

Igbos: The Hebrews of West Africa

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Introduction

There are many groups of people around the world who claim to be Jews. Some declare they are descendants of the ancient Israelites; others have performed group conversions. One group that stands out is the Igbo people of Southeastern Nigeria. The Igbo are one of many groups that proclaim to make up the Diasporic Jews from Africa. Historians and ethnographers have looked at the story of the Igbo from different perspectives.

The Igbo people are an ethnic tribe from Southern Nigeria. Pronounced “Ee-bo” (the “g” is silent), they are the third largest tribe in Nigeria, behind the Hausa and the Yoruba. The country, formally known as the Federal Republic of Nigeria, is in West Africa on the Atlantic Coast and is bordered by Chad, Cameroon, Benin, and Niger. The Igbo make up about 18% of the Nigerian population. They speak the Igbo language, which is part of the Niger-Congo language family.

The majority of the Igbo today are practicing Christians. Though they identify as Christian, many consider themselves to be “cultural” or “ethnic” Jews. Additionally, there are more than two million Igbos who practice Judaism while also reading the New Testament. In The Black Jews of Africa: History, Religion, Identity, Edith Bruder describes the three different kind of Igbo Jews: “the Hebrewists, who consider themselves as ‘pre-talmudic’ Jews on the basis of the alleged Hebraic traditions of their forefathers; the members of the various Jewish congregations

who have been striving toward Jewish recognition for some years; and, finally, the Sabbatherians, who number more than 2 million and who practice a kind of Judaism while also reading the New Testament.”¹

“Pre-Talmudic” Jews, often described as Karaite Jews, are Jews who recognize only the Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible, as having any authority over Jewish life. This excludes the Talmud which was written after the Tanakh, and which is considered the basis for Jewish law, ethics, and philosophy and is the foundation for the way of life of many Jews. Karaites simply do not believe that the “oral law” of the Talmud was divinely inspired and believe that they observe the true religion of Ancient Israel. This describes the first group of Igbo Jews Bruder mentioned.

Since Nigeria’s independence in 1960, the Igbo people have made multiple attempts at achieving the same self-determination that the Jews had with the State of Israel, their most notable attempt being during the 1967-1970 Nigerian Civil War with their own state, Biafra. Culturally, they have been compared to Jews during this era because of the genocide and pogroms against them and their fighting back, leading to the development of their own state. This has been compared to the Jews forming Israel after the atrocities of the Holocaust.

Edith Bruder, an ethnologist specializing in African Judaism and other religious movements, explains the origins of Igbo Judaism in her book. These include Igbo narratives of the Israelites traveling to Africa through trade routes as well as eighteenth and nineteenth century European colonists’ opinions that the

¹ Edith Bruder, *The Black Jews of Africa: History, Religion, Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 143.

Igbo people are descended from the Israelites, which may have played a major role in Igbo Jewish identity today.

The Igbo can, at least culturally, be considered a hybrid people. They are geographically and culturally West African. They come from Nigeria, with significant amounts of people living in the Americas as a result of the Atlantic Slave Trade. That being said, the Igbo have their own identity separate from other Nigerians and West Africans through their Jewish or Judeo-Christian religion and their claim of Jewish ancestry.

The Igbo are connected with the Jews, as well, yet they are not universally accepted as Jews, nor are they able to make *aliyah*, or to become citizens of Israel, without a formal conversion. They relate to Jews of the world through their religion, culture, and identity. However, because there is no concrete proof of immediate maternal Jewish ancestry, the Igbo are not recognized as Jews by the State of Israel.

The Igbo are both a part of and separate from both other Nigerians and other Jews, respectively. This is why the study of Jewish identity among the Igbo is important: we as scholars need to understand the Igbo point of view so that an oppressed, disenfranchised, and underrepresented people, whose voice is very seldom heard, can be understood and given a voice so that they can one day improve their situation and thrive as a people.

Chapter One: History & Jewish Identity of the Igbo

The history of black Judaism in Africa and the construction of their Jewish identity have produced narratives in which these black African Jews attempt to trace their origin.

One narrative of the Igbos' Jewish ancestry is that their descendants are migrants from ancient Israel. Some Igbo believe they are the descendants of Jacob's son, Gad, and therefore one of the Lost Tribes of Israel. (Jacob is an important patriarch of Judaism.) "A popular version of the narrative holds that Gad, the seventh son of Jacob, had three sons who settled in present-day southeastern Nigeria..." and that is how the Igbo allegedly people began.² It is said that Gad's migration to Africa began in the eighth century BC, after the Assyrian invasion of Israel. The Assyrian invasion forced some members of the 10 tribes of the Northern Kingdom into exile.

More foundational narratives, taken from Igbo oral tradition, include the idea that some Jews left Judah in the periods of the destructions of the First (586 BC) and Second Temples (70 AD). They supposedly settled in Djerba, Tunisia. Though there has been a Jewish community in Djerba for over 2,500 years, this theory is unlikely as these Jews are of North African descent and are not recorded to have migrated to Nigeria.

² Chika Oduah, "Nigeria's Igbo Jews: 'Lost Tribe' of Israel?," *CNN* (February 4, 2013). Accessed January 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2013/02/01/world/africa/nigeria-jews-igbo/>

Yet another narrative from Igbo oral tradition is that the Igbos are descendants of Israelites and Judahites who had fled the Land of Israel so as not to participate in the civil war between Israel and Judah (931-901 BC). These Jews originally settled in Havilah, beyond the rivers of Ethiopia. With them, supposedly, they had a copy of the Tanakh (the Hebrew Bible). These Jews had no knowledge of the Mishna or the Talmud. The Mishna, the first part of the Talmud, or “oral law,” was written in Judea from around 30 BC-200 AD. The reason these people would not have any knowledge about the Mishna or the rest of the Talmud is because, if this narrative is true, the Igbo descendants of the Israelites and Judahites would have left the Land of Israel long before the Talmud was constructed.

Another narrative is that Igbo are descended from North African Jews who traded and traveled within Mali, Songhai, and Kanem-Borno. It is even thought that several Songhai rulers had Jewish ancestry. However, when Askia Muhammad came to power in the 1490s, he ordered that all Jews convert to Islam or face expulsion. It is then that they ended up in Southeastern Nigeria. The king of Timbuktu, according to Leo Africanus, “declared a policy of exclusion towards Jewish traders in the same year as the Jews were expelled from Spain,” the year 1492. “Consequently, Jews were declared persona non grata in Timbuktu and, by extension, throughout the region of his vast Songhai Empire, along the River Niger and beyond. This account leaves us then with a hypothesis of a Jewish movement southwards which could have reached what is now Nigeria.”³ While these are simply narratives and have not

³ Daniel Lis, *Jewish Identity Among the Igbo of Nigeria: Israel's “Lost Tribe” and the Question of Belonging in the Jewish State* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2015), 5.

yet been proven by historians, anthropologists, or scientists, these narratives are imperative to the understanding of Igbo Jewish identity.

