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# Igboland, Jewishland? Separatism-based Religion in the “Promised Land”

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## Abstract

This article examines the role of Jewish identity in the Igbo nationalist movement under the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), a separatist group founded in 2012 by Nnamdi Kanu to restore the defunct Republic of Biafra (1967–1970). This article’s argument is supported by the concept of redemptive separatism, arguing that IPOB constructs a national religious identity to seek political and moral legitimacy. Unlike previous groups, IPOB’s nostalgic and divine narratives are realized under their objective to establish a Biafran Jewish state. This study finds that Kanu’s rhetoric has shaped a religious nationalist identity in both Israel and Nigeria, to argue that the Igbo are God’s chosen people and to garner further support. The article integrates academic literature, news sources, and Kanu’s interviews with Israeli media to analyze the intersection of nationalism, religion, and postcolonial.

## Keywords

the Igbo, Jewish identity, redemptive separatism, Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), Nnamdi Kanu, Israel-Nigeria relations, religious nationalism

## Introduction

In 1967, the Igbo-majority southeastern region declared itself the Republic of Biafra, sparking the Nigerian Civil War. Despite Biafra’s defeat in 1970 and the years of military rule, the return to democracy in 1999 revived Igbo nationalist movements, culminating in the formation of IPOB<sup>1</sup> in 2012 (Harnischfeger, 2012: 65–66). Under the leadership of Nnamdi Kanu, IPOB has linked Judaism to their separatist agenda, framing independence as a divine promise from Hashem/Elohim (names of the Jewish God), while asserting that the Igbo are descendants of Gad from the Lost Tribes (Nche et al., 2023: 12–13; Kohnert, 2024: 17).

Nations, Anderson (1983) argues, are not inherently existing entities but imagined communities constructed through shared symbols, narratives, and collective memory. Similarly, Hobsbawm (1983) asserts that many traditions perceived as ancient are in fact invented to foster historical continuity and legitimacy. The

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<sup>1</sup> The IPOB does not represent all Biafran nationalists, nor does it represent all Jubos (Igbo-Jews).

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construction of imagined identities, together with the analysis of religious-social movements (Hannigan, 1991; Rieger, 2019), has informed this research.

Furthermore, Juergensmeyer (2010; 2019) observes that the rise of religious nationalism and its application of violence in recent decades has increasingly challenged national-secular paradigms. This theoretical framework is central in understanding IPOB's framing of Biafran independence through a Jewish religious identity and its goal of creating a Jewish state. In doing so, I analyze the process of nation-building through the lens of religious nationalism.

While Kanu claims that IPOB's struggle is a divine message to liberate Biafra both politically and spiritually, Nche (2023: 31) argues that his rhetoric has "appropriate religious framing to sustain the neo-Biafra agitations for self-determination." Hence, the primary objective of this article is to critically assess these religious concepts and the intersection of IPOB's political and moral ideologies. By examining their tactics of armed struggle, religious framing, and their relations with Israel, the main research question explored in this article is: How is the struggle for an independent Biafra framed by IPOB as a national-religious struggle, and what are their aims in doing so?

Unlike previous Igbo separatist movements, IPOB situates itself within a constructed historical and religious Jewish narrative, invoking mythmaking and divine identity in the process of nation-building by claiming that Biafrans are children of God (Agbo, 2023: 3; Nche, 2023: 28). Since this article engages widely with conceptual frameworks, I will use the term: "redemptive separatism" to enhance the understanding of IPOB's ideological aims. I argue that this concept represents a form of self-determination process, in which political struggle is centralized as a divinely mandated quest for political and spiritual emancipation.

In the pursuit to independence, Kanu regularly draws parallels to the Israelites' exodus, Jewish persecution, and the modern State of Israel (amongst others Agbo, 2024; Nche, 2023; Oluwaseyi, 2021; Onuoha, 2011). Hence, Kanu seeks moral legitimacy and argues that the struggle is part of a fulfillment of a transcendent destiny, with Hashem calling for the establishment of Biafra. He sees IPOB as an agent to spread his religious and nationalist ideas, delivering spiritual and political redemption.

