

Nigeria's Igbo Jews

Jewish identity and practice in Abuja

Shai Afsai

Shai Afsai is an independent scholar. His email is shai.afsai@ppsd.org.

Fig. 1. Emanuel ben David, Tikvat Israel Synagogue's oldest member, prays by an open window.



1. In 1991, Lagos, in the southwest of Nigeria, was officially replaced by the more centrally situated Abuja as the federal capital city.

2. For a history of the lost tribes and those who have sought them out see Cooper (2006).

3. Jewish self-identification is found in many other African countries as well, but is most prevalent in Nigeria. For other examples of the emergence of African Jewish identity see Bruder (2008), Parfitt's chapter (2012a) and book-length (2012b) treatments, as well as Chitando's (2005a, 2005b) excellent articles on Judaism in Zimbabwe.

4. Most members of the Beta Israel (House of Israel) community currently live in Israel. For a history of the Beta Israel and the discourse surrounding their Jewish religious status see Corinaldi (1988) and Afsai (2014a). On the Beta Israel's interaction with Igbo Jews in Israel see Lis (2009, 2015).

5. While members of other Nigerian ethnic groups also currently self-identify as Jews, the phenomenon predominates among the Igbo.

6. On the arguments over whether Equiano may actually have been born in South Carolina rather than Africa, see Carey (2010).

7. For a scholarly discussion about the Nigerian civil war and the genocide question see the 12 articles in the 2014 double issue of the *Journal of Genocide Research* 16 (2-3), which attempt to historicize the discourse about genocide and Biafra.

8. Miles (2011, 2013, 2014) calls Igbo who practice Judaism 'Jubos', an appellation I have purposely avoided, as it is used neither by the members of the community themselves nor by other Nigerians.

9. Chislon Eben Cohen Enyioha is prominently featured in Lieberman's (2012) documentary on Nigerian Jews.

10. In Nigeria, Sabbatarianism (or Sabbatharianism) refers to forms of Christianity in which Saturday, rather than Sunday, is observed as the day of rest. For more on Sabbatarianism and its relationship to the development

In 2006, Swiss-Israeli anthropologist Daniel Lis struck up a conversation with a young Nigerian man at a Basel music club. When they finished their beers and exchanged contact information, Lis saw that the name the man had written down was 'Levi', a popular Hebrew name. To Lis's surprise, Levi explained that his name was Jewish, that he was an Igbo, and that the Igbo were Jews.

Lis knew of the Igbo – who number over 30 million in Nigeria and are the country's third-largest ethnic group – in connection with their attempt to secede from Nigeria and create the Republic of Biafra (1967-1970), but he had never heard of an Igbo-Jewish link. Deciding to explore the matter, over the next seven years of research and fieldwork (culminating in his 2015 *Jewish identity among the Igbo of Nigeria: Israel's 'lost tribe' and the question of belonging in the Jewish state*) Lis spoke with over 500 Igbo, only two of whom rejected outright the idea that the Igbo were Jews.

On the other hand, when William Miles, professor of political science at Northeastern University, read in 2006 that there were Nigerians practising Judaism, he was far more sceptical. Having worked in West Africa for the better part of 30 years without hearing of or encountering Nigerian Jews, Miles initially doubted the emerging reports, but eventually travelled to Nigeria's federal capital, Abuja,¹ in 2009 in order to look into them.

I met Miles in late 2012, shortly after he had written *Jews of Nigeria: An Afro-Judaic odyssey* (2013), the first book by a Western academic devoted to the phenomenon of Igbo Jewish identity. Miles showed me related literature he had collected, and described a community of several thousand Nigerians who not only self-identified as descendants of the ten lost tribes of Israel,² but were practising what any religious Jew, of whatever denomination, would readily see as Rabbinic Judaism.³

As was the case with Lis and Miles prior to their respective encounters with Igbo Judaism, in 2012 my research on African Jews was centred on the Beta Israel, Ethiopia's ancient Jewish community.⁴ However, I soon embarked on the first of three visits to Abuja in order to conduct field research with its Igbo Jews during 2013 and 2014.⁵