Bruder summarizes these Igbo oral traditions of Jewish identity by stating, “The Igbo are currently developing versions of their tribal history that place it as part of the Jewish Diaspora or claim that their ancestors came from Israel via the old African trade routes.”⁴

Bruder also mentions the impact colonialism may have had on the Igbos’ Jewish identity. Missionaries and colonists to Nigeria in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were impressed by the advanced civilization the Igbo had, especially while comparing their civilization to those of other tribes around them. An English missionary named George Basden wrote a book called *Among the Igbos of Nigeria* in 1921. “Basden, who stayed in Nigeria for many years, found all manner of signs of Judaism among the Nigerian people: ‘There are certain customs which rather point to Levitic influence at a more or less remote period. This is suggested in the underlying ideas concerning sacrifice and in the practice of circumcision. The language also bears parallels with Hebrew idiom.’”⁵

In the early twentieth century, Reverend Samuel Johnson, “the first Yoruba historian to write the history of his people, adopted the idea of a migration from Nubia through the Arabian Peninsula, down to the present territory... This community claimed a Semitic descent, called themselves by the Hebrew name of B’nai Ephraim (Children of Ephraim), and asserted that their Moroccan ancestors were expelled from oasis to oasis by Muslim persecution, beyond Timbuktu.” The

⁴ Bruder, *The Black Jews of Africa*, 144.

⁵ Bruder, *The Black Jews of Africa*, 144.

Igbo share this narrative, though it is heavily based on the novel *An African Savage's Own Story* by Lobagola, hence rendering the source questionable.⁶

Historically, the first written account of the Igbo holding the belief that they were descendants of the tribes of Israel is found in the 1789 autobiography of Olaudah Equiano. Equiano was a former Igbo slave who eventually became a British abolitionist. He described “the strong analogy’ that ‘appears to prevail in the manners and customs of my countrymen, and those of the Jews.’” Equiano concluded “that the one people had sprung from the other” because Igbo practices such as circumcision, sacrifices, and purifications so closely mirrored those of Jews of the Bible.⁷

A turning point in the Igbos’ Jewish identity and narrative occurred during and directly after the Nigerian Civil War, also called the Biafra War, which will be discussed in detail in Chapter 3. During this time, violence and persecution against the Igbo by other groups, such as the Hausa and Fulani, was widespread. What went on during the Biafra War “was likened to Nazi confiscation of the Jews’ possessions. Since then the Igbo have regularly compared their experience to the modern

⁶ Bruder, *The Black Jews of Africa*, 145.

⁷ Shai Afsai, “On Nigerian Claims to Jewish and Judaic Traditions: A Reply to Fatai Ayisa Olasupo,” *OIDA International Journal of Sustainable Development* (2014): accessed May 2017, <https://poseidon01.ssrn.com/delivery.php?ID=952112098007006071100071025023101024031086037020053013069083081065096028112125100087055031099031027019034093124095112089014008033047002081054085084097114122107002121088020035013093126085104005012090093024067117010109101086122096127082069080011085124104&EXT=pdf>

experience of the Jews.”⁸ This was a turning point for the Igbo regarding their identity as Jews.

Although the Igbo religion has been linked to Biblical Judaism for centuries, the failed bid for Igbo independence under the State of Biafra during and after the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970) had one of the most significant impacts on the Igbo identification as Jews. During the civil war, the Igbo held the belief that, like the Jews of World War II in Europe, they were sufferers of genocide. Also, like the Jewish state of Israel, the Igbo saw themselves as a people living on a threatened piece of land surrounded by hostile neighbors. As a result of the war and the atrocities that were committed, the Igbo turned to their history more than ever as a way to unite as a people. They also began to view their present and future through the prism of an oppressed people more after the civil war. “Following the Nigerian Civil War, a small number of Igbo began to question why, if they were in fact Jews, they should continue practicing Christianity.”⁹

The Igbos’ Jewish identity is a very important piece of who they are. The historical experience and suffering of the Jewish people, and later, the creation of the State of Israel, is something they identified with strongly. The word “Igbo” is considered by many to be a corrupt form of Ivri/Ibri/Hebrew. “The interpretation of the Igbo name for the Supreme Being, Chukwu Abiama, is God of Abraham

⁸ Bruder, *The Black Jews of Africa*, 146.

⁹ Shai Afsai, “Nigeria’s Igbo Jews: Jewish Identity and Practice in Abuja, *Anthropology Today* 32, no. 2 (April 1, 2016): 15, accessed May 2017, <http://ezproxy.purchase.edu:2088/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=d7e2cc45-7275-4ea1-aa87-b48ee68f2926@sessionmgr4010&vid=3&hid=4208>.

(*Chukwu* means God, and *Abiama* may be a derivative of *Abraham*).¹⁰ In later chapters, I will discuss persecution of Igbo by other Nigerians (particularly the Hausa and Fulani) and Igbo self-determination, the Republic of Biafra.

The contemporary Jewish identity among the Igbo seems to have begun with colonialism and slavery, which took place from the nineteenth century until the mid-twentieth century. Olaudah Equiano was a British ex-slave of Igbo background who worked to help end the slave trade. He lived from about 1745-1797. In his memoir, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, he was a pioneer in connecting Jewish and Igbo cultures. Equiano expressed pleasure when noting the similarities: "I was wonderfully surprised to see the laws and rules of my country written almost exactly here (in the Bible); a circumstance which I believe tended to impress our manners and customs more deeply on my memory."¹¹ Equiano suggested that the Igbo are offspring of Abraham and Keturah, who was thought to be a black woman, which was a theory that had already gained steam in eighteenth century Britain.

Addressing the skepticism some people today might feel about the veracity of black Jews, the author describes that "Jews could be simultaneously represented as both black and white- in other words, as ideal colonists or as racial inferiors...Jews, ambivalently placed between whiteness and blackness, were always tainted with one, but also embraced by the other. However, the general consensus was that the Jews were 'black' or, at least, 'swarthy.'"¹²

¹⁰ Bruder, *The Black Jews of Africa*, 143.

¹¹ Lis, *Jewish Identity Among the Igbo of Nigeria*, 18.

¹² Lis, *Jewish Identity Among the Igbo of Nigeria*, 19.

In her book The Black Jews of Africa: History, Religion, Identity, Edith Bruder describes white colonists' interest in certain black African groups as Jews in the nineteenth century. She argues that European colonialists in Africa during the nineteenth century believed that anything in Africa of value was brought there by the Hamites, who are supposedly a sub-group of the Caucasian race. They believed that some black Africans descended from Ham, son of Noah. "As a consequence, the ethnocentrism of travelers and colonists in the nineteenth century increased the standing of those who resembled them the most: these were declared to be the Hamites or of Hamitic descent, endowed with a higher ability, and even exerted a positive influence on African groups."¹³ The Igbo were included in this theory. Modern Igbo Jewish identity is built upon the foundational narrative of the theory of Hamitic descent.

It is also a widespread belief among the Igbo that before British missionaries arrived in Nigeria in the mid-nineteenth century, they practiced some form of Judaism. A Star of David was found in Agulu Eri, "in northern Igboland and had emerged an independent sign from contemporary external influences."¹⁴

Another sign that there may have been a Jewish presence in Nigeria pre-colonialism is the onyx stone. In Aguleri in Southeastern Nigeria, an onyx stone with the name "Gad" engraved in Hebrew characters was found. It is believed to be the verification of the Igbo's Jewish ancestry, according to Exodus 39:6: "And they wrought onyx stones mounted with enclosures of gold, engraved with the

¹³ Bruder, *The Black Jews of Africa*, 54.

¹⁴ Odi Moghalu, *Igbo-Israel: A Comparison of Igbo and Ancient Israel's Culture* (Xlibris, 2015), 5-6.

engravings of a seal, according to the names of the sons of Israel” (New Jerusalem Bible, Exodus 39:6). While the Bible isn’t a historical source, many Igbo Jews are quick to point out that this stone found in Southeastern Nigeria matches the Biblical excerpt, almost like a fulfillment of prophecy.

