

Secessionism in Nigeria

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I.

When some of us met last year in Turku, I gave an outline of secessionism in Nigeria. Today I want to present a case study: the Movement for the Actualisation of a Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), founded in 1999 among the Igbo people of southeast Nigeria. Although it is a nationalist movement, it has a strong religious component. Igbo nationalists tend to see themselves as members of a chosen people that has an exclusive bond with God, like the Israelites of the Old Testament. Many Igbo politicians and intellectuals even argue that their ancestors were in fact Jews who migrated in Biblical times from the Holy Land to their present location. But before talking about Igbo Judaism, let me first sketch the political context within which these ideas became popular.

Nigeria has a long history of secessionism that started in colonial times, around 1950, when it became clear that the country would become independent. Muslim politicians in the North, most of them Hausa and Fulani, feared that they would be dominated by Christians from the South who were better educated and economically more advanced. So they threatened to secede, if their region were not given a high degree of autonomy. The threat worked and the colonial administration, fearing a break-up of the country, granted them major concessions. Moreover, the British helped them gaining control of the central government at independence in 1960. Thus Hausa and Fulani politicians came to dominate Nigerian politics for nearly four decades.

A new wave of separatism emerged in 1966, with a military coup and counter-coup that split the army. This time, Igbo leaders threatened to secede if their region were not given autonomy. Nigeria's government, however, did not give in. The two sides could not agree on a new constitution, so the Igbo made true their threat, seceded – and lost. With the defeat of Biafra in 1970, after a 30 months' civil war, secessionism was dead for more than two decades. When it returned, after the failed transition to democracy in 1993, it was driven not by Igbo, but by Yoruba politicians whose presidential candidate had won the elections but had been prevented from taking over office by Nigeria's rulers from the north. The military regime managed to suppress the self-determination movement in Yorubaland, but with the sudden death

of General Abacha in 1998, Yoruba separatism rose again and became more militant, leading to attacks on the Hausa minority living in Lagos and other Yoruba cities. It confronted the generals and their Hausa-Fulani allies with the prospect that Nigeria might break apart and that they might lose their only source of wealth: the revenues from oil production at the south coast, which account for 98 percent of Nigeria's export earnings. In order to appease the militants in Yorubaland (and the Nigerdelta) the generals embarked on a transition to democracy and arranged for a Christian Yoruba to become president. In this way, militant nationalism proved a success. It ended military dictatorship, broke the hegemony of the Muslim north and initiated a power shift to the south. To many Nigerians, ethnic nationalism looked like a beneficial force, strengthening democracy and civil society.¹

The return to democracy in 1999 had a paradoxical effect. It sharpened ethnic and religious antagonisms and led to clashes which brought about tens of thousands of deaths. At the same time it defused the threat of secessionism. President Obasanjo, although he rigged elections and disregarded democratic institutions, kept the political competition between North and South, Christians and Muslims open. All relevant sections of Nigeria's fragmented elite remained interested in the benefits of the federation. Why, then, did Igbo secessionism begin to reemerge in 1999? Like the Sharia campaign, which started at the same time among Muslims in the North, it was a means to express popular anger with the government. And, like the Sharia campaign, it was used by politicians to put pressure on the central government. The success of Yoruba separatism, which had forced the northern rulers to hand over power to a Yorubaman, inspired Igbo activists. However, MASSOB's campaign for a new Biafra did not pose a serious threat. The Igbo cannot afford secession. Unlike an independent Yoruba republic, a new Biafra would not be a viable state, because Igboland is landlocked and densely populated, with little industry and not enough land to feed its population. Moreover, millions of Igbo have settled in other parts of the country. If Nigeria broke apart, they would be forced to return to their overpopulated 'homeland'.

II.

