

THE EMERGING TREND OF BLACK AFRICAN ZIONISM: THE FACTS AND MYTHS OF CLAIMS OF JEWISH ORIGINS BY THE IGBO OF NIGERIA

NWANKWO TONY NWAEZEIGWE

*Institute of African Studies,
University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria*

Abstract

In recent times there has been increasing interest among the Igbo to define their identity in terms of Jewish origins. This has led to the formation of some Zionist-oriented organizations. Among such organizations are Igbo Interests World Wide, College of Igbo Elders for Igbo Reformation Back to Jerusalem Reconciliation Movement, Ibo-Hebrew Language Project, and now the trending Obu Gad-Aguleri Hypothesis of Igbo-Jewish origins. Their common objective seems to revolve around the quest for the official recognition of the Igbo as part of the World Jewry and subsequent return to Eretz Israel. The present paper, therefore, examines the facts, myths, and probabilities of this seemingly emerging trend of Zionism in Black Africa. It begins with the examination of the existing three theories of Igbo origins. It, however, concludes with the probability of a remote Igbo - Jewish connection.

INTRODUCTION

The Igbo are often referred to as the Jews of Black Africa by some writers. The reasons for such characterization range from their habitual enterprising spirit, particularly in the areas of commerce, industry, and education, which often earn them the unguarded envy of their neighbors. This has led to their recurring experience of organized hostilities in the hands of their host communities. Beyond this circumstantial identity, however, is the theory of Igbo-Jewish origins which dates back to 1789. This theory, controversial though it might appear, carries strands of irresistible facts that tend to create the historical probability of a remote Igbo-Jewish connection; thus hazarding the rationale behind the current upsurge of interest to create a Zionist field of interest in Black Africa through the Igbo.

There is no doubt that the origins of the various peoples of Black Africa have often formed one of the primary foci of early historians and ethnographers working on the history and culture of sub-Saharan Africa. Most often, these researchers are confronted with endless catechisms of myths and legends of origins, which are in most cases used as legitimacy charters for socio-political title claims and land disputes. This is common with most societies of Black Africa, but prominent among the centralized polities.

Thus, among the Hausa there exists the *Bayijida* myth and legend of origin which talks of the *Hausa-Bokwei* and *Banza* kingdoms with their obvious spurious Yemeni connections. Similarly, among the Yoruba, there is equally the *Oduduwa* myth and legend with Ile-Ife as its revolving center, and the pendulum of origin probably pointing towards Saudi Arabia. However, these myths and legends most often speak more about the origins and migrations of mythical figures or heroes whose descendants evolved into dynasties, leaving out the ordinary people who were probably met by the often invading heroes.

Most scholars, however, attribute the rise of these mythical and legendary traditions to outside influences. For instance, in the cases of the Hausa and Yoruba, Islam appears to be the guiding factor in their respective attempts to link their origins to Yemen and Mecca. Roland Oliver and J.D. Fage appear to be saying the obvious when they wrote:

It cannot be entirely without significance that over large stretches of the central and western Sudan traditions ascribe the foundation of early dynasties to pre-Islamic immigrants from Yemen.... There can be no doubt that these traditions as we know them today represent hypothetical explanations suggested by early Muslim literati for the situation which they found in Sudan.¹

J.A. Atanda in agreeing with Oliver and Fage confronted the *Oduduwa* hypothesis of Arabian origin with traditional evidence of pre-*Oduduwa* inhabitants of Ile-Ife.² Most importantly is the fact that similarities between the primordial cultures of the Hausa and Yoruba on the one hand, and the two and the Arabs on the other cannot be explained beyond the influence of Islam. The point however remains that these traditions came to be popular among the two peoples, who quite often cite them on occasions in the hope that such ascriptions will consider them more Islamic than the other or others.

Among the Igbo, however, an all-embracing and widely accepted myth and legend of origins do not exist. This can rightly be explained by the absence of centralized kingdoms with its institutionalized instruments of transmitting oral traditions. In the case of the Igbo also, the transmission of oral traditions is done in bits of origins, migrations, and settlements of individual towns and villages. Although this is equally evident in other traditional African societies, the case of the Igbo seems to be more historically institutionalized in the absence of a domineering politically-driven myth of common origin. Thus, in considering the origins of the Igbo people, every piece of evidence must be examined in the light of the prehistoric origins of the peoples of West Africa, and Africa as a whole.

It is in accordance with this that historians, after careful considerations of the several traditions of origin of the peoples of Africa, and placing them on the relevant cultural matrix, arrived at three schools, or what is often called theories of Igbo origins. These include the Theory of Independent Origin or Autochthony Theory, Niger-Benue Confluence Theory, and the Theory of Jewish Origins or what is normally called the Oriental Hypothesis. Being that the question of Igbo origins has over time remained a source of controversy the need to examine in appreciable details, the contents of the three theories become necessary.