The Igbos’ Jewish identity is extremely important to them, as most believe they are descendants of the Israelites. Though the majority of Igbo people are Christian, they consider themselves “culturally and ethnically Jewish,” and the sizeable population that are religious Jews feel that they are now practicing their natural religion, free from Christian colonial rule and influence.

Chapter Two: Igbo and Hebrew Culture

There are many similarities between Igbo and Hebrew culture- particularly pre-Talmudic Hebrew culture. Many Igbo authors and historians have listed similarities in family structure, political structure, festivals, ceremonies, religion, and other categories. Some of these similarities may seem miniscule, while others are striking. In all, the Igbo people are very proud to connect their culture to that of the Israelites.

One source I will be relying heavily on is The Igbos and Israel by Remy Ilona. Ilona is an attorney and author as well as a leader in the Igbo Jewish community. The reason I am using this source is not necessarily because it is a historical text, but to demonstrate the Igbo point of view concerning the construction of their Jewish identity.

One of the proclaimed major similarities between the Igbo and the Jews is that the Igbo perform circumcisions for boys on the eighth day. For them, circumcision is “ibi ugwu,” an ancient tradition. *Obindigbo*, an Igbo cultural magazine, says that the forefathers of the Igbo recommended male circumcision for health reasons, “to prevent and treat the inability to retract the foreskin of the penis, or to treat an infection of the penis in older boys and men.” *Obindigbo* also says reasons for ibi ugwu include reduced risk of sexually transmitted diseases as well as better hygiene methods, saying, “By and large, it is shameful for a male to be

uncircumcised in Igbo land” (*Obindigbo*).¹⁵ Prior to the circumcision, each child is named on the day they are born. Interestingly, naming patterns in Igbo culture are parallel to naming patterns in Judeo-Christian culture, although instead of Hebrew names, they use the Igbo language. Igbo historian and lawyer, Remy Ilona, explains that Igbos, like Jews, use their word for “God” in many names. They compound “the names of their children with the name of the Supreme Being. A few of such are: Dani-EL, Micha-EL, Nathani-EL, Rapha-EL, Gabri-EL, Samu-EL, YA-shua, etc...Even the name Israel is compounded with “EL” which is a title for the Supreme Being. As for the Igbos, it is the rule to compound names with names of God.¹⁶” The Igbo form for the Supreme Being is “Chukwu.” Some popular Igbo names include Chukwuma, Chukwudi, Ngozichukwuka, as well as names like Chidubem (“the Lord is my shepherd”), which includes a variant of “Chukwu.”

In Igbo culture, following a child’s birth, a mother is ceremonially unclean for seven days if she has a boy, and fourteen days if she has a girl. “She may not touch anything sacred or go to the sanctuary (the shrine place of prayer) for 33 days, if a boy and 66 if a girl until purified from bleeding after which a sacrifice is offered.¹⁷” Odi Moghalu, the author of *Igbo-Israel: A Comparison of Igbo and Ancient Israel’s Culture*, has not made clear whether this ritual is taken straight from the Bible, or if the Igbo truly followed this pattern without outside influence. Another similarity in feminine uncleanness is the fact that Igbo women must, before celebrating the

¹⁵ “Culture of Ibi Ugwu (Circumcision) in Igbo Land,” *Obindigbo*, last modified November 21, 2015, accessed April 2017, <http://obindigbo.com.ng/2015/11/culture-of-ibi-ugwu-circumcision-in-igbo-land/>

¹⁶ Remy Ilona, *The Igbos and Israel: An Inter-Cultural Study of the Largest Jewish Diaspora* (Washington DC: Street to Street EpicCenter Stories, 2014), 25.

¹⁷ Moghalu, *Igbo-Israel*, 32.

birth of the child with extended family and a feast, immerse herself in a ritual bath. Jews around the world refer to this immersion as a “mikveh.” Today, the mikveh is used mostly by Orthodox Jews and largely ignored by Conservative and Reform Jews. Traditionally, Jews had to take this ritual bath after sexual activity and after contact with a dead body, and women particularly used the mikveh after childbirth and menstruation. The Igbo word for the seclusion of a woman after childbirth is *omugwo*. It is important to note that these similarities between the two cultures, whether or not they truly link the Igbos with the Israelites, are significant to the Igbos’ Jewish identity.

Both authors Remy Ilona and Odi Moghalu describe an experience for adolescent Igbos similar to a Bar Mitzvah. The ceremony is called “ima mmonwu” for a boy and “iwa akwa” for a girl. The ima mmonwu is an introduction to manhood for teenage boys. The night before the ceremony, the boys are told “vital secrets of the Igbo people,” including how they evolved and what makes them who they are. These secrets are not shared with outsiders.

This initiation takes place from March to May, which is the Igbo planting season. The boys are secluded and are lectured with teaching and music. Afterwards, the boys are “interrogated about all the misdemeanors they have indulged in, like disobeying their parents, playing pranks, etc. Unsatisfactory answers may earn some a crack of the cane across the back. Meanwhile palm wine will be going around.”¹⁸ Once the boys have been taught how to be good citizens,

¹⁸ Ilona, *The Igbos and Israel*, 29.

they start to dance, which goes on until early the next morning. Remy Ilona compares this initiation to a Jewish Bar Mitzvah, where Igbo boys become men.

Moghalu describes the *ima mmonwu* as a 13-year-old boy's initiation into the spirit world. (Since the Igbo remember this event through oral history, the origins of this initiation are lost.) He compares it to the Bar Mitzvah, in which Jewish boys become accountable for their actions at age 13, while also learning the 613 commandments of the Hebrew Bible. "This transitional period of life involves keeping the youth in focus of their present and future individual and collective responsibilities to themselves, family, society, and God. Parents and chaperones monitor and guide the teenagers through ceremonial order, that includes sharing of proverbs, legends, and jokes, and strictly instruct them of the laws of the land, tenets of culture that espouse at its core, righteousness, uprightness, integrity, etiquette, poise, and nobility."¹⁹

The female equivalent of *ima mmonwu* is *iwa akwa*. Once a teenage girl goes through this ceremony, she was traditionally considered ready for marriage. Though the official ceremony takes place when the girl is a teenager, between the ages of fifteen and eighteen, her training for it starts when she's a young child. Important skills for a mother to teach her daughter are homemaking and cooking. When the ceremony takes place, her parents make a feast and party for her. "On the morning of the day a proclamation goes forth to remind relatives and friends that the girl is to be inducted into womanhood. Various dancing groups would be invited. Towards mid-day the festivities would start. The elder of the girl's family

¹⁹ Moghalu, *Igbo-Israel*, 33.

would make a speech that the girl is now a maiden. Other people would talk too, after which feasting and dancing would start. Merriment continues till evening.”²⁰

There are some similarities between the Igbo and the Jews when it comes to marriage. Firstly, intermarriage is strongly discouraged by the Igbo. They, like the Jews, practice exclusiveness. Though there are many tribes around the world who see intermarriage as taboo, the Igbo are quick to point out the likeness to the Jewish custom of not marrying outside the faith or race. A standout example of the ancient Jews’ ban on intermarriage is in the book of Ezra, in which Ezra is horrified by the “sin” of Jewish/non-Jewish marriage and banishes foreign women and children. In more recent history, Jews who are against intermarriage tend to be for practical rather than religious reasons; for instance, the idea that with the limited number of Jews on Earth (14 million), the marrying of non-Jews will eventually lead to the Jewish race and religion dying out.

