

Letter to the Editor

ON NIGERIAN CLAIMS TO JEWISH AND JUDAIC TRADITIONS: A REPLY TO FATAI AYISA OLASUPO

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Abstract: For those with an interest in Nigerian claims to Jewish and Judaic traditions, Professor Fatai Ayisa Olasupo's "Black African Jews, the Nigerian Question and the Lost Ten Tribes of Israel: A Comparison of Igbo and Yoruba Claims to Jewish and Judaic Traditions" (Vol. 7, No. 4, 2014, pp. 49-62) is intriguing. As it is possible scholars attentive to the topic of Yoruba, Igbo, and smaller Nigerian ethnic groups tracing their roots or origins to the people of Israel may make use of Professor Olasupo's article, it is useful here to address three errors and misconceptions contained therein, as well as offer some additional comments particularly related to Igbo Jewry. The first of these misconceptions has to do with the relevance of the Queen of Sheba/Bilikisu Sungbo to Nigerian Jewish identity. It would be a grave misconstruction to interpret the state of Israel's lack of interest in her supposed burial places as a "bias against blacks." It is simply that she and the myth of Ethiopia's Solomonic dynasty are largely outside the purview of Judaism and Jewish national identity. In fact, when the Sephardi Chief Rabbi of Israel, Ovadia Yosef, declared in 1973 that the Jews of Ethiopia (Beta Israel/House of Israel) should be brought to the state of Israel — thus paving the way for the community's mass immigration to the Jewish state — he did so without any reference to King Solomon or the Queen of Sheba. Rather, the Chief Rabbi affirmed that the Beta Israel were "from the Tribe of Dan." A second error surrounds Professor Olasupo's claim that the government of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin sent a team to Nigeria to search for the "Lost Tribes" in 1995, but that the outcome of the search has not been made public. In fact, no past or present Israeli governments have undertaken a search for the "Lost Tribes" in Nigeria and there is no search outcome to be made public by Israel's government. A third misconception in Professor Olasupo's article concerns literature produced by Igbo Jews, which actually extends far beyond only one book on Igbo Jewish identity.

Keywords: Ethnic Studies/International Studies; Igbo; Israel; Jews; Judaism; Lost Tribes; Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

As one with an interest in Nigerian claims to Jewish and Judaic traditions, I was intrigued by Professor Fatai Ayisa Olasupo's "Black African Jews, the Nigerian Question and the Lost Ten Tribes of Israel: A Comparison of Igbo and Yoruba Claims to Jewish and Judaic Traditions" (Vol. 7, No. 4, 2014, pp. 49-62). Since it is possible scholars attentive to the topic of Yoruba, Igbo, and smaller Nigerian ethnic groups tracing their roots or origins to the people of Israel may make use of Professor Olasupo's article, I wish to address three errors and misconceptions contained therein, as well as offer some additional comments particularly related to Igbo Jewry.

The Queen of Sheba/Bilikisu Sungbo

The first of these misconceptions has to do with the relevance of the Queen of Sheba/Bilikisu Sungbo to questions of Nigerian Jewish identity. Olasupo (pp. 50-59) discusses the Judaic claims associated with the people of Oke-Eri, and with the Ijebu people as a whole, with special emphasis on the question of whether the Queen of Sheba/Bilikisu Sungbo is buried in Ethiopia or in Nigeria. Concluding that discussion, Olasupo writes (p. 61):

"The Queen of Sheba is unquestionably [a] black Queen born and buried in Africa. But while [her] birth place is known and is undoubted, the burial place and site remain contentious between Ethiopia and Nigeria. The only strong evidence that Nigeria can provide for this claim is to allow for national and international archaeologists to carry out extensive excavation of these areas, particularly the burial site. This is very important to Black Africa in particular and the World in general. If Israelis don't want to be bias[ed] against blacks, they should develop in this; who knows

[if] the ‘Ten lost tribes of Israel’ may be found here. Nigeria is the most populous black nation in the world with more than two hundred and fifty ethnic groups. Nigeria is not big for nothing. ...A synergy of efforts between Nigeria and Israeli governments could break the jinx.”

