

Biafran Separatism in Post-War Nigeria: Religious Identity, Intergroup Threats, and the (In)compatibility of Christianity and Islam

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Abstract

The Republic of Biafra was created out of Nigeria on May 30, 1967. Consisting mainly of Igbo Christians, Biafra officially ceased to exist on January 15, 1970, following a 30-month war. Most studies of the contemporary demand among some Igbo people for Biafra's restoration do not examine its religious dimension, and the minimal research on its religious drivers has paid less attention to the Igbo Christian identity, despite the significant position of Christianity in Igboland and Eastern Nigeria more broadly. Data obtained from July to October 2020 through 21 key informant interviews and 229 questionnaire respondents from Nigeria indicates that the present-day support for Biafra's restoration is partially motivated by Christian identity, perceived realistic and symbolic threats from Islam and northern Nigerian Muslims, and a notion that Christianity and Islam are incompatible. To address separatism in Nigeria, a strategic response should take its religious drivers into account.

Keywords

Biafra; Igbo; Nigeria; religion; conflict; colonisation; intergroup threats theory; Christian-Muslim relations

Introduction

Nigeria was created after the British-designated Northern and Southern protectorates were merged on January 1, 1914. The amalgamation was subsequently divided into the Eastern, Northern and Western regions before the Mid-Western region was created. Afterwards, Nigeria was divided into states, currently consisting of thirty-six states and the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. Nigeria's estimated population is more than 200 million, with over 250 ethnic groups and more than 500 indigenous languages (CIA 2023; United States Department of State 2022, Section 1). Some estimated percentage sizes of the ethnic groups are Hausa (30), Yoruba

(15.5), Igbo (15.2), Fulani (6), Tiv (2.4), Kanuri/Berberi (2.4), Ibibio (1.8), Ijaw/Izon (1.8), and others (24.9) (CIA 2023). Nigeria is one of the African countries with the highest levels of religious commitment (Pew Research Centre 2018; Ossai 2021a, 29ff, 2023; Vaughan 2016). Most of the population identifies as Christian or Muslim. Although the states in Nigeria have various degrees of religious diversity, most Nigerians in the northern regions are Muslims, while the majority in the southern areas are Christians (CIA 2023; Ossai 2021a, 29ff; United States Department of State 2022, Section 1; Vaughan 2016).

Nigeria experienced a civil war between July 6, 1967, and January 15, 1970. The war resulted from the former Eastern Region's unilateral declaration of independence and the rejection of the declaration by the Nigerian central government. The Republic of Biafra was declared on May 30, 1967, and existed until January 15, 1970, after Biafran forces surrendered to the Nigerian government. It is estimated that one to three million deaths occurred in Biafra during the war due to hostilities, disease, and starvation (Falola and Heaton 2008, 158; Heerten and Moses 2014, 170). Although the Biafran Republic ceased to exist decades ago, there still is a visible demand for an independent state of Biafra, as shown by the emergence of several Biafran separatist groups within the 21st century, such as the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), Biafran Independent Movement (BIM), Biafra Actualisation Forum (BAF), Biafra Foundation (BF), and Biafra Nigeria Worldwide (BNW) (Nwangwu et al. 2020, 17-8; Ugwueze 2021, 2). The Nigerian federal government has responded to contemporary Biafran separatism by proscribing separatist groups, conducting military operations in south-eastern Nigeria to limit separatist activities, and incarcerating individuals believed to be members or supporters of separatist movements (Amnesty International 2021; Ani 2017; Nwangwu 2023; Ojo 2023). This repressive approach does not effectively address the motivators of the support for Biafra's restoration and enables its persistence (Ani 2017; Nwangwu 2023, 43ff; Ojo 2023).