The Igbo also have a structure similar to that of the Jewish chuppah or khuppah, called okpukpu. Like a chuppah, the okpukpu is a booth “without walls, covered by canopies...It is inside them that the parties will sit.”²¹

A particularly interesting practice among the Igbo is that if a woman is unable to have a child, she is permitted to marry a woman who will then have sexual relations with her husband. Then, the resultant children will be regarded as her own. Remy Ilona compares this practice to what Sarah and Rachel did. Both Sarah and Rachel were barren, and their husbands took on other wives in order to produce children. Sarah and Rachel are Biblical figures, which does not necessarily

²⁰ Ilona, *The Igbos and Israel*, 30.

²¹ Ilona, *The Igbos and Israel*, 51.

mean that they are historical figures. However, this tradition adds to the Igbos' sense of Jewish identity.

Divorce is an uncommon occurrence for the Igbo. When it does happen, the main reason is when a wife is adulterous. Again, this draws comparisons to ancient Jewish culture.

In the event of a death, the Igbo have a similar custom to the Jewish act of "sitting shiva." "The Igbo mourning period corresponds roughly to the Jewish. The first seven days after death, the period that Jews call those of sitting shiva the Igbos will not engage in any kind of work. Twenty-eight to thirty days will still elapse after the burial before the *izu ozuzu* ceremony is held. After this ceremony, which is a sort of ending of serious mourning, the relatives can return to semi-normal life. Ilona then references Rabbi Jacques Cukierkorn: "Cukierkorn wrote: 'The first month after death is known as 'sh'loshim,' the thirty days of mourning (which includes the seven days of shiva).²²'"

Next we move on to festivals. The Igbo *oriri achicha* is compared to the Jewish holiday of Passover. *Oriri achicha* is the Igbo feast of dried bread. In the days preceding the feast, Igbo who still participate in this festival ate only dried bread. "...what is used as seasoning for the feast is *utazi* (the leaf of a bitter herb) that is strangely and uniquely important in the Igbo diet. The bitter leaf recalls the bitter herbs eaten in the Passover seder."²³ Remy Ilona also spoke about how the popular Jewish Passover song, "Had Gadya," has an Igbo variant.

²² Ilona, *The Igbos and Israel*, 103.

²³ Ilona, *The Igbos and Israel*, 108.

Another Igbo festival that is compared with Passover, the Igu Aro festival, uses practices similar to the ancient Hebrews. "Animals are sacrificed as commanded in Numbers 9:11 and though unleavened bread is not known to be made, the Igbo fondly eat bitter herbs and have a common, fondly eaten type known as bitter leaf soup (Ofe Onugbu) with pounded yam. The Igbo smear blood in doorposts, trees, roadways, feet, hands and earlobe often as seal of security from evil spirits. These go with prayers and declarations that are pronouncements of faith on those concerned."²⁴ What is significant about this feast, other than the bitter herbs similar to the ones eaten on Passover, is the smearing of blood on doorposts in order to seal away evil spirits. In the story of Passover, the Israelites marked their doorposts with the blood of a slaughtered lamb. These marks let God know that these houses belonged to Jews, and to "pass them over" and not plague them with the death of their first-born, like God would the Egyptians.

For Sukkot (ima ntu), the commemoration of the 40 years the Jews spent in the desert in search of the Holy Land, the Igbo people build booths made of palm fronds and straw and live in them for a number of days. There is much eating, drinking, dancing, and partying during this holiday.

On observing Shabbat, the Igbo rest, feast, and rejoice. It is explained in The Igbos and Israel that the Igbo day starts at sunset and ends on the next sunset. On the Igbo day of rest, there are no funerals and no marriages to be held.

There are many other holidays and festivals that the Igbo Jews in particular celebrate, though some are known to the Igbo via cultural diffusion, rather than

²⁴ Moghalu, *Igbo-Israel*, 71.

indigenous to the Igbo people. These include Hanukkah, Yom Kippur, Rosh Hashanah, and many more.

Traditional Igbo religion is called Odinani. They have a Supreme Being called Chukwu, who is the source of all things, as well as lesser spirits, sometimes called *agbara* through whom Chukwu can be approached (similar to angels in other religions). Chukwu is invisible (“cannot be seen with the eyes of man”) and genderless (though referred to with masculine pronouns). “We see Him as the overlord, and as beneficent and benevolent. We also believe that He punishes evil doers for their evil deeds, and that He rewards good deeds.” It’s interesting that the Igbo traditionally practiced a monotheistic religion, while neighboring tribes, such as the Yoruba, practice essentially polytheistic religions with multiple gods and goddesses. It’s also interesting that A. Afigbo, an Igbo historian, says about the cosmos, “It is the first in having no origin and no ending, in being the creator and ruler of all that has ever existed in the past that exists in the now and that will exist in the future...in truth, we (the Igbos) do not know its name.²⁵” Chukwu, meaning “great creator,” is not the personal name of the Igbo god. The reason this is significant is because the Jews also don’t know or use God’s name, as, according to Exodus 4:22-23, God only ever told Moses His actual name.

Another thing in common between Chukwu and the Hebrew God, sometimes called Yahweh, is that humans cannot see Him, nor are there any idols or symbols to be made representing Chukwu. Many Igbo believe that colonialism, both Arab Muslim and European Christian, have had negative influences on their culture. They

²⁵ Ilona, *The Igbos and Israel*, 69.

often blame Christian colonists for making their people “forget” their Jewish roots, and they blame Muslim colonists for other negative influences. They also blame other indigenous religions around them, such as the Yoruba religion. Ilona says, “Clearly, Igbos began to think that other gods exist only after they were exposed to cultures, beliefs, and doctrines that hold that other gods exist...ancient Igbos regarded the belief that there are other gods beside Chukwu as abomination.”²⁶

Many Igbo keep kosher. Even before the more recent movement to reclaim their Jewish heritage, Igbo eating patterns and dietary matters were quite similar to those of the Israelites’. For example, the pig is the “epitome of filth and dirtiness” to the Igbo. “Before the intrusion of the Europeans, there were no pigs in Igboland... Instructively, there are no Igbo breeds of swine, as there are okuku Igbo (Igbo chickens), eghu Igbo (Igbo goats) and efi Igbo (Igbo cattle).”²⁷ Of course, swine is forbidden in kosher diets as pigs are seen as “unclean.” The Igbo, like the Jews, do not eat pork or any other kind of meat that comes from pig.

Igbo men are known to wear a cloth called akwa mmiri, which has been compared to the Israeli tallit. Akwa mmiri, meaning “cloth of the water,” is sometimes used as a towel, but also used by masqueraders, warriors, religious occasions and ceremonies, and women in mourning²⁸.

Akwa mmiri are often fringed, just like the Israeli tallit. A striking quote from a Jewish source points to ancient Israelite presence in West Africa: “In ancient times, Tallits had a blue thread in the fringes; its dye came from a now-extinct rare

²⁶ Ilona, *The Igbos and Israel*, 75.

²⁷ Ilona, *The Igbos and Israel*, 210.

²⁸ McPhilips Nwachukwu et al, “Akwete Cloth: An Igbo Textile Art,” *Vanguard* (July 26, 2012): accessed April 2017.

snail from the West coast of Africa.’ West Africa is the region that the Igbos reside in now²⁹ (*The Igbos and Israel*, 221).