That conclusion leans on the misconception that the Queen of Sheba’s reign or place of burial is of any special importance to contemporary questions of Jewish identity, to present-day matters related to the “Lost Tribes,” or to Israelis and the Israeli government. The Ethiopic tale of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba’s affair has no Jewish historical or religious traction. In fact, when the Sephardi Chief Rabbi of Israel, Ovadia Yosef, declared in 1973 that the Jews of Ethiopia (Beta Israel/House of Israel) should be brought to the state of Israel — thus paving the way for the community’s mass immigration to the Jewish state — he did so without any reference to King Solomon or the Queen of Sheba. Rather, the Chief Rabbi affirmed that the Beta Israel were “from the Tribe of Dan.”

Thus, it would be a grave misconception to interpret the state of Israel’s lack of interest in the supposed burial places of the Queen of Sheba/Bilikisu Sungbo as a “bias against blacks.” It is simply that she, as well as the myth of Ethiopia’s Solomonic dynasty (found in the *Kebrā Nagast/Glory of the Kings*), are largely outside the purview of Judaism and Jewish national identity — even when it comes to the Beta Israel, and certainly when it comes to Nigerian Jewish claims. In such matters, she is essentially irrelevant.

Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin’s Search Team

A second error surrounds Olasupo’s assertion that the Israeli government sent a team to search for the “Lost Tribes” in Nigeria. Concerning the validity of claims made by various Nigerian ethnic groups that they are descendants of the “Lost Tribes,” Olasupo writes (p. 59): “Above all, in 1995, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin sent a team to Nigeria to search for the ‘Ten Lost Tribes of Israel.’ The outcome of the search has not been made public up till today; nor did the State of Israel officially recognize the Igbo as one of the Lost Tribes.”

However, as Dr. Daniel Lis explains in his chapter on “Israeli Foreign Policy Towards the Igbo” in Bruder and Parfitt’s *African Zion: Studies in Black Judaism* (Cambridge Scholars, 2012), as well as in his recently published *Jewish Identity among the Igbo of Nigeria: Israel’s “Lost Tribe” and the Question of Belonging in the Jewish State* (Africa World Press, 2015), which is currently the definitive work on Igbo Jewry, no such research team was ever sent to Nigeria by the government of Yitzhak Rabin (1992-1995) or any other Israeli government. Dr. Lis locates the origin of that widespread and persistent myth of a governmental delegation sent by Rabin:

“In 1995, Israeli filmmaker Aran Patinkin, together with an Israeli film crew, travelled to Nigeria to make a documentary about the Igbo, who, as we know, identified themselves as one of the lost tribes of Israel. Although far from being an official Israeli delegation the film crew received help from the Israeli embassy in Nigeria. Along with Ambassador Gadi Golan, the embassy had helped in the crucial organizing and facilitating the necessary contacts and permits, a sign that the embassy knew of the Igbo’s claim and believed that the project was in the interest of the state of Israel. The production of the movie was, in any event, a social happening in itself. Throughout the making of the movie, masses of people accompanied the crew on their visit, and the local media reported it. The arrival of the film crew in 1995 left traces, years after the event” (*African Zion*, p. 104).

Therefore, there is no search outcome to be made public by the state of Israel, as no past or present Israeli governments undertook a search for the “Lost Tribes” in Nigeria. Nor has there been any reason, based solely on the information shown in Patinkin’s documentary, for the state of Israel to suddenly officially recognize the Igbo as descendants of the “Lost Tribes.”

Scholarship by and about Igbo Jews

A third misconception in Olasupo’s article concerns literature produced by Igbo Jews. Citing my *New English Review* article “Igbo Jews of Nigeria Strive to Study and Practice” (July 2013), as reprinted in the *Leadership* newspaper on July 26, 2013 (after previously being plagiarized there, with Igbo Oyoyo as its purported author, on July 17, 2013), Olasupo writes (p. 57):

“On the Igbo side, early this year, Professor William Miles of Northeastern University published *Jews of Nigeria: An Afro-Judaic Odyssey*, based on his two visits to Igbo Jews in Nigeria’s capital, Abuja. Another book on Nigeria’s Jews, written by Daniel Lis of the University of Basel will be coming out in 2013 as well. As at today, only one Igbo Jew scholar has written a book titled: *Our roots: Igbo Israel Heritage*.”

