and its Aftermath: The Tragedy of Africa’s unlearned Lessons” is enamored that David Cameron, a onetime Prime Minister of United Kingdom supports and respects the rights of Scots to exercise their right to self-determination but wonders why Harold Wilson, the UK Prime Minister during the Nigerian civil war would not allow the Igbo or people of the Eastern region of Nigeria to exercise “their right to independence from the Nigeria-union ... when this Nigeria-union unleashed the genocide against them with the active participation of key constituent nations (in the union) such as the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba and Kanuri”. Instead, Harold Wilson was reported to have told Clyde Ferguson (United States State Department Special Coordinator for Relief to Biafra, US-SDSCR) that he “would accept half a million dead Biafrans if that was what it took’ the Nigeria-union to destroy the Igbo resistance to the genocide”.⁵³ Against this background, it is most unlikely that the British Government will ever accept the genocide in Biafra despite what it has in its archives and overwhelming genocidal evidence both in Nigeria and other parts of the world¹⁹.

The facts speak for themselves especially in the politics of winner takes all. The question is why is the Jewish Holocaust or genocide so well-known and popular today? No individual will deny that genocide was committed against the Jewish people but if Hitler had won the war, do we think the Jewish Holocaust would be remembered as it is today? The point being made is that those who win a war, as the British and Nigerian Governments did in the case of Biafra, do not criminalize themselves, rather they criminalize the acts of those they fought against. In his very erudite publication in 2011, Joshua Arinze averred:

“Because Britain and her allies won the war, they were in the position to criminalize the acts of anyone who fought against them during the war. They were in a position to decide that Hitler’s attempt to wipe out the Jews was an act of genocide and anyone who participated in that genocide was to be prosecuted as a war criminal²⁰. They were in a position to make such rule because they controlled the gold. Had they lost that war to Hitler, do you think we would be talking about the holocaust today? I think not”⁵⁴Infact, the Nigerian civil war was not

only an example of biological, but also cultural, genocide, aiming not only at the physical extinction of Biafra, but as well the collapse of the Igbo universe, because of the cultural possibilities of the Igbo as a people. Luckily, the Igbo people are well and alive today, striving throughout the world, and as resiliently as ever pursuing their careers, cherishing and grooming their language and their culture—45 years after Biafra²¹.

Genocide in Biafra

Speech by Mr. Maxwell Cohen, Lawyer, Member of the International Law Committee of the American Bar Association; Advisor to the Biafran Government on the United Nations Genocide Convention: - "Deliberately inflicting on the group, the conditions of life calculated to bring about physical destruction in whole or in part." Now, if you were creating a condition which makes it impossible for a national group to see its people fed so that 6,000, possibly 12,000, die daily, and if this is a deliberate policy, then this is obviously a violation of the International Code, which we call Genocide²². When you make it impossible for people to eat, they die. If they survive and they are young, the effect of malnutrition can create a mental impairment so you are in effect creating a generation of idiots. The feeding of infants may provide them with some degree of physical satisfaction now, but these are children who have seen their parents destroyed by bombs, have seen death and starvation and have been subjected to starvation themselves. Any pediatrician, any authority on welfare will tell you that the great consequence of malnutrition is an impairment of the reasoning and mental organic functioning. So when this confounded commission omits any reference to starvation and then blandly assures the world that there is no genocide, are they not misleading, are they not falsifying information²³?

Be that as it may, the world remembers Rwanda's genocide, yet before Rwanda's there was Biafra genocide. In a letter written in 1969 by nine Professors at the State University of New York at Buffalo and addressed to four US Senators, these Professors, confounded by the gratuitous human brutality taking place in Biafra, implored for action to "avert the worst crime against humanity since World War II, and that was the true description of Biafra; 'the worst crime against humanity since World War II' and yet Biafra Genocide is not found in the International Record of world genocides. This speaks volumes about the hypocrisy which characterizes international relations and politics²⁴.

CONCLUSION

The Nigerian Civil War remains a subject of significant debate regarding the application of genocide in historical and legal terms. While the conflict undeniably led to large-scale atrocities, whether these actions meet the legal threshold for genocide depends on interpretations of intent and accountability. Just War Theory highlights the moral and ethical violations of the conflict, while Genocide Studies Theory raises critical legal questions about state responsibility and the intent to destroy a specific group. The war's legacy continues to shape discussions on justice, reconciliation, and historical memory in Nigeria and beyond. The unresolved questions surrounding the war and its consequences underscore the importance of acknowledging historical injustices and fostering national healing²⁵. But note, The Biafran genocide wasn't just a war — it was a humanitarian catastrophe, a political powder keg, and a historical turning point. Its devastation came not just from bullets, but from the slow, agonizing deaths caused by hunger, and the long-lasting trauma it etched into a generation.

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<http://www.asabamemorial.org/data/ohanaeze-petition.pdf>. Ohanaeze Ndigbo, a Pan-Igbo rights group, presented this 'Ohanaeze petition' to the Human Rights Violations Investigation Commission (known as the Oputa Panel). In subsequent endnotes, 'Testimony'

14. Uchendu, Women and conflict, p. 76, notes that several midwest communities had staged formal shows of support for 'One Nigeria', hoping to avoid reprisals.
15. Interviewees present at the parade offered consistent accounts; for details of the event as it unfolded based on their testimony, see Bird and Ottanelli, 'The history and legacy'. Another eye-witness account is provided in Celestina Isichei- Isamah's self-published book, They died in vain (Seattle: Create Space Independent Publishing Platform, 2011).
16. No precise casualty count has been established. In 1981, the Asaba Development Council compiled a list of 373 dead, acknowledging many more not included. Eye-witness estimates range from 500 to over 1,000. In 1968, Legum noted 700 dead (see note 67). In October 1968, David Scanlon of Quaker Relief Services reported that 759 men and boys had been massacred in Asaba after 'the recapture of the city' the previous year (Report to American Friends Service Committee, Philadelphia, 3 October 1968, consulted in Archives of AFSC). Both these reports rely on second-hand accounts.
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