This study integrates historical and contemporary perspectives, analyzing Kanu's statements to Israeli media (Kanu & Vardi, 2018; Kanu & Minhar, 2018), alongside with recent Israeli news publications (Hayun, 2024; Kattan, 2024) that seemingly adopted completely Kanu's agenda. The unique interaction of Kanu with the Israeli media is framed under his vision for Biafra, that will "undoubtedly become a Jewish state!" (Kanu & Vardi, 2018). Moreover, this article argues that Kanu's approach to Israeli media is part of a larger attempt to alleviate the stress of potential migration of Igbos to Israel if they will be recognized as Jews, thus gaining more support in Israel. These publications allowed me to analyze the encounters between Israeli gatekeepers and their view of Kanu's agenda to create a Jewish state in Igboland.

This article is structured as follows: The first chapter offers an historical overview of the Igbo nationalist movement and the Republic of Biafra. The second chapter delves into the Igbo's claims of connections to the Jewish heritage. Finally, the core chapter explores IPOB's religious-nationalist framing, focusing

on Kanu's statements, situating it within a broader theoretical and historical framework.

As an Israeli researcher specializing in African Studies, my academic focus on Jewish identities in Africa informs my approach to this study. This perspective enables a critical engagement with Israeli media publications and local knowledge, analyzing the intersections of religious nationalism and constructed identity in the Igbo-Israeli context. Moreover, this research includes numerous publications by Nigerian scholars and journalists to integrate holistic knowledge view. Finally, the growing prevalence of radical ideologies rooted in religious and nationalist beliefs in Nigeria, Israel and the surrounding regions has influenced the development of this analysis.

### **Biafra's Separatism: Civil War, Decline and Resurgence**

[Igbos] remained for a long-time secessionist at heart but accepted that they had failed to carry their secession through (O'Connell, 2020: 199).

Igbo nationalism is based on their quest to "return" to what they see as the pre-colonial order, their "original position", in which Igboland was known as the Kingdom of Nri (Oluwaseyi, 2021: 74–85), nowadays (re)constructing it as Biafra (Nche, 2023; 20). The term "Biafra" is derived from the Bight of Biafra in the west-central African coast. As Ezemenaka (2021: 86) shows, Biafran separatists often argue that Igbos were, and still are, marginalized under both the military and democratic rule in Nigeria. Drawing on Juergensmeyer's (2010: 264–265) analysis of post-colonial world order and nationalism, this chapter devolves into Biafran nationalists' attempt to challenge colonial borders as part of their claims to disregard ethnic divisions that persist to this day.

Shibutani & Kwan (1965) define an ethnic group as a group consisting of people who perceive themselves to be of the same kind. Oluwaseyi (2021: 74–76) argues that mythmaking plays an important role in the process of (re)building the Igbo identity. Based on the Thomas Theorem, which states that "if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences," I observe the Igbo nationalist movement as a collective that interprets its beliefs as real, and therefore their actions are undoubtedly real (Merton, 1995: 384). I do not strive to determine whether the Igbo national sentiment is part of a belief in a long-lasting concept or, as Achebe (1982) argues, that they are part of a "scattered people".

On May 30, 1967, General Ojukwu unilaterally proclaimed the secession of Biafra from Nigeria. This was less than seven years after Nigeria's independence from British colonialism. Following the proclamation, Nigeria launched a military operation against the separatist region, sparking the Nigerian Civil War. On 15 January 1970, Biafra surrendered, after approximately three million people lost their lives (Nche et al., 2023: 4–8; Oluwaseyi, 2021: 89).

In post-civil war Nigeria, the government adopted two main policies to address the consequences of the war: First, the promise of *no winner, no vanquished*. This policy's objective was fostering unity by declaring that neither side emerged victorious. Secondly, the Reconstruction, Rehabilitation and Reconciliation plan

addressed displaced communities and national cohesion. However, Onuoha (2011: 408–409) notes that both failed to address Igbos' problems.

Oluwaseyi (2021: 89) argues that when the civil war ended, the Igbo experiences of injustice and marginalization increased, while there was an outspoken decline in the secessionist demands, due to their trauma and the consequences of the war. Under the military rule, Igbo nationalists were forced into a period of dormancy, until the restoration of Nigeria's democratic role in 1999 (Onuoha, 2011: 403). In the book *African Zion*, Harnischfeger (2012: 65–66) analyzes this moment as an “explosion” of public self-determination demands of the Igbo, describing it as *The Resurgence of Biafran Nationalism*:

[The end of the military rule] opened up the democratic space and unleashed a proliferation of ethno-nationalist projects in different sections of the country (Onuoha, 2011: 402–403).