THE THEORY OF AUTOCHTHONY

According to the theory of autochthony, the Igbo originated in their present homeland. In other words, they did not migrate from anywhere but rather were created in their present abode. Those who propound this theory point to such evidence as the existence of some settlements which have lost their traditions of migration and settlement which often arose out of amnesia due to their long period of continuous settlement. Such settlements often dismiss the issue of their origins and settlements with the claim that they sprouted from the ground. Although common among the high-density zones of the Northern Igboland, historians regard such claim as both a response to the problem of amnesia, which resulted from a long period of permanent settlement, and claims over disputed rights, such as traditional chieftaincy titles, land, and other related matters.

However, the present study is primarily concerned with the dimension dealing with the evidence of long continuous occupation. And this can only be explained from the evidence offered by archaeology and such other related sources as linguistics and palynology. But since linguistics belongs characteristically to the second theory, it will therefore not be considered at the present stage.

Adebisi Sowunmi of the University of Ibadan had suggested in her palynological research that as remote as three thousand years ago, settled agricultural populations had existed in the area presently known as Igboland.³ What this means is that the ancestors of the Igbo might have occupied the present Igboland since well over one thousand years before Christ. Sowunmi's position appears to be supported by some archaeological evidence. Apart from Thurstan Shaw's monumental excavations at Igbo-Ukwu, which was dated to the ninth century AD by Carbon-14 dating method, the marathon excavations by D. D. Hartle, which were carried out in different parts of Igboland, appear to have revealed considera-

ble evidence of the antiquity of Igbo origins and settlement. During his tenure at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, he excavated fourteen archaeological sites in Igboland.⁴ Among these sites, however, the most revealing was the one carried out at the University of Nigeria Agricultural farm, which yielded artifacts of pottery shards among other objects.

In this site, two carbon-14 dates associated with some of the pottery materials recorded the age of 2,555+-130 BC and 1,460 +- 115Bc.⁵ Since pottery-making is associated with agricultural communities, and agricultural communities are associated with sedentary societies, it thus suggests a much earlier period of primary settlement. Other archaeological sites excavated by Hartle and which suggest equally evidence of the antiquity of settlement, include the *Isi Ugwu Obukpa* Rock-shelter, which was a stone-age culture, the *Ifeka Garden* site at Ezira, the *Nwankor* site in Bende, and the *Ezi-Ukwu Ukpá* Rock-Shelter in Afikpo, which was also a stone-age culture.⁶

Although archaeology does not offer direct evidence on the identity of the bearers of most of the excavated material cultures, there is however evidence, based on the interpretation of the available artifacts, that the present inhabitants of the Igbo culture area might have descended from those whose material cultures were unearthed. However, when all this evidence is put together, Igbo presence in their present abode with a defined common identity might not have been later than four thousand years ago when considered in the context of linguistic evidence. But the fact however remains that archaeology alone cannot provide all the needed answers to Igbo origins and settlement, hence the need to explore such evidence as linguistics, which is embodied in the Niger-Benue Conference Theory.

THE NIGER-BENUE CONFLUENCE THEORY

The Niger-Benue Confluence theory is hinged on the linguistic theory of glottochronology and lexicostatistics. Glottochronology explains the evolution of a language in terms of the rate of change of its basic vocabularies over a thousand years. On the other hand, lexicostatistics explains the statistical calculation and study of the vocabulary changes.⁷ According to this theory, the *Kwa* language family, which is a branch of the larger *Niger-Congo* language family of Africa, gave birth to such languages as the Igbo, Yoruba, Edo, Idoma, Igala, Igbira, Ewe, Akan, and Nupe, Bassa, Igede, among other languages, most of which are domiciled in the West African sub-region. It is believed to have branched off from the parent *Niger-Congo* proto-language about ten thousand years ago. Similarly, the Igbo and Yoruba are believed to have separated from the *Kwa* proto-language about four thousand years ago.⁸

This theory no doubt explains the closeness between the Igbo, Edo, and Idoma, as well as the Igala, Itsekiri, and the Yoruba, suggesting that they might have separated from the other in more recent times than between the Igbo and Yoruba. It also explains the existence of some common vocabularies among the Igbo, Idoma, Igala, Yoruba, Edo, Bassa, Igede, Ebira, and Itsekiri among other neighboring languages of the same family.

Thus, among the Igbo, Yoruba, Edo, and other related languages, there exist frequent occurrences of common vocabularies. For instance, the common food item of tropical origin with one common name among the Igbo, Igala, Idoma, Igbira, Edo, and Yoruba, is *Ogede* (Plantain/Banana). Among the Igbo, Igala, Idoma, and Edo, you equally have almost identical names for the traditional four-market-day week. Thus, the Igbo four market days – *Eke*, *Olie*, *Nkwo*, and *Afor* are similar to those of the Igala, except *Olie* (*Oye*) which is called *Ede*. Other similar common vocabularies include rock (stone) which is commonly known as *Okwute* in Igbo and *Okuta* in Edo and Yoruba. The Igbo *Onu* which means the mouth is also similar to Yoruba *enu*.