MASSOB's campaign for secession was, to a large extent, a show. Its founder, Ralph Uwazuruike, had been a member of the ruling People's Democratic Party. He had

¹ Douglas/Ola 2003: 47, 42.

supported Olusegun Obasanjo during his election campaign in 1999, but was soon disappointed with his policy. When making federal appointments, the Yoruba president did not give the Igbo their "due", although 70 percent of them had voted for him.² Obasanjo continued the marginalisation of the Igbo, and when his two terms as president ended in 2007, he chose a Northerner, not an Igbo, as his successor. MASSOB leader Uwazuruike had predicted that the Igbo would never be allowed to rule Nigeria, even if they waited for another 40 years; thus it was better to part ways.³ His campaign for secession was not taken seriously at first. It looked like a one-man-show, but when hundreds of Igbo died in Sharia clashes, MASSOB became the most popular political organisation in Igboland, among intellectuals as well as among ordinary people.⁴

MASSOB assured its followers that Biafra could be achieved without a war, through a strategy of non-violence and passive resistance. The Igbo should gradually opt out of Nigeria and establish their own political structures in a long 25-stage process. MASSOB has already introduced a new currency, the Biafra Pound, it has opened a Biafra House in Washington D.C., and it is broadcasting news through its radio station Voice of Biafra. Its activists have hoisted the old separatist flag and patrolled the streets in the blue uniforms of the former Biafra police. However, the separatist policemen did not carry arms, as they were not meant to fight criminals. MASSOB activists posing as Biafra police were a bizarre masquerade, meant to impress politicians from other parts of Nigeria. By displaying more and more symbols of national sovereignty, they were trying to give the impression that Igboland was in fact drifting towards secession. For Igbo nationalists, this was the only way to force politicians of other ethnic groups to pay attention to the plight of the Igbo. Having been excluded for decades from ruling the country, most Igbo felt that successive governments, civilian or military, had failed to protect them against communal violence and discrimination. The best way to right these wrongs seemed to be for an Igbo to become president and bring the Igbo back into the mainstream of Nigerian politics. The wish to have an Igbo ruling Nigeria did not fit with MASSOB's call for a new Biafra, however, the organisation indicated at times that it would forego secession, once the Igbo were no longer excluded from the highest office. Before the

² *The News* [Lagos], 17 April 2000: 16, 13.

³ *Insider Weekly* [Lagos], 20 Dec. 2004: 28.

⁴ Anthony 2002: 241; *Tell*, 26 Sept. 2005: 27.

elections of 2003, MASSOB activists demonstrated under the slogan: "Igbo Presidency 2003 or Biafra".⁵

When MASSOB organised a stay-at-home strike against the federation on August 26, 2004, the strike was followed in all parts of Igboland. Even in Lagos and Kano, Igbo traders kept their shops closed. This does not mean that they had all joined the fight for Biafra. Most Igbo assume that the federal government will not allow them to secede, because their territory is too close to the Niger Delta and its oil fields. And even if Biafra could be achieved, it is not desirable to many.⁶ Millions of Igbo, living as traders and artisans in other parts of the country, would have to abandon their investments and return to their overpopulated homeland. Despite their resentment of the Nigerian state, they do not have a genuine interest in secession, not even in a looser (con)federation. Since they form substantial 'settler' communities all over Nigeria, their interests would be protected best by a strong central government which guaranteed that citizens in all parts of the federation are treated equally. Other Nigerians are, of course, aware that the Igbo would lose massively if Nigeria broke apart, so the campaign for Biafra is often dismissed as an empty threat. Igbo have little bargaining power. They are the first to be attacked and driven away, when communal clashes erupt in the North, but they have always returned.

III.

MASSOB's campaign did not achieve its goals. A new Biafra is not in sight, and Igbo politicians have not come closer to an Igbo presidency. Nevertheless, separatist agitation had a profound effect, as it alienated the Igbo from other Nigerians. MASSOB publications referred, again and again, to the traumatic experiences of the civil war, and they accused Hausa-Fulani and Yoruba politicians that they had not given up their plans to exterminate the Igbo. Among Igbo nationalists, the Biafra War is remembered as a genocide, as an attempt to wipe out the whole Igbo population.