Olasupo makes it seem as though only one book on Igbo Jewish identity has been written by an Igbo Jew, which is not the case. In fact, in that same *New English Review/Leadership* article I also specifically mention another Igbo Jewish work, “the locally-published *The Igbos: Jews in Africa* (2007), written by Nigerian attorney and author Remy Ilona.” I explain that it “provides a detailed description of Igbo religious beliefs and practices, and attempts

to demonstrate their similarity to Judaism. Since Igbo Jews consider themselves to be descendants of the lost tribes of Israel, and view much of Igbo tradition and culture as being essentially Israelite, it is of great importance to them to locate and record these similarities. A more recently published example of this genre of Igbo literature is Dr. Caliben I.O. Michael's 2011 *Our Roots: Igbo Israel Heritage*."

Among the works having to do with Nigerian Jewish identity produced so far by Western scholars, those of Dr. Miles, Dr. Lis, and Dr. Johannes Harnischfeger stand out. However, much more than simply one text has been produced by Nigeria's Igbo Jews. For example, in addition to Dr. Caliben's *Our Roots: Igbo Israel Heritage*, the musician and Hebrew teacher Cohen E. Chislon has written *Unveiling Igbo's Ethnic Identity* (2003), while the aforementioned Barrister Remy Ilona has authored multiple books on the subject and has most recently published *The Igbos and Israel: An Inter-Cultural Study of the Largest Jewish Diaspora* (2014). The latter work opens with a review by Lis, who first visited Ilona in Nigeria in 2006, an indication of the collaborative nature of some of the emerging Jewish-Igbo scholarship.

Additional comments on Igbo Jewish Identity

During a recent trip to Abuja in 2014, as I was driving with Remy Ilona to one of the city's Nigerian synagogues, he began grouching that the state of Israel has not yet recognized the Igbo as Jews even though the Igbo, so he said, have a more valid claim to recognition than the Jews of Ethiopia.

When I sought to challenge that assertion on historical grounds, he referred me to a *Haaretz* opinion piece ("In favor of politicizing Jewish identity," December 30, 2011) by Alfred Bodenheimer, a professor of Jewish studies at the University of Basel. Professor Bodenheimer writes in the Israeli newspaper that "it is ultimately impossible to rationally explain why the Igbos have not been recognized when, in the course of the 20th century, the Ethiopian tribes called Beta Israel received complete recognition of Jewish descent (from one of the Ten Tribes), and collective resettlement in Israel, beginning in the 1980s."

Before clarifying — as I did for my attorney-author friend — why it is entirely possible to rationally explain this difference when it comes to recognition, a little context may be necessary.

There is a widespread belief among the Igbo of Nigeria that they are descended from the tribes of Israel. This belief first found written expression in the popular 1789 autobiography of Olaudah Equiano, a former Igbo slave turned British abolitionist, who remarked on "the strong analogy" that "appears to prevail in the manners and customs of my countrymen, and those of the Jews." Pointing to circumcision, sacrifices, and purifications as examples of this resemblance, he concluded it must be "that the one people had sprung from the other."

Numbering over 30 million, the Igbo are Nigeria's third largest ethnic group. Their traditional homeland is located in the southeastern part of the country, though they have spread throughout Nigeria, including its capital city, Abuja. Most Igbo, due to British colonialism and missionary activity, now practice Christianity, but at the same time, many consider themselves genealogically Jewish, hold their indigenous ancestral religion to be a residual form of Judaism, and strongly identify with the state of Israel.