There is increasing research on post-war Biafran separatism (e.g., Chilwa 2018; Johnson and Olaniyan 2017; Nwabueze and Ezebuenyi 2019; Nwangwu 2023; Nwangwu et al. 2020; Ojo 2023; Okonta 2014; Onuoha 2011, 2012, 2013, 2018; Smith 2014; Ugwueze 2021; Ugwueze et al. 2020). However, the religious drivers of the renewed demand for Biafra have received less attention, despite the age-long importance of religious identity and institutions in Igboland and the former Eastern Region. The current study considers whether Christian identity in south-eastern Nigeria, a large part of the former Republic of Biafra, affects contemporary Igbo support for Biafra's restoration. Christianity has been the major religion of the Igbo since around the mid-20th century (Omenka 2010; Stonawski et al. 2016, 2f; Uchendu 2023; United States Department of State 2022, Section 1). This distinguishes the south-eastern region from the mainly Muslim north-eastern and north-western areas of Nigeria, whose configuration has been influenced strongly by Islam (Vaughan 2016).

Data collected through interviews and questionnaires completed in Nigeria in 2020 shows that (1) some Igbo people's Christian identity, (2) their belief that there are consequential threats originating from Islam or northern Nigerian Muslims, and (3) their understanding that Christianity and Islam are incompatible, are among the drivers of support for Biafra's restoration. A portion of the Igbo Christian population in contemporary Nigeria draws on Christian teachings and the bible to interpret or justify their demand for Biafra. Additionally, some believe that the presence of Christian and Muslim majorities in Nigeria inhibits peace

and development, and some think Biafra's restoration will protect the Igbo from Islamisation. The following three segments of this article describe the defunct Republic of Biafra, the study's theoretical framework, and the adopted research approaches. After a review of the literature on the causes of contemporary Biafran separatism, the significant Christian presence in Igboland is described and the research findings are presented and discussed before the article is concluded.

The defunct Republic of Biafra

On May 30, 1967, the military governor of Eastern Nigeria, Lieutenant Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, proclaimed "that the territory and region known as and called Eastern Nigeria together with her continental shelf and territorial waters shall henceforth be an independent sovereign state of the name and title of 'The Republic of Biafra'" (Odogwu 1985, 3-4). The pronouncement was made after the Advisory Committee of Chiefs and Elders and the Consultative Assembly mandated him to do so following a joint meeting in Enugu, the region's capital, on May 27, 1967. Under the administration of Major-General Yakubu Gowon, the Nigerian military government did not recognise Biafra and later invaded the territory to prevent a breakaway. The result was a war that lasted from July 6, 1967, to January 15, 1970. Although colonial and postcolonial factors caused the secession, its root cause appears to be the British merging of different nations to form Nigeria.

Before Nigeria was created by the British, the Igbo people and "numerous politically autonomous societies" lived in the areas that make up Nigeria (Alapiki 2005, 52). By 1900, the British had "established effective political control" over many of these societies, administered as the Colony of Lagos and the Protectorates of Northern and Southern Nigeria (Alapiki 2005, 52). In February 1906, the southern protectorate and the Lagos colony were merged to create the "Colony and Protectorate of Southern Nigeria", and on January 1, 1914, the northern protectorate was combined with the southern protectorate to form the "Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria", led from Lagos by a governor-general (Paxton 1974, 455). In 1939, the southern region was divided into the Western and Eastern provinces by Sir Bernard Bourdillon, who governed Nigeria from 1935-43 (Buchanan 1953, 451; Falola et al. 2020). Richard's Constitution of 1946 later established regional Houses of Assembly "to serve as the fulcrum of politics in the regions" (Alapiki 2005, 53; Buchanan 1953, 451). On October 1, 1954, Nigeria became a federation comprised of the Eastern, Western, and Northern Regions, the Southern Cameroons, a federal capital in Lagos, regional governors, premiers, cabinets, a legislature, and a civil service (Paxton 1974, 455; Falola et al. 2020). The Mid-West region was created in 1963.

Nigeria's colonial history can hardly be dissociated from the Nigeria-Biafra War (Ojukwu 1969, 1). However, more immediate causes of Biafra's secession in 1967 include events that followed the military coup of January 15, 1966, such as the killing of thousands of Igbo people and other Easterners in northern and western Nigeria between May and October 1966, and the attendant mass return of surviving ones to their ancestral home in Eastern Nigeria. Injustice and discrimination against the peoples of Eastern Nigeria were identified as major concerns in the resolution passed by the Advisory Committee of Chiefs and Elders and the Consultative Assembly, which mandated Ojukwu to declare the Republic of Biafra. Nigeria was understood to have failed to protect the Easterners, and Biafrans described the war as a struggle for survival and liberation. During the war, Ojukwu described the Biafran as "a victim

of a series of actions directed at his destruction” and “the only thing positive is his reflex to live, to prevent further death – a rejection of genocide” (Ojukwu 1969, xviii-xix).