When it comes to certain sexual behaviors, the Igbo think of unwanted, irresponsible, or “unnatural” acts in a similar way to the ancient Israelites. Though male infidelity is frowned upon, it is considered an abomination when a woman commits adultery. In order for her to be punished, however, there needs to be proof of her guilt. “The woman who was suspected of adultery is taken to the central place of worship of the entire clan/community. There she was administered an oath that is akin to the oath drink/bitter waters of the Israelites.³⁰” Instead of the drink, the woman was to eat a kola nut from the ground, which was prayed over. In addition, premarital sex, homosexual acts, and bestiality are all abominations to the Igbo, as they were in the Hebrew Bible. Though these acts are taboo in many cultures, the Igbo find it important to point out when comparing their culture to that of the ancient Hebrews’.

The Igbo people are very proud of their cultural connections to Israel and the Jews. Many of the Igbos’ life events are similar to those of the Jews’ and ancient Hebrews’. Igbo boys are circumcised on the eighth day, and children are named for God, like in the Hebrew language (Micha-EL, for instance, means “who is like God”). A woman who gives birth is ceremonially unclean, just like in the Hebrew Bible, as are menstruating women and those who just performed sex acts. In order to become clean again, they must immerse in ritual baths, which the Jews called “mikvehs.” The Igbo have coming-of-age ceremonies for teenagers that are

²⁹ Ilona, *The Igbos and Israel*, 221.

³⁰ Ilona, *The Igbos and Israel*, 189.

compared to Bar and Bat Mitzvahs, and marrying outside the tribe is strongly discouraged, just like how Ezra commanded the Jews not to marry non-Jews. Many Igbo marry under a canopy called an “okpukpu,” which has been compared to the Jewish “chuppah.” The Igbo have a mourning period much like the Jews’ “sitting shiva.” They celebrate Jewish holidays and have their own similar festivals to Jewish events like Passover and Sukkot. Many keep follow similar dietary laws like those in the Hebrew Bible. In all, the Igbo people are very secure in their Jewish identity, and see it as a major part of what makes them the Igbo people. The point of this chapter is not to prove whether or not the Igbo are a people descended from the ancient Israelites of the Bible. It is, however, to narrate the Jewish identity of the Igbo from works in their own words.

CHAPTER THREE: BIAFRA

The Biafran War, officially known as the Nigerian Civil War, took place from July 6, 1967-January 15, 1970. The main reason for the war was over the secession of Biafra, an area in Southeastern Nigeria in which the Igbo constitute the majority of the population, from Nigeria. The Republic of Biafra represents the self-determination of the Igbo people, as the State of Israel represents the self-determination of the Jews.

The conflict between the Igbo and other ethnic groups in Nigeria, such as the Hausa and Fulani, was religious as well as cultural. The Igbo are primarily Christian (though, as stated before, many identify as ethnic Jews), with some practicing religious Judaism or traditional Igbo religion, while the Hausa and Fulani are Muslim.

Because Nigeria was a British colony, under British rule, all of the cultures of Nigeria were forced together. The Igbo, Yoruba, Hausa, Fulani, and others were all united into one country. The British officially came into control of Nigeria in 1884, during the “infamous partitioning of Africa at the Berlin Conference, (when) Nigeria came under the colonial influence of the British.”³¹ The British did not divide the countries they ruled by ethnic group, but rather by geography. The Atlantic declares, “Europe’s arbitrary post-colonial borders left Africans bunched into countries that don’t represent their heritage, a contradiction that still troubles them

³¹ Pade Badru, *Imperialism and Ethnic Politics in Nigeria, 1960-1996* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1998), 3.

today.”³² On the division of the African countries in regards to Nigeria, William D. Graf said, “Thus the territory of present Nigeria was defined, not on the basis of its peoples’ shared historical, economic or social experiences, but merely by arbitrary amalgamation of a number of disparate ethnocultural units which happened to occupy contiguous land areas that were then under British colonial administration...”³³ This geographical division led to conflict, as the Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa/Fulani completely differ from each other in terms of culture, religion, and language.

Ethnic tensions in Nigeria, as in other parts of Africa, have always been high. Nigeria is the second-largest country in Sub-Saharan Africa. There are over 300 tribes or ethnicities in Nigeria with vastly different cultures and languages, not all of which are compatible. These ethnic tensions led to a war between the Igbo in the southeast and the rest of Nigeria.

Nigeria gained independence from the United Kingdom on October 1, 1960. The first Prime Minister of Nigeria was Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, a Muslim man who was ethnically Fulani and Gera.³⁴ Tafawa Balewa said in 1947, 13 years before Nigeria declared its independence and while he was a member of the Legislative Assembly, “We do not want our Southern neighbors to interfere in our development.

³² Max Fisher, “The Dividing of a Continent: Africa’s Separatist Problem,” *The Atlantic*, (September 10, 2012), accessed February 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/09/the-dividing-of-a-continent-africas-separatist-problem/262171>.

³³ Badru, *Imperialism and Ethnic Politics in Nigeria, 1960-1996*, 4.

³⁴ Farooq Kperogi, “Gere: Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa’s Real Ethnic Group,” *Daily Trust*, (January 22, 2016), accessed April 2017. <https://www.dailytrust.com.ng/news/notes-from-atlanta/gere-sir-abubakar-tafawa-balewa-s-real-ethnic-group/130284.html>

We have never associated ourselves with the activities of these people. We do not know them, we do not recognize them, and we share no responsibility in their actions. We shall demand our rights when the time is ripe. If the British quit Nigeria now at this stage, the Northern people would continue their uninterrupted conquest to the sea.”³⁵ This shows the disdain that Fulani leaders had toward other ethnic groups, particularly non-Muslims like the Igbo. In the minds of many Igbo people, the above quote represents the Fulani mission to spread an Islamic caliphate throughout Nigeria and to wipe out non-Muslims from the country. The Yoruba, too, felt marginalized by those in the North.

Historically, the Fulani arrived in the Nigerian territory via Ottoman conquest, and, according to Yahgozie Immanu’el, who was also a cabinet member of the Biafra government, was exiled, and now lives in the United Kingdom, “carried out a jihad and slaughtered the original Hausa rulers and installed their own king called Emir. They also attempted taking over the Yoruba Empire, called Oyo. They succeeded in taking the Kwara province, killing a Yoruba king and installing an Emir.”³⁶ The Hausa/Fulani ethnic groups have been the dominant political forces in Nigeria since its independence. Consequently, the Igbo, Yoruba, and other small tribes have felt disenfranchised- particularly the Igbo, because they are primarily religious Christians with a religious Jewish minority, while about half of the Yoruba population is Muslim. The Igbo, who make up most of Southeastern Nigeria, “has represented some of the staunchest opponents of Sharia law. In many northern

³⁵ Adebayo Oyeade, *The Foundations of Nigeria: Essays in Honor of Toyin Falola* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2003), 143.

³⁶ Immanu’el, Yahgozie. “Discussion with” Wellansky, Michelle. March 2017. Facebook.

Hausa-Fulani-dominated states, minority populations of Igbo claim to have been unfairly targeted by laws that do not pertain to their faith.”³⁷

In 1966, tens of thousands of Igbos were murdered in what was called “pogroms” (linking the Igbos to the Jewish people) by scholars and historians. The violence occurred between June and October of 1966 against Igbos living in the Sabon Gari, a region in Northern Nigeria with a Hausa majority. It is disputed whether the Nigerian government systematically organized these pogroms, but it is certain that they failed to put a stop to the violence.