With the return to democracy, the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) was formed by Chief Uwazurike. Harnischfeger (2012: 65–66) notes that MASSOB was the first sign of a national ideology to re-emerge after years of military rule. However, MASSOB lost its power, especially after its leader's arrest in 2007 and the state's crackdown against the separatist movement. In the wake of this decline, Biafra Zionist Front (BZF) was formed by ex-members of MASSOB. BZF's ideology aligns Biafra with Zionism and, to some extent, with Israel, drawing parallels of Neuberger's (1985) analysis of early African nationalism.

As Harnischfeger (2012: 73) asserts, previously most of the Igbos' nationalist movements were not seeking to establish a direct bond with Israel or to gain any recognition about their Jewish identity. Other groups such as the Biafra Independent Movement (BIM), the Rebranded Indigenous People of Biafra (TRIPOB) and the Renegade Indigenous People of Biafra (RENIPOB), did not gain massive popularity, nor did their agenda include a direct link to Judaism (Nche, 2023: 19; Nche et al., 2023: 6).

Into this vacuum enters Nnamdi Kanu. Born on September 25, 1967, in Abia State, within the claimed territory of the Republic of Biafra, Kanu studied media management in London during the 1990s, where he became a broadcaster on Radio Biafra, crucial medium for Biafran nationalism. Although he had a Christian background (Nche, 2023: 21), Kanu defines himself as a “Jew who practices Judaism.” (Miles, 2023: 58).

Since its inception in 2012, IPOB bases its agenda on Jewish sense of belonging and the nostalgic belief of returning to their homeland, as part of a divine promise from Hashem. In seeking self-determination, IPOB portrays Igbos as part of the enduring Jewish community, who never abandoned their faith to (re)establish their desired nation: a Biafran State under the order of the Jewish God (Hayun, 2024; Kanu & Vardi, 2018). The next chapter delves into the Igbo's arguments of Jewish linkage.

## Igbos' Sense of Jewish Belonging

We are Semites! We are Hebrews! We are Israelites! We are Jews! (Ilona, 2016: 1).

This chapter examines Igbos' sense of Jewish belonging as realized through the parallels with biblical stories and contemporary symbols. Even though a DNA test (Ameh, 2017) found no direct ancestral link between Igbo and Jewish people, I argue that for the purposes of this research, the certainty of the Jubos (Igbo-Jews) in their beliefs, together with the agenda of IPOB, is more than sufficient to approach this complexity. Thus, the aim of this chapter is not to verify or refute their claims of long-lasting kinship with Judaism.

Olayoku (2024: 5) describes the identity of the Jubos as situating themselves as God's chosen people. Bruder & Parfitt (2012: 4–5) further argue that the Igbo people are seeking to justify their power, legitimacy, and prestige within the diverse ethno-religious national context of Nigeria by claiming that they are Jewish. The academic literature is replete with scholarly works that engage with the links between Igbos and Judaism (amongst others Ilona, 2016; Kohnert, 2024; Lis, 2015; Miles, 2019, 2023; Parfitt & Fisher, 2016). Furthermore, numerous studies have shown how the separatist movement of Biafra derives inspiration from the Old Testament, the Jewish people, Zionism and the modern State of Israel (amongst others Ezemenaka, 2021; Nche, 2023; Oluwaseyi, 2021; Olayoku, 2024; Onuoha, 2011).

The historical claim of the Igbo for Jewish linkage is based on Eri, a mystical ancestor figure, who is claimed to be Gad's fifth son who immigrated to West Africa (Hayun, 2024; Lis, 2015: 111–115). It has been argued that Eri's name is mentioned in the Old Testament, in the Gn 46,16 (WordProject, 2025). Hayun (2024) outlines that Igbos built their temple in Biafra and maintained the customs of Judaism for thousands of years.

During those years, Christianity contributed to the idea that the Igbos are Jewish, as missionaries applied the Hamitic hypothesis to the group, associating them with the curse of Ham (Olayoku, 2024: 4; Kohnert, 2017: 17; Parfitt, 2013: 24–28; Sanders, 1969: 521–523). Nevertheless, it has been claimed that the missionaries sought to persuade the Igbos to abandon their Jewish identity and embrace Christianity:

The missionaries succeeded in obscuring the connection of the Ibo [sic] people to their Judaism and even made them feel ashamed of their religion (Hayun, 2024).