Let us take a closer look at the events in the 1960s. Persecution started with the pogroms of 1966, when thousands of Igbo were killed in the north of Nigeria and about a million fled back to their homeland in the east. Since Nigeria's government, with its police and army, seemed unwilling to protect them, Igbo leaders in the Eastern Region decided to secede. However, the new Republic of Biafra did not gain

⁵ *The News*, 7 February 2005: 18 (photo).

⁶ Smith 2007: 195, 205.

international support. Western governments and the Soviet Union, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and the Arab world, all sided with Nigeria. The brutal policy of starving the civilian population to death provoked protests all over Europe. The Igbo were clearly the wronged party, yet the British government, as Nigeria's main backer, did not stop its arms supplies.

In the time of greatest need, the Igbo were left alone, not only by the international community but also by other Nigerians. When the conflict started, they saw the Muslims in the far north as their main adversaries and hoped for support from neighbouring peoples, who were largely Christian. However, the vast majority of non-Igbo Christians joined the northerners in their fight against Biafra. For the beleaguered Igbo, this was a betrayal: Christian Yoruba, Tiv and Berom had abandoned the cause of Christianity by siding with the Muslim 'jihadists'. Europeans who visited Igboland in those years found a widespread "self-consciousness of a Christian state facing a Muslim *jihad*".⁷ Biafra's leader, General Ojukwu, declared in 1968: "Biafra is a Christian Country, we believe in the ability of the Almighty God to come to the aid of the oppressed and give us victory as he gave to young David over Goliath".⁸

The reference to David and Goliath placed the struggle for Igbo self-determination in the context of Biblical mythology, but it also pointed to contemporary events and indicated a strong tendency to identify with the modern Jewish nation. Just a week after Biafra had declared its independence, the Six-Day War broke out in the Middle East, and Israel defeated its Arab neighbours, whose armies were larger and better equipped. Igbo nationalists have interpreted the "liberation of Jerusalem"⁹ by Israeli soldiers in June 1967 as fulfilment of a divine promise. God's chosen people, the ancient Hebrews, had been despised and persecuted, put under a foreign yoke and scattered among distant people. However, God had promised to raise their descendents above other nations. Among modern-day Jews, this prophecy seemed to have come true. Just a few years after they had almost been annihilated, the survivors of the holocaust mustered the strength to establish their own state. Igbo patriots marvel at the way Jewish settlers (or returnees) turned an arid stretch of land into an intensely cultivated, prosperous country. And they are fascinated by the military might of Israel, which is attractive because it gives its citizens security in a

⁷ Walls 1978: 212.

⁸ Odumegwu Ojukwu, in Okorocho 1987: 117.

⁹ Alaezi 1999: 16, 141.

hostile environment. Although Israel is surrounded by a Muslim population that is far superior in numbers, its citizens do not have to bow. The Igbo, by contrast, have to endure discrimination, particularly in the diaspora of northern Nigeria. After the lost war, Igbo refugees returned to the north and west of the country and reclaimed their property. Today there are millions of Igbo living outside Igboland, many of them as traders, artisans and small-scale businessmen who have often been more successful than the indigenous population. However, they have largely been excluded from political power. Thus they see themselves as second-class citizens, who enjoy little government protection. Whenever ethnic and religious riots occur in the north, they are among the first victims.

IV.

Many Igbo believe that they are “living in the midst of enemies”¹⁰ – a fate that they seem to share with the Jews. Moreover, they assume that Jews and Igbo have been hated for the same reasons: Both nations are more gifted than others, and its members have often been blessed by economic success. Due to their achievements in trade, academia and other professions, they have attracted much envy. Thus the 'Igbophobia' of non-Igbo is rooted in an inferiority complex; it is "born out of the fear of the higher ingenuity, higher industry, higher wisdom and higher intellectual power of Ndigbo".¹¹

Jews and Igbo seem to be related not only by common historical experiences but also by common traits of culture and personality. One way of explaining this congruence is to assume a common origin: "The Igbos and the Jews have the same ancestral lineage and that is why they have similar experience".¹² Such speculations are not just a matter of a few Igbo intellectuals. A recent study on Igbo village histories found that “the idea of a Middle Eastern origin of the Igbo pervades oral historical accounts”.¹³ This is, however, a new phenomenon. The Igbo only learnt about the Jews by reading the Bible and by sifting information from modern mass media. Their precolonial traditions contained no hint of a migration from Egypt, Israel

¹⁰ Ralph Uwazuruike, in *The News*, 7 Jan. 2002, “Nobody Can Stop Biafra”: 42.