Northcote W. Thomas, one of the most celebrated colonial anthropologists, could not rightly explain the occurrence of common vocabularies in Yoruba, Edo, and Igbo languages. While he tried to explain these occurrences in both Edo and Yoruba in terms of dynastic relationship, for the Igbo and Edo he found it difficult to explain. Thus, he stated:

Among the words common to Edo and Yoruba are such terms as *Oke* (hill), *Okuta* (stone), and the like, and the reason for their appearance in both families of languages is first, that the line of kings which formerly ruled the Edo came from the Ife country; and that, secondly, hills and stones being virtually unknown in the Edo country, terms for them would naturally be adopted from the language of the immigrants.⁹

Concerning the Igbo and Edo, he continued:

There are certain resemblances between the Edo and Ibo languages which are more difficult to explain. Parts of the body for example, like the mouth (*unu*), are known by identical names and here it is difficult to suggest an explanation.¹⁰

All these similarities in vocabularies tend to point to one direction. That is that the Igbo, Edo, Yoruba, Igede, Igala, Idoma, Nupe, and Igbira once in the remote past spoke one common language, were one people, and lived in one common area. This common area of their abode, researchers have identified as the area around where Rivers Niger and Benue met. From this point, it has been suggested, the forebears of these groups dispersed to different areas, and aided by environmental hindrances and long periods of continuous isolation evolved into their present distinct forms of language.

The Niger-Benue Confluence Theory is the one riddle in Igbo origins which if followed to its logical conclusion could terminate at the *Biblical Tower of Babel*. But then in explaining this riddle, one must first take notice of the distinction between the origin of languages and origin of peoples. Can each exist in isolation of the other? The explanation here is that while it is not possible to isolate a people's origin from the origin of their language since communication is the essence of being, either of them could go into extinction, or both could jointly go out of existence. Equally notable is the fact that a new language could evolve as a result of circumstances arising from cultural and environmental confrontations.

Examples of the latter occurrences could be noted in the existence of virtually unintelligible dialects in a given language. For instance, among the Igbo, the *Ikwerre* dialect of the Southern Igbo sub-group assumes a form that makes a first-time Igbo visitor to often assume that it does not form part of the wider Igbo linguistic group. Other extreme examples include the Yiddish language of the German Jews and, the Swahili of the East African coast.

In the case of those people who have lost their original languages, the Ngoni people of Southern Africa, who were once members of the Nguni-speaking people of present South Africa is a living example. The Ngoni people who now live mainly in Malawi, Zambia, Tanzania and, Mozambique migrated from present South Africa in the wake of the 19th century *Mfecane*.¹¹ Most of them, although retaining strong features of their original culture, have lost their original Nguni tongue, wholesomely adopting the languages of their host communities.

Equally revealing in this aspect is the extinct language of ancient Egyptians, the Assyrian Aramaic language, which was the language of commerce and *lingua franca* in most parts of the Middle East at the time of Jesus Christ, as well as the Chaldean language of the Babylonians, which of course still retains some significant features in the liturgy of the Iraqi-based minority Chaldean Church. Although extinct and regarded mainly as historical relics, both languages however serve to authenticate Biblical traditions.

The Niger-Benue Confluence Theory of Igbo origins thus appears to have established itself as a subject of historical inquiry that cannot easily be discarded without leaving certain ethnolinguistic questions unresolved. In one important respect, it explains the antiquity of settlement and interactions of the ancestors of the various peoples that today live in this part of the great continent of Africa. Beyond this linguistic evidence is however the question of similarities in culture, bound by certain religious customs and traditions forming the nexus of Igbo claims to Jewish origins.

THE THEORY OF JEWISH ORIGINS

The Theory of Jewish Origin or what is equally referred to as Oriental Hypothesis is yet another riddle of Igbo origin which, apart from being webbed in controversy cannot be dismissed as mere mythical and legendary imagination. In fact, its strength lies in its time-depth, having been dated to the late 18th century, when nothing was known about the Igbo and their culture beyond the accounts of Slave Merchants.

Unlike the conventional Oriental Hypothesis which was inspired by European Colonial and Arab adventurism in Black Africa, the Igbo theory of Jewish origins began as a pre-colonial reaction against European slavery and racism in the Diaspora. Apart from being based on extant cultural similarities, it coincided with the era when the Jews were still in bondage in several countries of the world like the Black Africans. So, there was a question of Equiano being influenced in his theory by the modern advancement of the World Jewry in science and technology.

In 1789, an Igbo ex-slave who, with the inherent traditional Igbo spirit of enterprise, worked in the day and studied in the night to free himself from both physical and mental slavery, published his autobiography, a first-hand original account of the Igbo, their hinterland, and their culture. Olaudah Equiano in great detail explained and subsequently propounded the theory of Jewish origins of the Igbo. Reminiscent of the Jewish land flowing with milk and honey, Equiano opened up by painting the picture of the 18th century Igbo society thus:

Our land is uncommonly rich and fruitful, and produces all kinds of vegetables in great abundance. We have plenty of Indian corn, and vast quantities of cotton and tobacco. Our pineapples grow without cultures; they are about the size of the largest sugar-loaf, and timely flavoured. We have also spices of different kinds, particularly pepper; and a variety of delicious fruits which I have never seen in Europe;

together with gums of various kinds; and honey in abundance. All our industry is exerted to improve those blessings of nature. Agriculture is our chief employment; and everyone, even the children and women are engaged in it. Thus, we are all habituated to labour from our earliest years. Everyone contributes something to the common stock, and as we are unacquainted with idleness, we have no beggars. The benefits of such a mode of living are obvious. The West Indian planters prefer the slaves of Benin or Eboe to those of any other part of Guinea, for their hardiness, intelligence, integrity, and zeal.¹²