The now widespread Igbo belief in a Jewish ancestry goes back at least as far as the 18th century. (Indeed, it may be said that from its beginnings in the 18th century the evolution of a pan-Igbo identity was intertwined with Jewish identity.) Recalling his African childhood⁶ in his autobiography *The interesting narrative of the life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa the African*, first published in London in 1789, the freed slave and abolitionist Olaudah Equiano wrote:

And here I cannot forbear suggesting what has long struck me very forcibly, namely, the strong analogy which even by this sketch, imperfect as it is, appears to prevail in the manners and customs of my countrymen, and those of the Jews, before they reached the Land of Promise ... for we had our circumcision (a rule I believe peculiar to that people): we had also our sacrifices and burnt offerings, our washings and purifications, on the same occasions as they had. As to the difference of colour between the Eboan [Ibo or Igbo] Africans and the modern Jews, I shall not presume to account for it.

Equiano concluded 'that the one people had sprung from the other': the Igbo were descendants of the Israelites. The prominent 20th-century British missionary Reverend G.T. Basden was similarly struck by the similarities between Biblical Judaism and Igbo religion. In his 1921 *Among the Ibos of Nigeria: An account of the curious and interesting habits, customs and beliefs of a little known African people by one who has for many years lived amongst them on close and intimate terms* he suggested: 'To any contemplating residence in the Ibo country, particularly those likely to be associated with native affairs, I would recommend a careful study of Levitical Law. In many ways the affinity between Native Law and the Mosaic System is remarkable'.

Such ideas about a kinship between Biblical Judaism and Igbo religion circulated quietly in Nigeria for decades, but it was during and after the Nigerian civil war (1967-1970), in which at least one million Igbo died in the failed bid for Biafran independence, that Igbo identification with and as Jews concretized. Igbo saw themselves as sufferers of genocide,⁷ like the Jews of World War II in Europe, and as inhabitants of a beleaguered plot of land surrounded by

of Nigerian Judaism see Lis (2011, 2015).

11. A *tallit* (Hebrew) is a four-cornered cloak with ritual fringes that is worn during prayer; a *kippah* (Hebrew) is a cap or head covering.

12. For the state of Israel's policies towards the Igbo and Igbo Jews see Lis (2011, 2012, 2015) and Levey (2014).

13. Torah ('teachings' in Hebrew) is the name used by Jews for the first five books (the Pentateuch, or Five Books of Moses) of the Hebrew Bible. More broadly, Torah can refer to the entire religious structure based upon those five books, i.e. Judaism.

14. On the struggles for recognition of the Igbo Jews that were or are in Israel see Lis (2011, 2012, 2015).

15. In Hebrew '*shavei yisrael*' means 'ones who have returned to Israel'. With Shavei Israel's assistance some 1,700 members of the Judaizing Bnei Menashe of northeastern India, who believe they are members of the lost tribes of Israel, formally converted to Judaism and resettled in Israel. For more on the Bnei Menashe's history see Halkin (2002). For more on Shavei Israel's activities with respect to the Bnei Menashe see <http://shavei.org/communities/bnei-menashe/>. For more on the organization's recent involvement with Nigeria's Igbo Jews see Blum (2015).

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Bruder, E. 2008. *The black Jews of Africa: History, religion, identity*. New

hostile forces, similar to the Jewish state of Israel. The war and its disastrous consequences initiated a still ongoing period of intense questioning among the Igbo concerning their history, present predicaments, and future prospects.

Most Igbo – including those who consider themselves genealogically Jewish, hold their indigenous ancestral Igbo religion to be a residual form of Judaism, believe their forebears settled in Nigeria after being exiled from the Land of Israel, and strongly identify with the state of Israel – subscribe to various forms of Christianity. As explained by African studies professor Johannes Harnischfeger in his 2011 paper on 'Secessionism in Nigeria', Igbo self-identification as Jews usually does not correlate with embracing Judaism:

In Igbo imagination it is easy to [be] both: Christian and Jew. A journal that serves as a discussion forum for Igbo secessionists published [in 2003] 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 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' ... 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'.