While researching for this project, I spoke with Dr. Nonyelu Anyichie about her experiences. She is an Igbo immigrant to the United States and considers herself Nigerian American. Dr. Anyichie related how she was born and raised in Biafra and how her family suffered during the Biafra War. She told of how she lost her older brother, but doesn’t remember many details, as she was a young child at the time. She said, “The way the Igbos have been marginalized in Nigeria, they were the initial targets of (terrorist group) Boko Haram... Their churches were burnt down; even their pastors were killed in broad daylight. This war against Igbo Christians started before I was born. It was part of why the civil war erupted... The Muslims in the north have not stopped killing the Igbos.” Dr. Anyichie says that she supports the re-emergence and independence of Biafra, simply because the Igbos have been the target of violence from the northern Muslims for so long.

On May 30, 1967, the Republic of Biafra declared its independence with Chukwuemeka “Emeka” Odumegwu Ojukwu declared its President. Most of

³⁷ “Ethnicity in Nigeria,” *PBS* (April 5, 2007), accessed March 2017, http://www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/africa-jan-june07-ethnic_04-05/

Nigeria's oil was on Biafran territory, which was a concern for the Nigerians, because the petroleum industry is always a lucrative one, and the Nigerian Federal Government blockaded Biafra's oil.

The war began on July 6th of that year, with the Nigerian government invading Biafra. Russia had supplied the Nigerians with weapons, while Biafra largely seemed to be on its own. The Biafrans looked to Israel for help, seeing themselves as brothers, as "Biafrans identified closely with Israel as a similarly beleaguered modernizing nation surrounded by backward, Muslim neighbors. Inspiringly, it had won a stunning victory against them in the Six Days War in 1967. Biafran leader Ojukwu announced that, 'Like the Jews...we saw in the birth of our young Republic the gateway to freedom and survival.' Many Israelis reciprocated, viewing the Biafrans in similar terms and pressuring their government to aid the secessionist struggle in various ways. They thought genocide was taking place.³⁸" Because of this shared identity between Biafrans and Israeli civilians, the Israeli government agreed that Israel would aid Biafra in terms of economics, intelligence, and refugee care. The Biafran government did not accept Israel's offer, angry that Israel would not help them militarily³⁹.

³⁸ Lasse Heerten et al, "The Nigeria-Biafra War: Postcolonial Conflict and the Question of Genocide," *Journal of Genocide Research*, 16, no. 2/3 (July 2014): 179, accessed March 2017, <http://ezproxy.purchase.edu:2088/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=2&sid=f1cba2d5-4c1b-4e91-bbf3-e2c058e67f22@sessionmgr104>.

³⁹ Zach Levey, "Israel, Nigeria and the Biafra Civil War, 1967-70," *Journal of Genocide Research*, 16, no. 2/3 (July 2014): accessed March 2017, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14623528.2014.936704?journalCode=cjgr20>

According to Levey, however, Israel had already helped Biafra in several ways, including financially and medically. "In 1968 the Mossad twice transferred to Biafra, through Zurich, the sum of \$100,000. An Israeli medical team worked in Biafra from September to December, performing over 1,400 medical operations at the mortality rate of only 4%. In early summer 1968, Israel attempted, unsuccessfully, to carry out a secret arms transfer in Biafra."⁴⁰

The war took its toll on Biafran citizens. By the end of 1967, "the first signs were discernible that Biafra would be threatened by a serious food shortage; the Biafran population was heading for a famine that could cost hundreds of thousands of human lives."⁴¹ Throughout the three years of the war, between 500,000 and 2 million Biafrans died from starvation and malnutrition, and around 100,000 died as a result of military casualties. The war ended in January 15, 1970, with Ojukwu fleeing to the Ivory Coast and Biafra surrendering to Nigeria on January 14th, "...thus came the end of the civil war the renunciation of secession."⁴²

Around the world, photos from the Biafran War made headlines. Photographs of starving and malnourished Igbo children were displayed in Western magazines such as *LIFE*. "After the publication of images of starving Biafran children in the Western media, analogies and comparisons with the Holocaust abounded internationally."⁴³ Other comparisons were made between the Igbos and the Jews. Igbo nationalists identified closely with the Jews and the Jewish

⁴⁰ Levey, "Israel, Nigeria and the Biafra Civil War, 1967-70," 271.

⁴¹ Heerten et al, "The Nigeria-Biafra War," 175.

⁴² Kingsley Azuh, "The Nigerian Civil War: Causes, Strategies, and Lessons Learnt," *Global Security*, (1992), accessed April 2017.

⁴³ Heerten et al, "The Nigeria-Biafra War," 179.

experience, “and especially that of the Holocaust, viewing themselves, too, as a people who would recover and build their own state.”⁴⁴ The Igbos, the Hebrews of West Africa, “envisioned their state like an ‘African Israel,’ a new nation born of genocidal violence.”⁴⁵

Today, Nigeria is still rife with ethnic conflict. As previously stated, Nigeria is a country with an amalgamation of different tribes or ethnic groups with different religious beliefs. When the British created the country that is Nigeria, they did it as outsiders with no concern for the people that were being lumped together. Oftentimes, scholars describe the Hausa and Fulani tribes as one tribe: the Hausa-Fulani. Yahgozie Immanu’el describes the “Fulani Caliphate” as being created through an “ISIS-styled jihad.” Usman dan Fodio was the Fulani leader, and, according to Immanu’el, “his military campaign started as if it was for the establishment of a fundamentalist Islamic state in the already-existing Islamic kingdoms of the Hausa people but indeed extended to non-Muslim territories southwards.” During this jihad, dan Fodio captured and enslaved non-Muslims. “In 1900 the Sokoto caliphate had at least 1 million and perhaps as many as 2.5 million slaves.”⁴⁶ Based on his writings, dan Fodio’s intent could be understood as the “total Islamization and strict implementation of Sharia throughout Bilad al Sudan,” how black Africa was then known by the Arabs, explains Immanu’el.

Igbo author Chinua Achebe has claimed that the Hausa-Fulani and the Yoruba hate the Igbo because of their “cultural advantage.” He says, “I have written in my

⁴⁴ Levey, “Israel, Nigeria and the Biafra Civil War, 1967-70,” 267.

⁴⁵ Heerten et al, “The Nigeria-Biafra War,” 179.

⁴⁶ Roger B. Beck et al, *A History of World Societies, Volume 2: Since 1450*, Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2011, 755.

small book entitled The Trouble with Nigeria that Nigerians will probably achieve consensus on no other matter than their common resentment of the Igbo.”⁴⁷

(Achebe uses the word “Nigerian” to differentiate other tribes from the Igbo- the Igbo are “Biafran.”) Francis Duru, another Igbo interviewed for this paper, also believes the hatred of Igbo by other Nigerians is due to resentment. He says, “Igbos have been killed repeatedly by particularly the Hausa-Fulani...Igbo success in business, trade, education, science, and technology seems to piss them off. We have the highest standard of living in Nigeria.”