The encounters with missionaries, followed by the Christianization of the population, have resulted in a syncretic dimension within the Jubos, where elements of Christianity and Judaism continue to converge in their practices to this day (amongst other Harnischfeger, 2012: 73; Lis, 2015: 111; Miles, 2019: 5–6; Nche, 2023: 21; Kohnert, 2024: 17). Referring to the defunct Biafran Republic, General Ojukwu said: "Biafra is a Christian Country." (Harnischfeger, 2012: 69–70).

The earliest known written testimony of the linkage dates to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when Igbo freed-slave and abolitionist Olaudah Equiano wrote that the Igbos were practicing Judaism until the arrival of missionaries, who broke this tie (Equiano, 1789: 20). Historical claims of early Jewish presence are further supported by letters from European rabbis to Jews that were reportedly living along the Niger River (Olayoku, 2024: 3–6).

It has been claimed that the name of the group – *Igbo* – is a distortion of the colonialists, who understood the name, supposedly *Hebrew*, as *Ebo/Igbo* (Patinkin, 1996). Moreover, the flag of the Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria (1914–1952) featured a six-pointed green star, as the Star of David. Both the Civil and the Governor flags had similar symbols. These flags have been claimed as evidence of the historical linkage (Kanu & Minhar, 2018).

Previous research has shown that the Igbo draw inspirations from the stories of the Exodus and the Jewish Holocaust – as part of their marginalized notions and the attempt to return to their homeland: “As the Israelites in the Land of Egypt, so are We in Nigeria.” (Miles, 2023; Nche et al., 2023). Thus, perceiving themselves as part of the enduring Jewish community has played a crucial role in the construction of Jubos’ identity.

Although the Igbo’s sense of belonging declined during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the turning point came after the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. Then, Igbos were to reclaim their Jewish identity. In 1966, Igbo officials flew to Israel under Ojukwu’s request, seeking support for their struggle. On the day following the independence, Radio Biafra announced that five countries had disclosed their recognition in the new state: Gabon, Côte d’Ivoire, Tanzania, Haiti and Israel. However, the Israeli government vehemently denied the claim (Lis, 2015: 93–102).

As Lis (2012: 97–98) points out in *African Zion*, the linkage of Jubos with Israel was affected deeply by the geopolitical changes. In June 1967, days after Biafra’s independence, Israel launched an all-out air strike against some of its neighboring states, resulting in what became known as the Six-Day War. This event was perceived by Igbos as a divine message from God (Olayoku, 2024: 2). As Harnischfeger (2012: 70) states:

Igbo nationalists have interpreted the liberation of Jerusalem by Israeli soldiers in June 1967 as fulfilment of a divine promise (Harnischfeger, 2012: 70).

More recently, Kanu claims that Israel was secretly providing military training and weapons to the secessionist region (Kanu & Minhar, 2018). Moreover, the Igbo are perceiving Israel’s victories and eventual political freedom as part of Elohim’s plan for the Promised Land(s) – first to redeem Israel, later Biafra (Agbo, 2024: 1). Thus, by creating a direct link to Judaism and Zionism, Igbos nationalists emphasize the importance of the belonging sentiment, which binds them to a long-lasting heritage which is influenced by external factors as well.

Nche et al. (2023: 12–13) emphasize the integral role of the Exodus from Egypt in the nationalist religious rhetoric to sustain hope and resilience in the movement. Nowadays, Kanu’s IPOB claim that similarly to the way that God redeemed

the Israelites from Egyptian tyranny, *He* will redeem the Igbos from Nigeria. Additionally, Jubos often use the biblical story of David and Goliath to promote self-determination and a sense of hope, as weak-David won against all odds Goliath. Hence, Biafra will prevail against powerful Nigeria (Harnischfeger, 2012: 69–70). By using redemptive separatist ideas, Kanu’s IPOB are encouraging Igbos to draw inspiration from the history of the Israelites, that presumably ended with the establishment of the State of Israel.

Miles (2023) observes that Igbo nationalists are using the Holocaust of European Jews to draw a comparison with the suffering of the Igbos during the Nigerian Civil War. Thus, providing a spiritual layer to their political claims, since God is faithful to *His* promises (Miles, 2023: 8–13). Moreover, Harnischfeger (2012: 71) notes that Igbo nationalists often mention the shared feeling of “living in the midst of enemies”, a notion well-felt among Israeli mainstream due to its bordering nations. Thus, Igbos often draw faith from the Arab-Israeli wars since, though smaller in size, Israel historically managed to defeat stronger armies in the region (Agbo, 2024: 12).