Following the Nigerian civil war, a small number of Igbo began to question why, if they were in fact Jews, they should continue practising Christianity. These seekers gradually found one another, acquired printed material on Judaism, photocopied what Jewish prayer books they could lay their hands on, taught themselves to read and pray in Hebrew, and scoured the internet for information on Jewish history, belief, and ritual. Their community, which practises Judaism but is not yet recognized by any Jewish denomination or by the state of Israel, numbers between 2,000 and 5,000 people throughout Nigeria.⁸

There are now three established Nigerian synagogues in Abuja, which is located in the centre of the country, most of whose members are Igbo. (There are some two dozen synagogues in the southern part of the country, but none in the predominantly Muslim north.) As there are no Nigerian rabbis, religious leadership has been taken up by laymen. Abuja's largest synagogue, for example, Gihon Hebrews' Synagogue, is headed by Elder Obadiah Agbai, a retired geologist. The three synagogues hold holiday and weekly Sabbath services, self-identify as Orthodox, and use available Orthodox prayer books, but Abuja's sprawl and the fact that its members are not concentrated in a particular area mitigates the possibility of one Nigerian Jewish house of worship for the entire city. An Orthodox Jew visiting from abroad, though perhaps needing to adjust to the Nigerian-accented Hebrew in which prayers are recited and sung, would find the services familiar and fairly easy to follow.

The significance of Biafra, the centrality of the state of Israel, pride in Jewish ancestry and practice, and questions (raised by Equiano as far back as 1789) surrounding the range of Jewish skin colour, predominate in Igbo Jews' discussions of their identity. All of these components were forcefully articulated to me, for example, by the musician Zadok Chayim ben Moshe. He also expressed pride in Igbo Jewry's autodidacticism, referencing the pioneering Igbo Hebrew teacher, author, and musician Chislon Eben Cohen Enyioha, who not only taught himself Hebrew using materials obtained from Israel's Academy of the Hebrew Language, but also used his musical gifts to compose lyrics and melodies that Igbo Jews use in worship and celebration.⁹

In addition, Zadok Chayim ben Moshe emphasized his awareness that although – antisemitic stereotyping notwithstanding – the physical appearance of Jews the world over has not differed much from that of the majority non-Jewish populations amongst whom they have lived for substantial periods of time, Western Jews sometimes find the possibility of there being black sub-Saharan African Jews difficult to grasp:

I am a Biafran. We have suffered a lot at the hands of Nigerians. Just as the Israelis obtained or got their freedom from the European world, I'm looking forward to getting my own freedom also ... I am a practising Jew. I'm proud to be a Jew, an Igbo Jew – African Jew, for that matter.

I am proud of myself. Africans, you see – mostly Igbo – nobody taught us this. Most of us Igbo grabbed this knowledge of Judaism through the social network, which is the internet. Like Eben Cohen – nobody taught him Hebrew. Now we are trying to retrace our root, to retrace our custom, to retrace our origin – from Africa.

I am black and I am Zadok. I'm Zadok and I'm black. I'm Zadok and I'm black! I want people to know that I am coming from Africa. We lost these things – we lost these practices, we lost these customs – but now we are realizing and trying to retrace back where we came from.

In contrast to the vast majority of Igbo who, if they maintain a sense of Jewish identity, do so while practising Christianity, Igbo Jews have severed themselves from the now dominant Christian religion. This separation meets with an array of reactions – hostility, suspicion, curiosity, tolerance, acceptance, support, or encouragement – from their family members, friends, neighbours, employers, and co-workers. The members of Abuja's Tikvat Israel Synagogue, for example, sometimes climb Byazhin Mountain, which towers over the neighbourhood and is in walking distance from the synagogue, in order to pray at its summit. A church group also holds services on the mountain in a small building it has constructed there. The open-air Jewish prayer area is demarcated by stones and has a large Star of David painted in its centre. In this manner Igbo Jews and their more numerous and established Christian neighbours share the mountaintop.