The above graphic presentation no doubt would appear to have further debunked the demographic hypothesis of Igbo enterprise and migration. But beyond this, is Equiano's exposition of the basis of traditional Igbo belief. He proved beyond all reasonable doubts that Igbo belief in one Supreme God goes beyond the era of Christianity in the land. This he averred by the statement that "*the natives believe that there is one creator of all things*"¹³

Today, one could only but remain dumbfounded by the primordial origins of such divinely oriented-Igbo names as that of the present author, *Nwaezeigwe*, meaning "the son of the King of Heaven," *Chukwuokike* – God the Creator, *Chukwujindu* – God the custodian of life, *Chukwunwike* – The all-powerful God, *Chukwunenye* – God the Giver, and *Chinazo* – God the Savior, among others. It is evident that Christianity cannot lay claim to the idea and origins of these names, since up to the present times most Igbo Christians still prefer popular European names, which are in most cases said to be historically connected with ancient Roman and Greek traditions rather than Christianity for baptism, to their indigenous names which possess better understandable connections with God.

On specific Igbo – Jewish connections, Equiano was emphatic:

We practiced circumcision like the Jews, and made offerings and feasts on that occasion in the same manner as they did. Like them also our children were named from some events, some circumstances, or fancied foreboding, at the time of their birth. I was named Olaudah which, in our language, signifies vicissitude or fortune also; one favored, and having a loud voice, and well spoken.¹⁴

But of most striking in similarities is the Levitical code of the Jews and the Igbo customary rites of cleanliness. As Equiano again pointed out:

I have before remarked that the natives of this part of Africa are extremely cleanly. This necessary habit of decency was with us a part of religion, and therefore we had many purifications and washings; in-

deed almost as many, and used on the same occasions, if my recollection does not fail me, as the Jews. Those that touched the dead at any time were obliged to wash and purify themselves before they could enter a dwelling house. Every woman at certain times was forbidden to come into a dwelling – house, or touch any person, or anything we eat.¹⁵

Equiano went further in the above account to report that he at one time as a kid who was very fond of his mother had cause to violate the custom, for which he was kept isolated with his mother till evening. In agreement with Equiano's observations, the book of *Leviticus* chapter 15, verses 19 to 23, explains this aspect of the Jewish Levitical code, the *Torah*

When a woman has a discharge of blood which is her regular discharge, from her body, she shall remain in her impurity seven days; whoever touches her shall be unclean until evening. Anything that she lies on during her impurity shall be unclean; and anything that she sits on shall be unclean. Anyone who touches any object on which she has slept shall wash his clothes, bathe in water, and remain unclean until evening; and anyone who touches any object on which she has sat shall wash his clothes, bathe in water, and remain unclean until evening. Be it the bedding or be it the object, on which she has sat, or touching it shall be unclean until evening.¹⁶

Olaudah Equiano's thesis of similarity of culture between the Igbo and the Jews was carried forward in the 19th century by another Igbo scholar of liberated class, Lt. Col. (Dr) James Africanus Beale Horton. In what appears as a rebuttal to Dr. Baikie's declaration that "*the religion of the Eboes is entirely pagan*," Horton asserted that, "*the religion of the Eboes is Judaism, intermixed with numerous pagan rites and ceremonies.*"¹⁷ As Christopher Fyfe further put it:

He quoted from Crowther and Taylor to show similarities between Ibo theology and worship and those of the Old Testament Jews, hazarding the theory of a Jewish dispersion over Africa.¹⁸

However, during the four decades that followed British colonization of Igboland, and against the back-drop of the Hamitic hypothesis propounded by C. G. Seligman, those colonial anthropologists who ventured into the subject of Igbo origins clearly departed from the concept of Jewish

origins. The central premise of the Hamitic hypothesis is that Black Africa never had any civilization that developed out of her own initiative but had such civilizations imposed by a band of White-men who invaded the continent through either the Mediterranean or the Red sea carrying superior cultures. In fact, Black Africa had no history outside the history of the activities of these White-men in Black Africa. As Seligman put it:

The civilizations of Africa are the civilizations of the Hamites, its history the record of these peoples and of their interaction with the two other African stocks, the Negro and the Bushmen, whether this influence was exerted by highly civilized Egyptians or by such wider pastoralists as are represented at the present day by the Beja and the Somali.¹⁹

In Igboland, H.R. Palmer and M.D.W. Jeffreys, the two colonial ethnographers who worked among the Aro and Nri sub-groups respectively, did not at one moment, in the course of their monumental researches on these two sub-groups, contemplate the idea of any similarity between certain Igbo practices and those of the Old Testament Jews. They were all the while guided by the hypothetical imaginations of C.G. Seligman. In applying the Hamitic hypothesis in their analyses of Igbo cultural values, the two men described the Aro and Nri as belonging to a superior race through whom what appeared to be superior cultural values got to the Igbo. In the words of H.R. Palmer:

... the only reason why the Ibos are a more advanced people—a people of distinctly higher grade than the Ibibio and Ejaw is because, firstly of Aro teaching and secondly of a large admixture of in certain areas—particularly the Abakaliki and Enugu region – of Aro blood.²⁰

What Sir Palmer did not however know about the Aro is that they have more Ibibio blood in their veins than that of the Igbo. And that there is nothing more superior about Aro values than what they learned from the Igbo on their arrival from the Ibibio country. For instance, the concept of oracular adjudication is not indigenous to the Ibibio but a primordial intrinsic aspect of Igbo cosmology. Before the Aro *Ubinu-Ukpabi* (Long Juju) came prominent, such similar oracles as the *Aghala* of Awka, *Kamalu* of Ozuzu and *Igwe-Kala* of Umuneoha among so many others had been in existence on the cosmic terrains of Igbo credulity.

Neither could the Aro be said to be imbued with any outstanding martial prowess beyond the services offered by the Eda-Ohafia-Abam group of cultic head-hunters. Similarly, the Aro cannot claim to have introduced long-distance trade. The fact is that they emerged in the course

of the trans-Atlantic slave trade in the 18th century as a result of their primordial connections with the Efik-Ibibio group to dominate the trade in slaves in some parts of the interior Igboland.

The Isu sub-culture group of the Southern Igbo, apart from being the most widely dispersed single Igbo sub-group, was well-known for legitimate long-distance trade. They dominated the interior commerce of most parts of pre-colonial Igboland. Their activities were so dominant that early European visitors described interior Igboland collectively as *Isuama* country, after the Isu people. For instance, Major A.G. Leonard in his effort to locate the home of the well-known itinerant Nri ritual agents described their town, Nri as being situated in Isu country. Thus, wrote Leonard:

Nri or Nshi – evidently the same place, but a different pronunciation of it—is a town which is situated about forty to fifty miles to the east i.e. behind Onitsha, on the east bank of the Niger, just below its confluence with the Anambra, in the district of Isu or Isuama, or the country of the Isu.²¹

To show the extent at which Isu people were held in high esteem, Dr. James Africanus Beale Horton was reported stating that he “*descended from the royal blood of Isuama Eboe*.”²² Even, in colonial days, C.K. Meek was to remark on the distinct character of the Isu as long-distance traders. He observed that:

Among men the propensity towards trade varies considerably in different groups. Thus, in Owerri Division, the large group of people known as the Isu are noted traders, and on any of the main roads leading to Port-Harcourt hundreds of Isu can be seen making their way on foot or on bicycles to and from this center of trade.²³

One thing that should be noted in respect of the above observation by C.K. Meek is that, the Isu trading activities could not have just begun with the advent of British colonialism. It is therefore not improbable to assume that what C.K. Meek observed was merely a sequence of daily activities that had been taking place many centuries earlier. And it is equally probable that the ability of the Isu to sustain this primordial commercial tradition over time could be attributed to the fact that they were *ab initio* primarily engaged in legitimate commerce. On the contrary, because the Aro grew into prominence following the rise of the trans-Atlantic slave trade,

they evidently went out of commercial circulation with the collapse of the illegitimate trade.

It is therefore clear that Palmer's hypothesis of a superior Aro race was not based on any primordial or extant body of evidence. However, one notable distinct of Aro personality is their acclaimed craftiness, which pitches the other Igbo sub-groups against them. Thus, among the Igbo, there has always been the general tendency to believe that the Aro habitually put on dual personalities in any business transaction. This assumption followed the seeming belief by most Aro that they are, in line with Palmer's hypothesis, more imbued with superior intelligence than their other Igbo counterpart.

For M.D.W. Jeffreys, the Nri probably originated from the Igala; while the ruling dynasty of Igala originated from Jukun, and the Jukun, on the hand migrated from Egypt. Using the *Ichi* scarification, which he erroneously ascribed to Nri origins, as the basis of his hypothesis, Jeffreys believed that the practice of *Ichi* title markings on the face originated from Egypt through the Umunri. With this, he appears to hazard the Hamitic origins of the Igbo culture. Stating this he wrote:

The Ibo evidence in support of an independent invention is nil. The Umundri group claim to have migrated to their present sites from the north and to be a branch of the Igala. The Igala ruling group claims to have come from the Jukun and the Jukun derive from the east.²⁴

To both Matthews and Jeffreys therefore, no evidence suggesting the Jewish origins of the Igbo was ever stumbled upon. Rather, what they believed was that if at any rate Igbo origins could be traced to external roots, definitely it could have been to Egypt or any Middle Eastern country other than the land of the Jews; and which could have been through the Umunri (Nri) connection.