¹¹ *News Service* [Enugu], February 2002: 13; cf. The Voice of Igbo Israel: What are responsible for Igbo and Jewish higher intelligence?, 30 August 2009, <http://igboisrael.blogspot.com>, 7 June 2010.

¹² *Pilot* [an Igbo periodical], Vol. 7, No. 14, 2004: 3; Daniel Jordan Smith 2007: 206–207.

¹³ Harneit-Sievers 2006: 22.

or any other distant land.¹⁴ Until the early twentieth century, when the British conquered the area, Igbo-speakers were living in hundreds of autonomous village groups, without overarching political or religious authorities. They had no sense of belonging together, no common name, no national or ethnic history. This made it easy to adopt the Old Testament as a “sort of alternative ‘tribal’ history”¹⁵ and thus as a repertoire of metaphors, narratives and religious ideas that helped them to organise collective experiences.

Identifying with a distant people that has played a prominent role in world history is a means of reflecting their place in the jumble of global forces. It helps them to discuss who they are and what they are striving for. When comparing their fate with that of ancient and modern Jews, it is not important whether they actually believe in a genealogical relationship. Thus the question of a genetic link has not received much attention. Only a few locally produced books collected evidence meant to prove the Jewish descent. They were written by Igbo intellectuals, though not professional historians. They relied, above all, on Biblical quotations in order to show that ancient Hebrews and precolonial Igbo used to observe the same customs, such as purity taboos, circumcision rites and first-fruit festivals. Such cultural similarities had already been noticed by some colonial ethnographers but did not attract closer study, because the Judaic features of the old 'Igbo' civilisation did not exceed what had been observed among other African peoples.

Igbo researchers who sought to trace their Jewish roots had to admit that the Mosaic culture which the Igbo had brought from the Holy Land had only survived in an “adulterated form”.¹⁶ When the Jewish migrants settled in their new African surrounding, they mixed with the local population and became black people. Their pure monotheistic religion “degenerated”;¹⁷ they worshipped “gods of wood and stone”¹⁸ and turned to witchcraft, “fetishism”¹⁹ and human sacrifice. As a result, “God ceased to care for them”,²⁰ and they plunged even deeper into ignorance and misery. Today, salvation seems only possible if they renounce those “idolatrous customs”

¹⁴ Afigbo 1981: 4; ; Afigbo 1983: 3; Uchendu 1965: 2.

¹⁵ Marshall 1998: 291.

¹⁶ Ogbukagu 2001: 106, 39, 95.

¹⁷ Alaezi 1999: 43.

¹⁸ Deut. 28:64, quoted in Alaezi 1999: 43, 70, 105.

¹⁹ Alaezi 1999: 37, 44, 106

²⁰ Ogbukagu 2001: 95.

which they acquired in the African diaspora and which are "completely at variance with the Jewish racial dignity, nobility and monotheism".²¹

Breaking with the pagan past would allow them to rediscover their Jewish identity. But how would a "renaissance of Jewishness"²² look like? Only a small number of Igbo have converted to Judaism and are looking for recognition by Jewish communities in Israel and USA.²³ The vast majority practise Christianity, no matter whether they assume a bond of kinship with ancient Israel or not. Many have embraced Christianity in order to become modern people and acquire western education and lifestyles. They are not interested in religious observances that date back to Mosaic times. Those who feel an affinity to the Jews are more attracted by the achievements of modern Israel.