Following the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970), during which at least one million Igbo died in the failed bid for Biafran independence, Igbo self-identification as Israelites intensified. Igbo saw themselves as sufferers of genocide, like the Jews of World War II Europe, and as inhabitants of a beleaguered plot of land surrounded by hostile forces, similar to the Jewish state of Israel. Some Igbo also began to question why, if they were in fact Jews, they were practicing Christianity rather than Judaism.

These seekers gradually began to find one another, acquire printed material on Judaism, photocopy what prayer books they could lay their hands on, scour the internet for information, teach themselves to read and pray in Hebrew, and advance their practice of the Jewish faith. Their community, not yet recognized by any Jewish denomination or by the state of Israel, numbers between 2,000 to 5,000 people throughout Nigeria.

Igbo Jews are eager for recognition from world Jewry and the state of Israel. As Elder Pinchas Ogbukaa of Abuja's Gihon Synagogue told me after our first time meeting in Nigeria, in 2013: "We are Torah-hungry Nigerians, adherents of the Jewish faith [. . . and the] greatest of all the challenges we are facing is that of isolation. Officially, Israel has not accepted us as Jews, yet our culture, our central way of life, points to nowhere in the universe except the ancient House of Israel. It is the aspiration and dream of the Torah-lovers of Nigeria from Abuja to Lagos, from Warri to Umuahia, from Port Harcourt to Onitsha, to break the isolation."

Like Elder Pinchas Ogbukaa, I too hope that Igbo Jews will build bridges with world Jewry, and that there will be open and honest religious and educational exchanges. The Igbo Jews I have met are sincere in their pursuit of Judaism, are lovers of Zion and supporters of the Zionist project, and view themselves as part of the Jewish nation. I

concur with the sentiments expressed to me about Igbo Jews by an American rabbi who has visited Nigeria several times and had a significant impact on the course of Judaism there: “They identify with the Jewish people and they want to practice Judaism. Now that they’ve thrown their lot with us, what are our responsibilities to them? How can we enhance their standing in the Jewish community?”

Those are important questions with complex answers. However, responding to those questions does not mean unnecessarily muddling the history of Igbo Jewish identity — and the issues surrounding Igbo Jewish recognition — with the history and recognition of the Beta Israel. There is good reason to be wary here of “Lost Tribes” fetishists. And there is danger in politicizing Jewish identity.

Returning to Professor Bodenheimer: In his *Haaretz* opinion piece, he refers to the work of one of his doctoral students, whose study, he claims, shows “British rabbis were already aware in the 1840s that there might be descendants of the Ten Tribes in the Niger delta. That was even before the process of the Jewish acceptance of Beta Israel began. Evidently, though, the Igbos, who today number 20-30 million people, would be political and demographic dynamite.”

Much is amiss in the above paragraph, which must be unpacked bit by bit. First, it needs to be stressed that the process of world Jewry’s acceptance of the Beta Israel began long before the 1840s. As Professor Michael Corinaldi demonstrates in his masterful *Ethiopian Jewry: Identity and Tradition* (Rubin Mass, 2005), encounters between rabbis and the Beta Israel — whom the rabbis variedly referred to as Hebrews, Jews, or Falashas — go back at least to 1435 (nearly six hundred years ago), and practical rabbinic rulings concerning the Beta Israel’s Jewish status commenced in the sixteenth century.

Thus, when making his historic 1973 declaration that the Beta Israel are Jews “from the Tribe of Dan” and that there is a religious obligation to get them to the state of Israel, Israel’s Sephardi Chief Rabbi, Ovadia Yosef, was drawing on rabbinic decisions and precedent concerning the Beta Israel spanning more than four hundred years. No similar rulings exist concerning the Igbo, from rabbis past or present.

Secondly, British rabbis — namely Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi Solomon Herschell and Sephardi Rabbi David Meldola — were not “aware” in the 1840s that there might be descendants of the Ten Tribes in the Niger Delta. The letters of the two British rabbis are discussed in Dr. Lis’s 2009 article “‘Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands’: Ethiopian Jewry and Igbo Identity” (*Jewish Culture and History*, Vol. 11, No. 3, 2009, pp. 21-38), as well as in his recently published *Jewish Identity among the Igbo of Nigeria: Israel’s “Lost Tribe” and the Question of Belonging in the Jewish State*. (Daniel Lis was the unnamed doctoral student referred to in Bodenheimer’s 2011 opinion piece.)