But it was Reverend G.T. Basden of the Church Missionary Society, who raised very interesting questions on the Jewish origins of the Igbo, more than even Olaudah Equiano and James Africanus Horton. His observation in this respect was straight and clear. Said he:

Over twenty years ago, I wrote: '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.'²⁵

Basden went further to engage in what could rightly be called an incising intellectual promenade into the similarities between Igbo practices

and the Old Testament Laws, using the Bible in most cases to justify his comparisons. He observed that among the Igbo, there were a lot of light and red-skinned individuals that could easily pass for the average Caucasian. He further noted that their carved masquerade, (masks) wore the facial features of the Middle East and not negro.²⁶

Basden's observation could be said to be a collaboration of an earlier description by a British slave merchant, Captain Hugh Crow, in his memoirs which was published in 1830 after his death. Hugh Crow described the Igbo complexion of being "*generally of a yellowish tinge, but varying to a jet black.*"²⁷ Bringing these observations to the present, there is no doubt that the Igbo have frequent unexplained occurrences of light-skinned complexion more than any member of the Kwa language family. This prominent racial feature could lead researchers of Igbo – Jewish tradition to bend towards a possible connection.

On specific similarities between the Jewish Levitical code and Igbo Native Law and Customs, it is however important to acknowledge the remarkable high level of morality and religious observances among the pre-colonial Igbo. It is, therefore, possible that a parallel of what obtained in Igboland could be drawn with what obtained among the Old Testament Jews.

Among these similarities was the law relating to retaliation and sanctuary in respect of murder and man-slaughter. These are explained in the Book of Deuteronomy Chapters IV:41-42 and XIX.²⁸ Like the Jews, the Igbo in applying the law of retaliation in respect of the killing of one's kinsman, recognize the distinction between murder and manslaughter. Although no cities of refuge existed in Igboland as in the case of the Old Testament Jews, the Igbo had their counterparts in shrines and related institutions.

A man who committed murder (*Ochu-Ukwu*) if not immediately apprehended, had such options as: hand himself over to the people, who could summarily deal with him; flee to an unknown land or a community deemed hostile by his people; or take refuge in an oracle, thereby becoming an *Osu*, in such case becoming a perpetual property of the oracle. The *Osu* caste system is mostly practiced among the Southern Igbo, specifically among the Owerri-Oratta sub-group. Elsewhere in Igboland, particularly among the Western and Riverain Igbo sub-groups where *Osu* caste system did not exist, such a person who did not have a hiding place was normally hanged once apprehended.

On the other hand, the man who unwillingly caused the death of his kinsman (*Ochu-Nta*), if able to escape from instant justice had the prospect

of returning back home after some number of years in exile. He was required to stay away from his community for a ritual period of seven years, when it was believed, the spirit of retaliation might have died down and the spirit of the killed rested. As Achebe graphically noted:

The only course open to Okonkwo was to flee from the clan. It was a crime against the earth goddess to kill a clansman, and a man who committed it must flee from the land. The crime was of two kinds, male and female. Okonkwo had committed the female, because he had been inadvertent. He could return to the clan after seven years.²⁹

In some communities of the Western and Riverain groups, particularly in Ibusa, a man who killed his kinsman accidentally and succeeded in taking refuge in the house of the *Ikwelle-Ibusa*, the Warrior King of the town was automatically granted reprieve by the latter by immediately initiating the culprit into the *Ogbuu* warrior cult. The man was immediately required to commence the *Ikwa-Ochu* ceremony, which is the process of atonement through the formal initiation into the *Ogbuu* warrior society. The palace of the *Ikwelle* was therefore a kind of sanctuary for remorseful killers.

However, in respect of the killing of a member of a neighboring town, there might be no proper means of settlement except a replacement from the offending community. In the event of the latter not conceding to the request of the town whose member was killed, the option would be war, or a declaration of a state of enmity between the two towns and the subsequent plot for revenge. This is again noted by Achebe in the Ikemefuna episode of his *Things Fall Apart* when the people of Mbaino murdered the wife of Ogbuefi Udo of Umuofia, and Umuofia people gave them an ultimatum to choose between war and atonement of the murdered woman, in which a female replacement to the murdered woman and a male—Ikemefuna were given to Umuofia in appeasement.³⁰

Basden was also quick to observe during his time, the strong displeasure among the Igbo of women putting on men's attire, and the men doing likewise. He saw this Igbo attitude as being consistent with similar injunctions in the Book of *Deuteronomy* Chapter xxii: 29.³¹ One does not however need to go into the issues relating to circumcision and menstrual purity of the woman, since these have earlier been dealt with. But it remains to explain the practice of female circumcision among the Igbo, which incidentally did not exist among the Levitical Jews.

Most Black African societies where morality took the principal stage of religion and where the culture of proper clothing was not highly developed saw in the practice of female circumcision more of a moral control measure than mere religious rites. A situation where most young women

had their bodies unguardedly exposed only required an extraordinary means of sexual restriction on the part of the women against the menacing advances of the male sexual hawks. Hence, despite the widespread nude culture among the Igbo of the time, there was a high rate of morality. The Igbo might have therefore adopted the practice of female circumcision as a reaction to the needs of their moral values in relation to the dearth of clothing.

Other similar laws that Basden noted were those relating to adultery, as recorded in Leviticus xx:10, and witchcraft also as recorded in Leviticus xx:27. He equally saw in the Igbo New Yam Festival (*Iwa-ji*) a resemblance to the Hebrew Feast of Tabernacle. He further traced the cultic Igbo respect to the elderly to the Biblical injunction in Leviticus chapter xix: 32. But the most striking resemblance between the two peoples is the law of inheritance. Apart from the Igbo being patrilineal like the Jews, the old practice of inheriting one's late brother's young wife appears to have taken the same form with that of the Old Testament Jews.³²

When therefore all these posers are put together, one is left with no option than to accept the fact of a connection, in some remote past, between the Old Testament Jews and their Igbo counterparts. Otherwise, how could one rightly explain the basis of these similarities? Much as there are equally elements of evidence suggestive of the possible veracity of the two earlier theories, the theory of Jewish origins raises such questions that one cannot jettison without risking a case of throwing away the bathwater with the baby away.