In Igbo imagination it is easy to both: Christian and Jew. A journal that serves as a discussion forum for Igbo secessionists published a "vision" of Biafra that fuses Christian and Jewish elements. This future Biafra, although an independent, sovereign state, will be firmly aligned to "the Commonwealth of Israel" and "committed to political as well as spiritual Zionism". "The cities of Biafra will be named after Israeli cities, just as Australian cities are named after English cities". The currency will be the "Biafran Shekel", and the national flag will display the Star of David. Administratively, Biafra will be subdivided into 12 states, and "the legislature shall be a 120-member single chamber house to be known as the Biafran Knesset".²⁴ This commitment to Zionism, however, does not rule out a commitment to Christianity. The new Biafra, with its Knesset and Israeli flag, is at the same time a "Pure Christian state [...]. Therefore all systems and other instruments of worship will not be allowed". In order to further the spread of Christianity, ten percent of the national revenue "will be devoted to zealous evangelization of the world". However, this work of Christian mission will be supervised by a Jew because the "president of Israel automatically becomes the president of the Christian Democratic Republic of Biafra".²⁵

Identifying with the Jews is a means to affirm their Christian identity. The Igbo are so intensely Christian that they are Jewish. This idea was already present during the civil war when Biafran propaganda fostered a strong "identification of Biafra with

²¹ Alaezi 1999: 7.

²² *Body & Soul* [an Igbo periodical], Vol. 3, No. 3, 2003: 4.

²³ Bruder (2008: 143) estimates that as many as 30,000 Igbo practice some form of Judaism.

²⁴ *Body & Soul*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 2003: 6.

²⁵ *Body & Soul*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 2003: 6.

Biblical Israel"²⁶ and denounced its adversaries as "Gentiles".²⁷ Britain in particular was portrayed as a godless nation, sunk into "spiritual bankruptcy".²⁸ Her "refusal to take sides with justice – with Biafra – was evidence of her failure as a Christian nation".²⁹ For the beleaguered Biafrans, Christianity became an ethnic religion. They saw themselves as a chosen people, closer to God than those alleged Christians who made common cause with the 'Islamists'. The God of the Old Testament was not only talking to them as individual Christians, he was addressing them as a nation with a divine mission. Thus their unique suffering could be interpreted as a sign of election.

Today's Igbo nationalists speak with pride about the religious enthusiasm of the Biafrans who were "butchered for Christ by hordes of fanatical Northern Nigerian Moslem Fundamentalists".³⁰ The idea that the Igbo are a scattered group of Israelites, destined to suffer but firm in their faith, has served to dissociate themselves from other Christians, not only in Nigeria but also in the west. While the Biafrans remained committed to Christianity, other so-called Christians sided with the 'jihadists' and participated in genocide.

The Jewish people with whom the Igbo identify is a phantasm. Drawing from Biblical stories, television news and history books, the Igbo are free to construct a Jewish alter ego that suits their nationalist aspirations.

To sum up. Claiming Jewish roots or talking of a common destiny appears arbitrary and phantasmagoric: an invention that obscures and distorts their historical experiences. However, it is more than a self-mythification. Telling stories about being God's chosen people who were destined to suffer, or about the Holocaust survivors who built their own successful state may help to deal with the trauma of the past. They organise collective experiences, and they link the Igbo to political and religious forces outside Africa. By comparing themselves with ancient and contemporary Jews, they can reflect their experience as a people and discuss who they are and what they are striving for. Nationalism can be used as a force of self-transformation. Thus it makes sense to experiment with alien identities. Nevertheless, I would argue in the

²⁶ Walls 1978: 211, 213.

²⁷ Kalu 1996: 267, 268.

²⁸ Walls 1978: 211, 213.

²⁹ Okorocho 1987: 117.

³⁰ *New Republic* [an Igbo periodical], Vol. 4, No. 3, 2006: 7.

case of the Igbo that assuming to be (like) Jews has, on the whole, a negative effect, as it alienates them from other Nigerians.

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