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Evaluating Antisemitism against the 'Igbo Jews' of Nigeria

In the last decades, in the US and in Europe and elsewhere the repertoire of hate and accusations against the Jews has only grown and the media are currently full of news items about crimes.

At the same time, in the course of the twentieth century, more than a dozen ethnic groups in the African continent have self-proclaimed their own specific connection to ancient Israel and have developed versions of their tribal history that position them as part of the Jewish Diaspora. These communities respect the Sabbath, light candles on Friday evening, eat kosher food, circumcise the male child, and celebrate Jewish festivals, most of them actively undertaking the learning of Hebrew. I refer to the Igbo of Nigeria, the House of Israel in Ghana, the Lemba of South Africa and Zimbabwe, the Baluba in Congo, the Abayudaya of Uganda, the Tutsi-Hebrews of Rwanda Burundi, the Cabo Verde Jews, and the newly formed Jewish communities in Cameroon, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Zambia, and Madagascar, not to mention many other groups that are rapidly gaining in importance.¹ Members of these various ethno-religious communities may number in the hundreds of thousands (Estimates vary).

Given the prevailing antisemitism, what is the current situation of of African communities claiming to be of Jewish descent in their countries ?

The purpose of this research project, which has no precedent, is to observe and evaluate the situation of the Igbo of Nigeria who have long been referred to as the ' Jews of Africa'.

Why did I choose Igbo for this first research on the subject? Over several decades, the Igbo have developed versions of their tribal history that place it as part of the Jewish Diaspora and, following the earliest historical hypotheses on the arrival of Jews in Africa, claim that their ancestors came from Israel via the old African trade routes.

The Igbo, the ' Jews of Africa'

According to Remi Ilona, an historian of Igbo Judaism, 4,000 Igbo of Nigeria are practicing rabbinical Judaism today in Abuja and in the Anambra State (not counting the millions of Messianic Jews), at risk of being massacred by the Boko Haram. Synagogues, where communities carefully observe Jewish traditions and prayers are mushrooming throughout these two regions.

In Nigeria, Islam predominates in the North, among the Hausa and Fulani, and Protestantism and local syncretistic Christianity are most evident in the Yoruba areas in the West, while Catholicism is prevalent in the Igbo and closely related areas.

A widespread belief among the Igbo is that, prior to the arrival of British missionaries, they practiced a form of Judaism. From the 1950, a body of literature encompassing legends of origins, foundation myths, migrations, religious rites, exile, was extensively written by authors of local histories.ⁱⁱ From this time, a myriad of publications re-defining and re-constructing the history of local Igbo societies emerged stressing the differences between the Hebrew cultural specificity of the Igbo community, and that of their neighbours, thus making their community stand out as being quite unique. In addition to this, voluminous recent academic literature by Igbo scholars attempts to prove Igbo Lost Tribes ancestry.

The various claims and engagements with a Jewish ancestry, adopted over the course of almost a century by the Igbo, found their undeniable confirmation in the oppressive conditions of the Biafra War (1967-1970) when Igbo suffered atrocities and used references to genocide to qualify the massacre of the Igbo people. The prominent Professor Alaezi summarised: "The history of the Ibos of Nigeria can be said to be a replica of that of the Jews in the Middle East. The earlier narratives regarding the cultural similarities between the Nigerian Hebrews (Ibos) and the world Hebrews show that the events of their lives as Jews or Hebrews in exile in Nigeria were also predicted by God and recorded in the Bible... The Hebrews (Ibos) in Nigeria also witness to the truth of God's curses on the Jews: persecution and hatred ...; victims of genocide; victims of slavery..."ⁱⁱⁱ

The Research Project

The most recent (2014) figures of the Anti-Defamation League indicate that 16% of adults are antisemitic in Nigeria (which seems to be rather low compared for example with Kenya and Cameroon : 30%).^{iv}

The research project will focus into present-day manifestations of anti-Jewish hostility against Igbo Jews in Nigeria, in the general population (Christians and Muslims).

Methodology

Observation and analysis of :

1. antisemitic rhetoric and actions in recent decades: investigations of documents and interviews
2. intellectual, ideological and political roots of this antisemitism : evaluation of what is 'new ' and the potential antisemitic trends of the past
3. what has been inherited from the 'classical' antisemitic lexicons of the past and the present-day emergence of African 'New Jews' in the political context of terrorism and the Boko Haram's actions
4. The research project aims to advance creative thinking and stimulate further research
5. It would be essential to subsequently pursue this first exploration in Nigeria by surveys in other African countries where there are 'New Jews'.

ⁱ Edith Bruder, *The Black Jews of Africa: Identity, Religion, History*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2008 and 2012; *Black Jews, Les Juifs Noirs d'Afrique et le mythe de Tribus perdues*, Paris, Albin Michel, 2014,

ⁱⁱ Edith Bruder, "The Proto-History of Igbo Jewish Identity from the Colonial Period to the Biafra War, 1890-1970", in *African Zion: Studies in Black Judaism*. Bruder E. and Parfitt, T. eds., Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012.

ⁱⁱⁱ O. Alaezi, *Ibos: Hebrew Exiles from Israel; Amazing Facts and Revelations* (Aba, Nigeria: Onzy Publications, 1999),134.

^{iv} https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geography_of_antisemitism; <http://global100.adl.org/>