For one thing, both the Jews and the Igbo share common sentimental attachments to their homelands. They are both imbued with a strong spirit of enterprise, which often attracted the envy of their host communities. Both peoples have equally suffered repeated mob attacks and outright pogroms by their respective hosts on account of, not just their enterprising successes, but also their religious identities. In fact, Captain Hugh Crow made several references to the distinctive character of the Igbo in respect of their preference by plantation owners in America. In one such remark, he stated:

The Eboes, tho' not generally a robust type, are a well-formed people, of the middle stature: many of their women are of remarkably symmetrical shape, and if white, would in Europe be deemed beautiful. This race is, as has been already remarked, of a more mild and engaging disposition than the other tribes, particularly the Quaws and though less suited for the severe manual labour of the field, they are

preferred in the West Indian colonies for their fidelity and utility, as domestic servants, particularly if taken there when young, as they then become the most industrious of any of the tribes taken to the colonies.³³

The Igbo experience under slavery had always been observed in the Jews under similar conditions. Be it in Egypt, Babylon, Assyria, Persia, Macedonia, ancient Roman Empire, Arab Caliphates, Ottoman Empire, or European nations. Thus, the reference to the Igbo as the Jews of Black Africa might not have arisen without reference to the foregoing evidence of common experiences.

It is not therefore out of place for the Igbo to lay claim to the membership of the World Jewry, a status which is anchored on the claim that their progenitors belonged to one of the lost tribes of Israel. They further link this claim to the etymology of the term Igbo, which is interpreted to be a corruption of the word "Hebrew", which originated from the earliest European reference to Igbo as "Heebo."³⁴

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing body of evidence, it seems there is ample evidence of some similarities between some aspects of the ancient Hebrew practices and elements of traditional Igbo values. There is also the evidence of the unexplained widespread occurrence of a strong ting of light complexion skin pattern among the Igbo when compared to other ethnic groups in Nigeria. And if this remains unexplained in the context of racial classification, then it becomes explicable only within the context of Igbo-Jewish origins.

The description of the Igbo as the Jews of Black Africa would seem to be explicable not only in their achievement instinct and widespread persecution in foreign lands in the manner of the Jewish experiences but also in the context of the two peoples being often described as exceptionally intelligent.

Above all, the fact that the earliest European reference to the Igbo was in the form of the word "Heebo" may actually suggest that the word might have actually been a corruption of Hebrew since there appears to be no record of the origin of the word "Igbo." In other words, the probability weighs more in favor of the claim that the word "Igbo" originated from Hebrew and a yet to be determined source.

There is no gainsaying the fact that there are obvious similarities between the Igbo and the Jews, which probably point to the fact that the Igbo claim of being part of the lost tribes of Israel might not be totally out of place. This probability further points to the fact that the present negroid

racial character of the Igbo might have the consequence of long periods of interactions and miscegenation between the aboriginal Black African Stock and the immigrant Jews on the one hand, and the environmental circumstances arising from the climatic condition of the environment.

In laying credence to the above possibility, the case of the Ethiopian Falashas rightly comes to mind. Thus, even though their racial character is clearly distinct from those of the Jews from other parts of the world, yet they are classified as Jews. This evidence is further supported by the fact that even among the contemporary Jews, one could still notice some distinctive color differences, with each of the Groups evidently assuming the racial character of their host communities. These characteristic distinctions are evident in the cases of such Jewish groups as the *Sephardi* of mainly medieval Spain, other Western European nations, and the Mediterranean region, the *Ashkenazi* of mainly Eastern Europe, as well as the Oriental group of the Middle East. It would therefore appear hazardous to define a group's Jewish identity only in racial terms. Thus, if all other facts clearly point to the probability of Igbo – Jewish origins, except in fact the racial factor, the evidence would seem to tilt in favor of the tradition that the Igbo of Nigeria might have originated from the Jews.

To most Igbo therefore, the reason for the continued hostility of the Muslim Hausa-Fulani ethnic group in the North against them might have been their professed claim of Jewish origins. This possibility of origins appears to equally account for the periodic spillover of the Middle East conflicts in Nigeria, in which the Igbo are always the principal targets of unprovoked anti-Israeli demonstrations and attacks.