Olayoku (2024: 3–4) traces Nigerian Judaism in the 1990s, noting that the key Jewish figures such as Avichai were instrumental in standardizing Jewish orthodoxy. Today, Jubos conduct prayers in synagogues, practice circumcision, and celebrate Jewish holidays (Olayoku, 2024). In Kan 11 Television Channel (KAN 11), Kanu states that “of the 70 million Igbos,<sup>2</sup> at least 50 million of them identify as Jewish that practice Judaism by praying, reading the Torah and using a kippah and tallit” (Kanu & Vardi, 2018).

Moreover, the number of synagogues in Nigeria today is debatable – while some argue for 80 of them existing and that 9 out of 10 Jews in Nigeria are Igbo (Subramanian, 2022), others claimed that there are approximately 200 synagogues in the West African country (Vanguard, 2021). Regarding the number of Jubos in Nigeria, estimates vary from 2,000 to 5,000 (Afsai, 2016: 14–16) or up to 30,000 (Bruder, 2008: 4). However, Nche (2023: 21) remarks that the substantial support for Kanu’s IPOB in recent years has led to a notable expansion of the Jewish community in Igboland, many of whom identify it as part of the return to their ancestral way of life.

## Religious Nationalism and the Role of Judaism in IPOB

We want an independent Jewish state! A Biafran state that is absolutely independent from anything that has to do with Nigeria [...]. To go back to our ways of life (Kanu & Vardi, 2018).

This chapter focuses on Kanu’s IPOB engagement with the Israeli media, a unique encounter between two distinct yet overlapping narratives: Israel’s media gatekeepers and a separatist leader committed to the “creation of a Jewish Biafra” (Kanu & Minhar, 2018). Acknowledging that Igbo Jewish identity remains widely debated or mostly unaware in Israel was integral in creation of this chapter, since

<sup>2</sup> Kanu’s number is highly debatable: the consensus is that there are about 30 million Igbos worldwide (Lis, 2016: 71).

these interviews seem to be as part of an identity construction in the eyes of the Jewish community in Israel. The recent publications (Hayun, 2024; Kattan, 2024) in Yedioth-Net (Ynet), Israel's most popular news site, indicate that Kanu's narratives were fare interest to Israel mainstream and becoming less debatable. Kattan (2024) draws on similar arguments of Kanu:

This is one of the more mysterious corners of Judaism. Many don't even recognize it as a Jewish community. While the exact number is unclear, tens of thousands of Igbos — or possibly more — living in Nigeria's Biafra region identify as Jews (Kattan, 2024).

Kanu's interviews to state-owned KAN 11 channel in 2018 are part of his framing of Biafra's struggle via Jewish destiny, utilizing it as an opportunity to deliver his message to a wider, Israeli-Jewish, audience. A discourse analysis of these interviews reveals how Kanu skillfully intertwined nationalist aspirations with religious legitimacy, using the Israeli media platform to gain recognition and validation, while continually emphasizing their desire to a Jewish state in Biafra (Kanu & Vardi, 2018; Kanu & Minhar: 2018). The evolving discourse underscores the tension between IPOB's redemptive separatism and their lack of recognition, highlighting both the strategic nature of Kanu's rhetoric and the broader implications of his claims for the future of Biafra. Vardi (Kanu & Vardi, 2018) introduces the Igbo as follows:

They maintained Jewish customs such as circumcision and Jewish holidays, but they are not interested in immigrating to Israel (Kanu & Vardi, 2018).

Drawing on Juergensmeyer's (1995; 1996; 2010; 2019) analysis of religious nationalism, I analyze IPOB's Jewish claims, rhetoric, and measures of armed struggle through the lens of redemptive separatism. By challenging secular paradigms, religious-national movements derive legitimacy by claiming to be *ideologies of order* (Juergensmeyer, 1995: 379–380). While the pursuit of sovereignty remains integral, religious aspirations are centralized, framing their struggle as both politically necessary and spiritually ordained (Juergensmeyer, 2010: 264–265).

Hence, I argue that redemptive separatism focuses on political struggles as a sacred dimension, framing independence as a righteous, even eschatological, mission. This chapter uses Juergensmeyer's framework as a conceptual background, analyzing Kanu's IPOB struggle based on three core issues: First, Kanu's statements that Biafra will be a Jewish state. Second, IPOB's application of violence in their quest for emancipation. Finally, the lack of inner and outer recognition of their religious claims. Since its inception Kanu binds IPOB to Jewish claims:

This narrative [of Jewish identity] runs through virtually all his speeches and serves as a strong source of hope and sustenance for the movement (Nche, 2023: 19).