It is apparent from the London Sephardi rabbi’s Hebrew letter, as found in William Simpson’s *A Private Journal Kept During the Niger Expedition* (1843) and reproduced by Lis (“‘Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands,’” p. 26), that Rabbi Meldola expected whatever Jews might be living in the vicinity of the Niger Delta to be rabbinic Jews not too different from himself and his fellow London Sephardim. Rabbi Meldola presupposes, for example, that Jews living in the Niger Delta region would know of and possess not only the Torah and the Prophetic works, but also the Talmud:

“Peace to our Brethren the children of Israel in all place of their habitations. I the servant of the Lord named David the little is he who writes this in order to inquire after your welfare and the number of the souls and wishes also to know your occupation and what books are to be found amongst you after the conclusion of the Talmud and to what customs you are adhered. All this let me know well and clear explained through this man who goes towards you to explore and search the places of your habitations. And know we children of Israel who are scattered in all those places do believe on the law of Moses the servant of the Almighty and the Prophets and the Talmud and then on the books of Rabbi Moses ben Maimonides who is known under the term Rambam and all these we pray to let us know and may your kind words reach us.”

Moreover, neither rabbinic letter received a reply, nor is it certain they were ever delivered to anyone during Simpson’s failed 1841-1842 expedition. Had the letters been delivered, however, their Niger Delta recipients would not only have been unable to read them (as they would not have known Hebrew), but also (and unlike the Beta Israel) would likely not have been able to comprehend the references to the children of Israel, to Moses, and to the Prophets (let alone the Talmud and Rambam). Were Rabbi Meldola to have received a reply to his missive, he might have found it difficult to imagine it was composed by children of Israel.

That is entirely different from what transpired when Jews outside Abyssinia began writing to the Beta Israel there, beginning in 1845. As Professor Corinaldi chronicles, not only did these letters receive a response — and not only did those corresponding recognize each other as members of the same religio-nation — but one such response was even hand delivered to Jerusalem’s Jewish community by two Beta Israel pilgrims in 1855.

Is it really any wonder, then, that though the Beta Israel have been recognized as Jews by the state of Israel and world Jewry, the same has not yet happened with the Igbo — or with other Nigerian ethnic groups, for that matter?

After returning to Abuja from a 2014 study-visit with the Abayudaya in Uganda — where he discovered he was not considered Jewish enough by that African convert community to handle a Torah scroll or to receive an *aliyah* without himself converting — one young Igbo Jewish man, who was clearly hurt by his experience, exclaimed to me: “We say we are Jews from blood. We are now excluded; we cannot go and participate as Jews in any place. I make an appeal that we be recognized, not excluded and isolated from other Jews. There needs to be a process to address this. How long will it take to resolve this matter? When will it be resolved? After our fathers pass away? After my generation passes away? We want our community to be well known, not isolated. If it is recognition by blood, there should be a fast mechanism to recognize it. And if it is by some other alternative, such as conversion, there should also be a fast mechanism. By whatever way, let it be done fast so that we will not continue to be isolated. The most important thing: let us be recognized.”

I don’t know if it is possible or even desirable to set up “a fast mechanism.” Those are logistical and *halachic* (Jewish legal) questions, which rabbis and sages must take up. But I do believe such earnest pleas for recognition and an end to isolation deserve to be treated seriously — which also means honestly — by world Jewry. Mutual honesty is most important. Further scholarship may also be necessary, and if so, I hope these few corrections and comments will prove useful in that regard.

About the author: Shai Afsai’s “The Sigd: From Ethiopia to Israel” appears in the Fall 2014 issue of *CCAR Journal: The Reform Jewish Quarterly*. His articles on Igbo Judaism have been featured in Nigeria’s *The Sun* and *Leadership*, in Israeli publications such as *The Jerusalem Post* and *The Times of Israel*, and in *The Providence Journal*.