By now, a sizable portion of younger Igbo Jews have been born to parents practising Judaism and have never been involved in any other religion. Others have embraced Judaism independently, whether as young adults or at various later stages of life. Dayan Obidi, a university student in his 20s who worships at Tikvat Israel Synagogue when he is in Abuja, told me how he came to practise Judaism as an Igbo, described the primacy of his Jewish identity, and also spoke about how his friends have reacted to his religious transformation:

The question of how did I become a Jew is just like asking how did I become a man. This is me. This is who I am. And the issue of how do I decide or choose to remain Jewish is just like asking how a man chooses to stand up to his responsibilities. It's in you. It's what you're meant to be. You understand? It is the instinct. The first time I attended a Jewish gathering was about five years back, on a Shabbat [Sabbath]. Although it was the first time, I kind of had the feeling or sense of what they call déjà vu.

We in Nigeria are known as internet Jews because most of our Jewish learning and things we know are through the internet. Eben Cohen was my Hebrew instructor. We studied a lot, and with the enthusiasm in us, it just took us a little while and we learned Hebrew. Right now I have students of my own that I've taught Hebrew and they're now real cantors.

Initially my mates kind of marvelled or were surprised at this kind of weird, you know, faith I joined in. But they have to accept it. They have to accept me the way I am, because a friend is someone who accepts you the way you are. They know this is who I am. I tell my mates that this is the religion of our forefathers. The Israelis – this is how they live. If you want to worship the true God, you must find out from his servants how to worship him. So when we find that the Israelis who worship

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- God, this is what they do, we have to do the same. My mates have no option but to accept me the way I am. It's not a barrier. It's not a barrier to them.
- Sometimes migrations from Christianity to Judaism occur within a marriage. While this can pose a challenge for both partners, resulting in familial strife or separation, other couples find ways to accommodate each other's beliefs and practices. Sarah Ezenwa, a civil servant and energetic member of Gihon Hebrews' Synagogue, recounted her passage from Sabbatarian Christianity¹⁰ to various Pentecostal denominations and finally to Judaism, and how her Christian husband has accepted this last change:
- I became a Sabbatarian as a result of my parents. I was born into a Sabbath family. My father and my mother attended the Seventh-day's Church. On Saturdays no work was done in our house; we all went to the church. That is the foundation that I have from my parents. I attended other Pentecostal churches until I found my way back to Judaism after my marriage, and I am now worshipping in Abuja, in Gihon Synagogue.
- In 2009 I went to Israel because there was a desire in my heart to be where I'm supposed to be. I went seeking, trying to feed my soul, because I was so desperate ... When I got there, what I saw and what I experienced – I knew that all was real, and that the only thing that can bring my soul back is to go back to my roots.
- In my house we keep all the [Jewish] feasts, though my husband is still a Christian. We keep the Shabbat in my house and I come to the synagogue. I have three boys and a girl and they come with me to Gihon Synagogue. Gradually, my husband is trying to see the light. I thank Hashem [God], because it's really the path that I want to be on, because I know that my soul belongs to Israel.
- I bought his [her husband's] *tallit* and his *kippah*¹¹ and they are still waiting. Each Friday as we are lighting the Shabbat candles I tell him, 'Your *tallit* and your *kippah* are still waiting for you'.
- Given the very small number of Igbo practising Judaism relative to the larger Nigerian population, it can be difficult for unmarried men and women – whether they were born into families practising Judaism or embraced Judaism independently – to find Jewish partners. Orah Aniegbuka, of Abuja's Igbo Israel Heritage Synagogue, related how she recently found an Igbo Jewish husband from a distant Nigerian city, and expressed the view that Nigeria's Igbo Jewry is part of the larger Jewish diaspora:
- I was born and brought up a Jew. I got married to a Jewish man last month ... I thank the Most High who made it possible for me to get married to a Jew. I am proud to be a Jew because Judaism is a way of life and the tradition that our ancient forefathers performed – which our late forefathers denied, and they were sent to this country, Nigeria. Our people are in diaspora. I wish that one day the Most High will take us over there [Israel] when we have realized our mistakes.
- I met my husband, Yochanan, on Facebook. I did not see him for one day until the introduction between our families. It was the Most High that connected us divinely, through Facebook. I knew he was Jewish because he was putting on a cap, and that cap is a symbol. Whenever you see a man – whenever he puts on the cap, you know that this guy is a Jew. He had the
- cap in his picture on Facebook and that is what enticed me to send a friend request to him, because I knew that he is a Jew. I sent the friend request, which he accepted. Through chatting we got to know each other. I was living in Lagos, whereas he was living in Abuja.
- Understanding themselves to be part of the global Jewish community of the diaspora and the state of Israel, the Igbo and members of other ethnic groups practising Judaism in Nigeria are eager for religious and political recognition from world Jewry and the Jewish state.¹² Elder Pinchas Ogbukaa of Gihon Hebrews' Synagogue singled out isolation as the greatest challenge facing Nigerian Jewry: 'Officially, Israel has not accepted us as Jews. Yet our culture, our central way of life, points to nowhere in the universe except the ancient House of Israel. It is the aspiration and dream of the Torah-lovers¹³ of Nigeria from Abuja to Lagos, from Warri to Umuahia, from Port Harcourt to Onitsha, to break the isolation'. A younger member of Gihon Hebrews' Synagogue, Solomon Nnaemezuo Yaakob, a civil servant and prayer leader, expressed that same desire with greater urgency:
- We say we are Jews from blood. We are now excluded; we cannot go and participate as Jews in any place. I make an appeal that we be recognized, not excluded and isolated from other Jews. There needs to be a process to address this. How long will it take to resolve this matter? When will it be resolved? After our fathers pass away? After my generation passes away? We want our community to be well known, not isolated. If it is recognition by blood, there should be a fast mechanism to recognize it. And if it is by some other alternative, such as conversion, there should also be a fast mechanism. By whatever way, let it be done fast so that we will not continue to be isolated. The most important thing: let us be recognized.
- As detailed in Egorova and Perwez's (2010) ANTHROPOLOGY TODAY article on India's Bene Ephraim of Andhra Pradesh, self-identifying Jewish groups without documented historical connections to more established Jewish communities face considerable challenges in gaining such recognition, particularly as genealogical Jews.¹⁴ However, Daniel Limor – an Israeli activist for African Jewry – and the influential Shavei Israel organization have recently taken an interest in Igbo Jewry.¹⁵ Shavei Israel's Michael Freund and Rabbi Eliyahu Birnbaum accompanied Limor on an exploratory visit to Nigeria in December 2014, and the organization sent an emissary from Israel to southeastern Nigeria for two months in mid-2015 in order to teach Igbo Jews Hebrew and Judaism, and report back on his findings there. These new developments may not represent the 'fast mechanism' called for by Solomon Nnaemezuo Yaakob, but they have the potential to eventually mitigate Igbo Jewry's isolation and gain rabbinic recognition for the community, which would have a far-reaching impact on the progression of Igbo Jewish identity. ●