A recent random survey carried out by the present writer among some Igbo young men shows that a large number of the Igbo youth would be willing to enlist in the Israeli Defense Force (IDF), to fight the Arabs. Allied to this also, is the rising desire of some Igbo groups and individuals to immigrate to *Eretz* Israel. This desire has resulted in the emergence of a number of Igbo Zionist organizations. This rising interest has also led to a gradual shift among the Igbo from the stereotyped Judaism called "Sabbath Missions", to the actual practice of Orthodox Judaism. For instance, Rabi Ike, who hails from Nteje, a town in the present Anambra State of Nigeria, lives and practices Orthodox Judaism in Israel presently. His wife, Dr (Mrs. Chy Ike, also a practicing Orthodox Jew, founded an Igbo-based Zionist organization known as "Igbo Interests World Wide" (IIWW), which is aimed at creating increased awareness in the historic connection of the Igbo to the Jews.³⁵

In general, therefore, there appears to be a strong sentimental attachment of the Igbo to the Zionist idea and aspirations. Most striking in this attachment is the emerging trend among the Igbo to presently attach the suffix title of "JP," "Jerusalem Pilgrim", for anybody who undertakes the Holy Pilgrimage to the Holy City of Jerusalem. This trend no doubt appears to be a counter-sentimental device against the over-bearing Muslim title prefix of *Al-Haji* ascribed to those who undertook the Holy Pilgrimage to the Muslim Holy Lands of Mecca and Medina. In the same vein, there have also been increased Government involvement in the conduct of Christian pilgrimages to Israel and Rome among States with a majority or substantial number of Christians. This is evident in the establishment of State Pilgrim Welfare Boards for both Muslims and Christians. Although this emerging trend is not exclusive to the Igbo, the fact remains that, beyond the general attachment of the Christian population of Nigeria to the aspirations of the Jews, the Igbo remain the flag-ship of pro-Jewish consciousness in Nigeria, particularly given the circumstances, both of their claim of origins from the Jews, and being the only ethnic group in Nigeria where adherents to Judaism are found in greater number.

NOTES

1. Roland Oliver and J. D. Fage, *A Short History of Africa*, (Harmondsworth 1975), 51.
2. J. A. Atanda, *An Introduction to Yoruba History*, (Ibadan, 1980), 2.
3. Adebisi Sowunmi, "Human Ecology in South-Central Nigeria: Appraisal" Institute of African Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, 9-10, January 1991, 4.
4. D.D. Hartle, "Archaeology in Eastern Nigeria," *Nigeria Magazine*, no. 93, (1967), 136.
5. Hartle, "Archaeology in Eastern Nigeria."
6. Hartle, "Archaeology in Eastern Nigeria," 139.
7. Dell H. Hymes, "Lexicostatistics so far," *Current Anthropology* Vol. 1, 1960, 4.
8. See the works of Joseph H. Greenberg *Languages of Africa* Bloomington: 1960, and "Africa as a Linguistic Area," in William R. Bascom and Meville J. Herkskovits (eds) *Continuity and Change in African Culture*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Wiston, 1959). Also, R. G. Armstrong, "Glottochronology and West African Linguistics," *Journal of African History*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (1962): 283-290.
9. N. W. Thomas, *Anthropological Report on the Edo-Speaking Peoples of Nigeria Part I Law and Custom*, (New York, 1969), 7.
10. Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narratives of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa the African*, originally published in London, 1789
11. N. T. Nwaezeigwe, *The Igbo and their Nri Neighbours*, (Enugu: SNAAP Press Ltd, 2007).
12. G. I. Jones, "Olaudah Equiano of the Niger Ibo" in P. D. Curtin (ed) *Africa Remembered: Narratives by West Africans*, (Ibadan, 1967), 75-6.
13. Jones, "Olaudah Equiano of the Niger Ibo," 78.
14. Jones, "Olaudah Equiano of the Niger Ibo," 79.
15. W. Gunther Plant (ed), *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, (New York, 1981).

16. Christopher Fyfe, *Africanus Horton, 1835 – 1883, West African Scientist and Patriot*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 79.
17. Fyfe, *Africanus Horton*.
18. C. G. Seligman, *Races of Africa*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), 61.
19. Minute by H. R. Palmer dated 28/9/21, in A. E. Afigbo, *The Igbo and their Neighbours* (Ibadan: Oxford University Press, 1987), 152.
20. A. G. Leonard, *The Lower Niger and Its Tribes*, (London: Frank Cass, 1968), 34.
21. Fyfe, *Africanus Horton*, 22
22. Fyfe, *Africanus Horton*.
23. Meek, *Law and Authority in a Nigerian Tribes*, 19.
24. M. D. W. Jeffreys, "The Winged Solar Disk or Ibo Itsi Facial Scarifications," *Africa* Vol. xxi, (1951), 107.
25. Basden, *Niger Ibos*, (London: Frank Cass, 1960), 411.
26. Basden, *Niger Ibos*, 414.
27. *Memoires of the Late Captain Hugh Crow of Liverpool*, (London: Frank Cass, 1970), 199
28. Basden, *Niger Ibos*, 415-7.
29. Basden, *Niger Ibos*, 415-7.
30. Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1957), 87.
31. Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 9.
32. Basden, *Niger Ibos*, 418-23.
33. *Memoires of the Late Captain Hugh Crow of Liverpool*, 198.
34. *Memoires of Late Captain Hugh Crow of Liverpool*, 197.
35. Chy Ike, "Speech during the one-year anniversary celebration of Igbo Interests Worldwide (IIWW)", held at Oyi Local Government Council Secretariat, Nteje, Anambra State, Nigeria, November 17, 2007.