A specific example of interethnic conflict in present-day Nigeria is the Enugu massacre. Enugu is a state in Southeastern Nigeria and the majority of its inhabitants are Igbo. On April 25, 2016, over 500 armed Fulani herdsmen “unleashed terror on hapless natives, killing 46 and burning the Christ Holy Catholic Church, Odozi-Odobo.”⁴⁸

According to The Independent UK, Fulani militants, though not well known outside of Nigeria, were named the fourth deadliest terror group in the world, following Boko Haram, ISIS, and Al-Shabab.⁴⁹ The herdsmen planned to take

⁴⁷ Sam Omatseye, “Why Nigerians Hate Igbo, by Chinua Achebe,” *The Nation Online*, (October 20, 2012): accessed April 2017, <http://thenationonline.net/why-nigerians-hate-igbo-by-chinua-achebe/>

⁴⁸ Francis Igata, Enugu, “Enugu: Blow-By-Blow Account of How Herdsmen Killed 46 Natives,” *Vanguard*, (April 30, 2016): accessed March 2017, <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2016/04/enugu-blow-blow-account-herdsmen-killed-46-natives/>.

⁴⁹ Rose Troup Buchanan, “Global Terrorism Index: Nigerian Fulani Militants Named as Fourth Deadliest Terror Group in World,” *Independent UK*, (November 18, 2015): accessed March 2017, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/global-terrorism-index-nigerian-fulani-militants-named-as-fourth-deadliest-terror-group-in-world-a6739851.html>

portions of the fertile land to feed their cattle. “The herdsmen were alleged to have consistently raped, maimed, and killed victims from the communities situated on the Nsukka-Adani-Umulokpa expressroad in the council area⁵⁰” previously. The attacks have been described as a way to “Islamize Nigeria,” as one reason for the brutal attacks was to reduce Southeastern Nigeria’s Christian population. This attack happened just months after another similar attack by Fulani herdsmen, this time in Benue State. To add insult to injury, President Buhari and his administration are particularly strict in terms of cracking down on pro-Biafra activists, while “working behind the scenes” and seemingly turning a blind eye to the Fulani herdsmen’s massacres. Buhari, who is of Fulani ancestry, is thought to be displaying favoritism to his tribesmen.

President Muhammadu Buhari was elected in May of 2015. Before becoming President of Nigeria, he enforced the air, sea, and land blockade against the Igbo in Biafra during the Nigerian Civil War. As stated in earlier paragraphs, the Igbo people are the staunchest opponents of Sharia law. In August of 2001, Buhari, by then a politician, said, “I will continue to show openly and inside me the total commitment to the Sharia movement that is sweeping all over Nigiera... Godwilling, we will not stop the agitation for the total implementation of the Sharia in the country.” As the most powerful man in Nigeria, President Buhari now has the ability to implement Sharia law in the country. This is problematic because there are many non-Muslims in Nigeria.

⁵⁰ Francis Igata, Enugu, “Enugu: Blow-By-Blow Account of How Herdsmen Killed 46 Natives,” *Vanguard*, (April 30, 2016).

Interestingly, many Igbos support President Trump as an American leader. This comes from a distrust of former President, Barack Obama. Some Igbo believe that Obama helped Buhari get elected. Francis Duru says, “The Igbos did not like the Obama government because he seemed to us to be supporting the Muslims in Nigeria against the others. He refused to sell weapons to a Christian Nigerian president (Goodluck Jonathan) to fight Boko Haram Islamic extremists. The Igbo also did *not* support Mrs. Clinton because we figure she would be another Obama. Igbos openly celebrated Trump’s victory, and eleven Igbo young men were killed by Buhari’s security men for celebrating Trump’s victory!”

African American activist and pastor, Dumisani Washington, who works closely with Igbo Jews, describes the negative view the Igbo have of President Obama in a Facebook post: “President Obama actively hindered the Nigerian government from fighting Boko Haram. He practically nurtured the terrorist group into a major force... President Obama actively (illegally) helped current President Muhammed Buhari get elected, who is himself an Islamist who is killing Christians with the use of his military... My Igbo friends are very glad Obama is gone and are vocal supporters of Trump. They believe Trump will do something to help their plight. Damn sure can’t do much more damage than Obama” (Washington, February 25, 2017).

Finally, support for Israel is something that brings the Igbo people together. According to Remy Ilona, the author of many works on the Igbo Jews and their relationship with Israel, the Igbo support Israel because they feel they are part of the Nation of Israel. It’s a strong part of the Igbo identity. Francis Duru says, “Most

Igbo support Israel instinctively. I was once asked when I was in high school by a non-Igbo classmate, 'Why do you love and support Israel so much?' I answered that I didn't need a reason to do that. At peace and in war we support Israel. In all its wars, it is usual to see Igbo even in the rural areas gather around transistor radios to monitor events at the warfronts and to eventually celebrate Israel's inevitable victories." The Igbo believe they are the Jews of Africa, and Israel is an essential part of them.

The history of British colonialism in Nigeria, together with the Biafra War and the recreation of the State of Israel were forces that helped amalgamating a Jewish identity for the Igbo people. The Igbo people identify with the Jews because of what they perceive are their shared struggles with persecution, statelessness, genocide, and survival in the midst of surrounding enemies.

Chapter Four: Other Black African Jews

Throughout Sub-Saharan Africa, there are other groups of people who claim to be Jews- either by ancestry or by religious conversion. Each of these groups has an important reason for identifying as Jewish, such as a way to rebel against Christian or Muslim oppression and colonialism, a need to identify with other people who have been persecuted, and other reasons. Although there are many of these groups across black Africa, I am going to focus on the Tutsis of Rwanda, the Lemba of Zimbabwe and South Africa, and the Abayudaya of Uganda. (Because Ethiopian Jews have already been studied on a larger level, I will leave them out.)

The Tutsi people of Rwanda were the victims of a horrific genocide in 1994. 800,000 Tutsis were killed under the Hutu government. Before that, in the 1970s, the Tutsis were expelled from universities in Rwanda and are restricted to only 9% of all available jobs.⁵¹ Since the horrific suffering of the Tutsi people up until the 1990s, “the Tutsi describe their history as a microcosm of worldwide Jewish history, using key words such as *genocide*, *pogrom*, *Shoah*, *persecution*, and *anti-Semitism*. Professor Bwejeri wrote: ‘For the last 40 years, the Batutsi have been exterminated and till now they are being exterminated, because of their Hebraic identity and their Solomonic legacy.’ Following this, the spokesmen of Tutsi Hebrews called out to

⁵¹ “Rwanda: A Historical Chronology,” PBS, accessed March 2017, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/rwanda/etc/cron.html>.

Israel and the international community to condemn and take measures against the anti-Semitic violence in Africa toward the 500,000 Tutsi of Rwanda.⁵²

Jewish writer Jonathan R. Beloff described his trip to Rwanda as a pleasant surprise. He said that Rwandans consider the Jews to be brothers: “The Jewish people experienced centuries of brutality, hardship and genocide,” and despite all this, the Jewish people have persisted.⁵³

The reason the Tutsis identify with the Jews is *not* religious; in fact, the majority of Tutsis are religious Christians. The Tutsis identify with the Jews because of their common experiences of genocide, pogroms, and other suffering. Many Rwandan Tutsis not only identify with Jews, but also support Israel, seeing it as a model: the Jewish people came together after a tragedy and built their own nation, which is today the most developed country in the Middle East, and is thriving.