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Fig. 2. Solomon Nnaemezuo Yaakob cradles one of Gihon Hebrews' Synagogue's two Torah scrolls. Neither scroll is kosher: their Hebrew letters are not hand-written, and are printed on paper made to look like parchment. However, they are the synagogue's most prized possessions.
Fig. 3. Habakkuk Nwafor examines the Jewish prayer area he has demarcated with stones atop Byazhin Mountain. The members of Tikvat Israel Synagogue share the mountaintop with Christians who have built a small structure there. Nwafor has been building a structure to house Jewish worshippers on the mountain as well.
Fig. 4. Igbo Jewish worshippers atop Byazhin Mountain, with a view of Abuja behind them.
Fig. 5. An exterior concrete wall of the Nwafor family compound, with faded, weather-beaten Hebrew letters announcing the location of Tikvat Israel Synagogue beneath a blue and white Star of David.
Fig. 6. Four young cantors. In the foreground, far right, is Dayan Obidi.
Fig. 7. Harim Obidike (right) ceremoniously breaks a kola nut at the start of an Igbo Jews' community meeting presided over by Elder Obadiah Agbai (leader of Gihon Hebrews' Synagogue, centre) and Habakkuk Nwafor (leader of Tikvat Israel Synagogue, left).
Fig. 8. Chislon Eben Cohen Enyioha (centre) places a kippah on the head of baby Yishai, as the men prepare to enter Tikvat Israel Synagogue on Purim (the Festival of Lots) afternoon. An effigy of Haman, the villain of the Biblical Book of Esther, hangs in the background.



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