In a 2018 speech, Kanu explains the revelation and redemptive concept of Biafran separatism:

I came to Jerusalem where I prayed many years ago and I had this revelation that Biafra will be restored. There is only one creator [...] if only our people can follow the light, they will be liberated. But we are getting there (Nche, 2023: 28).

This quote shows a prophet-notion that Kanu is linking to himself, as the one that received a divine call from God. He claims that “the Igbos are the wandering Jews of Africa”, so as their leader he will navigate the return to the homeland (Kanu & Vardi, 2018). His rhetoric uses both historical and contemporary tools, positioning the Igbos as God’s chosen people, drawing strength from the Israelites’ *Exodus*, comparing the Jewish Holocaust with the Nigerian Civil War and arguing that the Jewish people’s right to the state of Israel is proof of God being faithful to *His* promises (Nche et al., 2023: 11–14).

While the Jewish-Zionist notion has been present in early African nationalism (Neuberger, 1985), and later in figures like Garvey, King Jr., and Mandela (Nche et al., 2023: 21), IPOB strategically uses Judaism as a tool to foster collective consciousness rooted in an imagined divine identity and destiny. Thus, Kanu frames Biafra’s struggle as a redemptive journey akin to God’s promise (amongst others Harnischfeger, 2012: 70; Miles, 2023: 8–13; Olayoku, 2024: 2).

Furthermore, Oluwaseyi (2021: 89) examines IPOB’s embrace of Jewish identity through the lens of maintaining collective suffering, persecution, and imminent victory among the Igbo. In the podcast-interview to KAN 11, named “Jewish State 2” (Kanu & Minhar, 2018), Kanu was introduced as the “leader of the Biafra nation that seek to establish an autonomous Jewish state in West-Africa”. In this context, he claimed that both the Holocaust and the Biafran war broke out due to the same reason: The perpetrators did not accept that the Jewish people are God’s chosen people (Ibid.). Hence, while Kanu’s statements indicate an intersection of the national demands with religious ideas, he also seeks greater proximity to Jewish communities, constantly drawing comparison and parallels. Thus, he strives to gain not only recognition but also religious solidarity, since:

It is the moral responsibility of Israel to make sure that Biafra stands as an independent entity in Africa (Kanu & Vardi, 2018).

Kanu’s religious and national narratives are part of his attempt to construct a nostalgic notion and intertwine the Biafran secessionist movement with the Jewish identity to obtain legitimacy. Tworek (2022: 172–176) explores how nostalgia and canonization have played crucial roles in the survival of the Chabad Hasidic Jewish movement in 19<sup>th</sup>–20<sup>th</sup> centuries led by Yitzhak Schneersohn. Similarly, I interpret Kanu’s rhetoric and actions as an attempt to create a nostalgic notion in the form of longing for a lost homeland.

Kanu often encourages his followers to think that their deaths will not be in vain, but sacred steps toward liberation (Kanu’s Video in Hayun, 2024). This eschatological framing risks further radicalizing of his base and may perpetuate vio-

lence, as believers may view martyrdom as a sacred duty. In 2018 Kanu spoke to Biafrans locally:

If Biafra doesn't come [...] I am only a mere mortal, one day I will die but your name reigns forever. So every generation will remember that you went back on your word. But you are God and you don't go back on your word (Nche, 2023: 31).

Recently, IPOB's violence has intensified with attacks on government properties and the killing of state security personnel and civilians (Nche, 2023: 33). In the 2015 World Igbo Congress, Kanu said: "We need guns, and we need bullets!" (Agbo, 2024: 5–6). The Nigerian government classified IPOB as a terrorist group since 2017 (Nigeria Sanctions Committee, 2017). As recently as May 30, 2024, Biafra's Independence Day, six civilians and at least five soldiers were killed in Abia State, allegedly by IPOB members (Arise News, 2024). To justify the spiritual fears of Igbo, they often accuse other ethnic and religious Nigerian groups. Nche (2023) explores the IPOB's leadership fear from both Christian and Muslim Nigerians, arguing that those groups strive to deprive their religious and political rights. Juergensmeyer (1996; 2010) notes that religious violence often arises in regions with contested nationhood, where faith becomes a unifying force for political legitimacy and conflict:

Politicized religious movements are the responses of those who feel desperate and desolate in the current geo-political crisis (Juergensmeyer, 1996: 1).