The next group is the Lemba. The Lemba are found in Southern Africa, mostly Zimbabwe and South Africa. There are over 50,000 Lemba, though not all still practice Judaism today. Their DNA has been traced to the Middle East, and many of the males in the community have the Cohen Modal Haplotype, which proves their Jewish ancestry. Those with the Cohen Modal Haplotype are said to have a common ancestor from the Jewish priestly caste, the Kohanim.

In his book Journey to the Vanished City: The Search for a Lost Tribe of Israel, Tudor Parfitt interviewed a Lemba man named Phophi. Describing his people’s journey to Africa, he said, “*This* is how we came to be sojourning in this wretched

⁵² Bruder, *The Black Jews of Africa*, 156.

⁵³ Jonathan R. Beloff, “The Jewish Brother of Rwanda,” *The Times of Israel*, June 26, 2014, accessed April 12, 2017, <http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/rwanda-israel/>.

land of the gentiles. Solomon sent his ships to get gold from Ophir, that is Zimbabwe. Some of the Jews who went on those boats stayed in Africa.⁵⁴

The Lemba observe Shabbat, identify as the chosen people, do not eat pig, practice ritual animal slaughter, practice male circumcision, use Stars of David on tombstones, and are discouraged from marrying outside of the tribe. They share this in common with other Jews from around the world.

Because there is no Jewish DNA found in females, it indicates that male Israelites traveled to Africa and married African women. This confirms the oral tradition that the first Lemba men came from Sena (or possibly Sanaa) in Yemen and married African women. According to DNA tests, “50 percent of the Lemba’s Y-chromosomes were of Semitic origin and 40 percent were Negroid, with the remaining 10 percent unidentified.⁵⁵” Unfortunately, because no matrilineal Jewish descent can be found among the Lemba, they are not recognized by Orthodox and Conservative groups as Jews. In order to be recognized, they would have to formally convert.

Finally, we move to Uganda. The Abayudaya are the Jewish community of Uganda, a country in East Africa. They are Baganda people, a sub-category within the Bantu ethnic group. They make up the largest population in Uganda at approximately 20%⁵⁶.

⁵⁴ Tudor Parfitt, *Journey to the Vanished City: The Search for a Lost Tribe of Israel*, (New York: Random House, 1992), 59.

⁵⁵ Bruder, *The Black Jews of Africa*, 168.

⁵⁶ “Tribe: The Baganda, Uganda’s Royal Kingdom, Past & Present,” *Afritorial* (May 23, 2013), accessed April 2017, <http://afritorial.com/tribe-the-baganda-ugandas-royal-kingdom-past-present>.

The founder of the Abayudaya community was Semei Kakungulu. *Tablet Magazine* describes him as “an extraordinary African chieftain, elephant hunter, warrior king, and colonial agent.⁵⁷” Kakungulu was converted to Protestantism by British missionaries, but “broke away from the church initially because of a personal quarrel with the British⁵⁸” (*Jewish Virtual Library*). In 1919, Kakungulu was circumcised and subsequently circumcised all his sons on the eighth day after their births. In Luganda, a language spoken in Uganda, “Abayudaya” means “People of Judah,” or “Children of Israel,” and despite having no ancestral connection with Israel, they consider themselves Jews.

Decades later, in the 1970s under Idi Amin’s rule, he “declared a ban on Abayudaya religious practices: all synagogues were closed and Jewish books were forbidden.⁵⁹” At one point, there were 36 synagogues in Uganda, but due to persecution, 95% of Abayudaya converted to Christianity or Islam. Depending on the source, only 150 or 300 members of the Abayudaya remained Jews. Today, there are 2,000-2,500 Abayudaya Jews led by the Rabbi Gershon Sizomu, the first ever native-born black rabbi in Africa. Uganda today has five synagogues as well as multiple Jewish schools.

⁵⁷ Rose Kaplan, “Abayudaya Jews of Uganda Now Officially Recognized by Jewish Agency,” *Tablet* (April 14, 2016), accessed September 2016, <http://www.tabletmag.com/scroll/200094/abayudaya-jews-of-uganda-now-officially-recognized-by-jewish-agency>.

⁵⁸ “A History of the Abayudaya Jews of Uganda,” *Jewish Virtual Library*, accessed September 2016, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/a-history-of-the-abuyudaya-jews-of-uganda>.

⁵⁹ Menucha Chana Levin, “The ‘Jewish Tribe’ in Uganda,” *Aish* (July 30, 2011), accessed September 2016, http://www.aish.com/jw/s/The_Jewish_Tribe_in_Uganda.html.

The Abayudaya are a special case because they have no claim to the ancient Israelites. The Abayudaya consciously *chose* to be Jews, and knew that they had no ancestral connection to the Land of Israel or to ethnic Jews. They do not claim to belong to one of the Lost Tribes of Israel. While Jewish identity is complicated, with Judaism being an ethnicity, a culture, and a religion, the Abayudaya chose to be cultural and religious Jews and to identify with Israel. Rabbi Gershom Sizomu said, “We are Africans who have chosen to observe the Torah, which was given to Israel. By that fact we have declared ourselves Jews and a part of the community of Israel.”

While none of the Jewish rituals the Abayudaya perform are indigenous to Uganda (the way the Igbo claim their Jewish rituals were brought over to Nigeria from Israel centuries ago, for example), the Abayudaya have adopted many Jewish customs. The Abayudaya keep kosher households and have weekly readings from the Torah. They follow the laws of Shabbat and circumcise their sons on the eighth day after birth. The women “obey traditional laws concerning purity and abstinence during their menstrual period.” The Abayudaya follow the same rules and observe the same holidays as Jews from all over the world⁶⁰.

The Abayudaya have come a long way since the early 20th century. They are a community who “‘discovered’ Judaism on their own, and embrace it faithfully despite obstacles such as oppression and hostility, a separation from other Jews and a lack of Judaic resources- and not least of all, poverty and hunger.”⁶¹ In April 2016,

⁶⁰ Richard Sobol et al, *Abayudaya: The Jews of Uganda* (New York: Abbeville Press, 2002)

⁶¹ “Kulanu and the Abayudaya,” *Kulanu* (August 2012), accessed September 2016, <http://www.kulanu.org/abayudaya/kulanusworkoverview.php>.

the Jewish Agency for Israel finally recognized the Abayudaya community as Jews, and granted them the right to the Law of Return.

All over the African continent, different groups of people identify as Jews for many different reasons. Some believe they belong to one of the Lost Tribes, while others choose to convert to religious Judaism to be a part of a worldwide religious movement.

Conclusion

The Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria are an ethnic group who claim ancestry from the ancient Israelites. Through various narratives, including traditions of the Igbo people being descendants of Gad, one of the twelve tribes of Israel, and fleeing the land after the destructions of both Temples, they have attempted to piece together their identity in order to unite with one another and to differentiate themselves from other tribes around them, such as the Hausa, Fulani, and Yoruba tribes. Whether their Jewish identity is ancestral or a construction built over the years by a combination of European colonists, comparisons to Jews during the Biafra War, and other factors is irrelevant to this paper: what's important is the identity and how it factors into their lives.

While some research has been done about the Igbo people and their history and identity, it's clear that their story is just beginning to be told. They are black Africans who also identify as ancestors of the people of Israel. The Igbo are a hybrid people who are a part of and separate from other Nigerians and other Jews. We must continue to study the Igbo and their Jewish identity so that their story can be told. As a people who are discriminated against within their own homeland and who are underrepresented in scholarly discussion, the Igbo must be given a voice to the intellectual audience so that they can one day be recognized and can thrive in their home country and beyond.

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