Miles (2023: 69) describes Kanu's usage of Judaism in IPOB as nothing more than "political opportunism", accusing him of risking the Nigerian Jewish community who is now wrongly associated with IPOB. The recent developments of IPOB were described as "hijacking" of the movement's ideas (Arise News, 2024), while others said that IPOB has appropriated their Jewish claims as a "selling point" (Nche, 2023: 34):

[T]he tactical conflation of Igbo nationalism with Jewish identity by Nnamdi Kanu and IPOB is clearly recognized by most Jewish congregants for what it is—political opportunism that heralds danger for them as a vulnerable religious minority (Miles, 2023: 69).

In 2021 Kanu was arrested in Kenya and extradited to Nigeria. Since then, he has remained in detention for alleged treason and terrorism (Nche, 2023: 33). In detention, he officially converted to Judaism, an act criticized by the Judaism Fellowship of Nigeria (JFN), flagged as "a threat to the existence of true Judaism in the country" (Nche et al., 2023: 10). JFN, an umbrella organization of Judaism in Nigeria, argue that Kanu uses tactics of "evangelisation and conversion", and called his actions to go against Judaism (Vanguard, 2021).

As recently as March 2025, the legal process against Kanu is still taking place, with his supporters arriving to court with Tallit and other Jewish-related symbols

(TVC News Nigeria, 2025). Moreover, Agbo (2024) observes that this alignment of religious nationalism has fueled IPOB's armed struggle, while Olayoku (2024) notes that since October 7, 2023, local scrutiny has intensified, increasing suspicions and escalating violence against Jubos.

Kanu's IPOB inserts religious narratives not only as mere political instruments, but as imagined symbols of shared identity and canonization. As the tension rises, the movement's rhetoric increasingly frames its cause as divinely mandated. In the shadow of the government's recent crackdown, some Igbos observe it as the emergence of rights violations (Eboh, 2024). Ynet framed it as follows:

Their [Jubos] lives aren't easy – they are persecuted and ostracized by Muslims and Christians, including the Christian Ibo [sic] people who do not accept them, and their leader, Nnamdi Kanu, is imprisoned in Nigeria and his life is in danger (Kattan, 2024).

Kanu's IPOB gains its popularity from the masses, yet, together with JFN's criticism, Miles (2023: 69–70) observes that at the time of his arrest, the leaders of Nigeria's Jewish communities did not recognize him as one of their own and repulsed his actions. Some argue that IPOB has created "a negative image for Nigerian Jews", while Avichai has completely rejected Kanu's politicization of Judaism in Nigeria, fearing state retaliation (Olayoku, 2024: 8–9).

Moving forward, I claim that the lack of widespread recognition of the Jubos claims could severely undermine their goals for legitimacy, solidarity and liberation (Olayoku, 2024: 1–5). Hacoen (1998: 81–84) observes that during the first decades of Israel's existence, one of the biggest challenges of the state was to determine "who is a Jew"; and since the 1950s, Israel holds the formal process of deciding who is Jewish worldwide. Lis (2015: 122) notes that to be recognized as a Jew nowadays "it had to be validated by a significant Rabbinical Jewish or Israeli authority."

Lis (2016: 10–11; 76) emphasizes that the first step to verify Jewish claims is to become "part of the Jewish conversation". While he determines that there is enough quality information about the Igbo's connections to Judaism, they are still excluded from *the conversation*. Lis refers to the Ethiopian Beta Israel community, arguing that since Israel's independence, and even before, they were part of *the conversation*. Firstly, in the 1950s their Jewish claims were denied by Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi Yitzhak Herzog, who expressed suspicion of "adulterous marriages" among the Ethiopian Jews (Hacoen, 1998: 83–84). Later, in 1973, the Beta Israel obtained recognition by Sephardi Chief Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, who formally asserted that they are part of the Jewish community.

Kattan (2024) observes the Igbo situation today: "Israel's Chief Rabbinate does not consider them to be Jews at all". The Rabbinical authority and Israel's refusal to recognize the Igbos as Jews serves as a significant obstacle in their call for solidarity and shared identity. Shaul Meiselis, chairman of the Igbo Friends of Israel association, claimed that he has spoken with Israel's current Sephardic Chief Rabbi David Yosef:

I reminded him that his father, Ovadia Yosef, spearheaded recognition for Indian and Ethiopian Jews and he could follow suit. The Igbo people [...] suffer for their Judaism (Kattan, 2024).

The formidable power of Israel in this matter is driven from the 1950 Law of Return that states: “every Jew has the right to immigrate to the Land of Israel”, (Meier & Shazar, 1970), together with the 2018 Israel’s Nation-State Law, that enshrines Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people, where their self-determination right is exercised (Knesset, 2024). Both of these laws strengthen the state grip on the process of determining who is a Jew around the world – an uncommon potent force on religious acceptance to be held by a state.

The Igbo attempts to gain recognition cannot be understood aside from the Law of Return. Once Israel officially recognizes their claims, seemingly some 30–40 million Igbo, about four times larger than Israel’s current population, will have the right to immigrate to Israel. Hence, in the interviews with Kanu I identify how he strategically alleviates this stress. He often ridicules this probability, calling it *paranoia*, explaining that the Igbos want to establish a Jewish state in Biafra:

It seems to be that there is some kind of paranoia, that should Biafra get closer to Israel, then 70 million people will somehow flow to the land of Israel. But that’s not the case. We are seeking Biafra, so we can return to Biafra and be in Biafra (Kanu & Vardi, 2018).

Echoing Kanu’s claims, Kattan (2024) argues in Ynet that: “The Igbos aren’t looking to immigrate to Israel; they simply want their Judaism acknowledged”. By repeatedly affirming to Israeli news that Igbos do not want to immigrate to Israel, Kanu lifts the stress from the demographic issue. Hayun (2024), also in Ynet, further addresses this by clarifying that “Ibo [sic] are not interested in Israel, but want to establish their own Jewish state in Nigeria”. These publications in Ynet, Israel’s leading news site, prove that Kanu’s goals of creating proximity with Israel and to assert their position within the global Jewish discourse, have been successful to a certain extent – as part of his redemptive path to separation. However, without formal recognition from Israel or wider Jewish authorities, IPOB’s religious claims may remain a contested issue, limiting their ability to achieve full legitimacy and broader international support.

## Conclusion

Nnamdi Kanu’s IPOB has strategically appropriated its struggle for Biafran independence within a religious nationalism narrative. Through redemptive separatism, they intertwine Jewish identity and political self-determination as part of a divine mission and a historical necessity. Kanu’s engagement with the Israeli media underscores his efforts to situate the Biafran nationalist movement within a global Jewish discourse, emphasizing religious and political aspirations. While this framing seeks to strengthen IPOB’s ideological base, it also exposes the movement to skepticism from Nigerian Jewish orthodoxy and the Israeli state.

Despite IPOB's efforts to construct a unified Jewish-Biafran identity, challenges persist. Rieger (2019) identifies that the mix of religion and politics is crucial for grass-roots social movements, yet the lack of formal Jewish recognition complicates its quest for spiritual and political redemption. Moreover, the latest escalation of Israel-Palestine conflict has further affected the safety of the Jews in Nigeria (Olayoku, 2024). Hence, the absence of institutional Jewish validation, particularly from Israel, suggests that Kanu's vision of Jewish-Biafra remains as an imagined ideal rather than a tangible political reality. Finally, the group tactics of armed struggle further polarize and danger Jubos as a minority group. Thus, IPOB's mission hinges on navigating post-colonial, religious and national identities.

The main limitation of this study was the scope of primary sources that were analyzed. Although engaging with the academic literature and many other testimonies of Kanu, I carefully chose to focus on his interviews to the Israeli media. I argue that they bear a unique outlook on his agenda: In this context, he is speaking to an outer crowd – the international Jewish community, especially in Israel, seeking for recognition and proximity, as part of his path to achieve liberation and redemption, politically and spiritually. Therefore, future research that will include further primary sources is well-needed.

## Abbreviations

IPOB	<i>Indigenous People of Biafra</i>
JFN	<i>Judaism Fellowship of Nigeria</i>
MASSOB	<i>Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra</i>
KAN 11	<i>Kan 11 Television Channel</i>
TRIPOB	<i>Rebranded Indigenous People of Biafra</i>
RENIPOB	<i>Renegade Indigenous People of Biafra</i>
Ynet	<i>Yedioth-Net</i>

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