Most countries recognised the Gowon regime as the legitimate government of Nigeria, but Biafra was formally recognised as a sovereign state by Tanzania (April 13, 1968), Gabon (May 8, 1968), Ivory Coast (May 14, 1968), Zambia (May 20, 1968) and Haiti (March 22, 1969) (Davies 1995, 225; Ijalaye 1971, 553-4). Additionally, Biafra received “implied recognition” from France, Israel, Norway, Portugal, Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), South Africa, Spain, and the Vatican (Unoke 2018, 12). According to Odogwu (1985, 14), who led Biafra’s Directorate of Military Intelligence, the nation’s population at the time it was declared “was estimated at 14 million people”, including about 9 million Igbo and 5 million others “from minority tribes made up of Efiks, Ijaws and some marginal Ibos (sic) in the Rivers areas of Port Harcourt”. By the time Biafra was declared, most people in the region were Christians, making Christianity the major religion of the new republic (Omenka 2010, 375).

After the termination of the Nigeria-Biafra War, Ojukwu and other former leaders of the Republic of Biafra supported a united Nigeria. Ojukwu advised Igbo people to embrace their Nigerian citizenship and “advance into the mainstream of Nigerian politics” since “isolationism and wallowing in an orgy of self-pity or indeed carrying the banner of protest is counter-productive” (Ojukwu 1989, 139). However, the desire to live in a sovereign state of Biafra has remained among some Igbo people. In the current Fourth Republic of Nigeria, which started in May 1999, the demand for Biafra’s restoration has increased among the Igbo (Onuoha 2018, 380; Smith 2014, 792ff). The Republic of Biafra currently being sought consists of the peoples of the South-East and part of South-South geopolitical zones. The South-East is made up of five states: Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo, while six comprise the South-South, namely, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, and Rivers. The South-East zone consists mainly of Igbo states, while the part of the South-South that is counted as Biafra consists primarily of Igbo-speaking areas. Although there is support for Biafra among some people in the South-South, Biafran separatists have the most substantial presence in the Igbo states of the South-East.

Theoretical framework

A revised version of the Integrated Threat Theory, the Intergroup Threat Theory (ITT) enables a useful interpretation of the causal role of perceived threats from Islam and the Nigerian Muslim population in the public Igbo support for Biafra’s restoration (Stephan and Stephan 2000; Stephan, Ybarra and Morrison 2009). The ITT holds that “an intergroup threat is experienced when members of one group perceive that another group is in a position to cause them harm” (Stephan, Ybarra and Morrison 2009, 43; cf. Stephan and Stephan 2016). Based on the kind of harm believed to be likely to arise from the outgroup, the ITT classifies the outgroup threats that an ingroup may perceive into realistic and symbolic threats. The former refers to “a concern about physical harm or a loss of resources” or “threats to a group’s power, resources and general welfare” (Stephan, Ybarra and Morrison 2009, 43-4; cf. Stephan and Stephan 2016; Rios, Sosa and Osborn 2018). For example, a realistic threat emerges when members of a group fear that an outgroup may attack it, leading to the loss of lives and property, and a possible physical extermination of the ingroup. Symbolic threat, on the other hand, refers

to “a concern about the integrity or validity of the ingroup’s meaning system” (Stephan, Ybarra and Morrison 2009, 43-4; cf. Stephan and Stephan 2016; Rios, Sosa and Osborn 2018). Specifically, they are “threats to a group’s religion, values, belief system, ideology, philosophy, morality, or worldview” (Stephan, Ybarra and Morrison 2009, 43). This concern exists against an outgroup whose values are markedly different from those of the ingroup, and whose worldview can undermine the ingroup’s value system, way of life, or identity if the ingroup fails to protect itself, for example, by allowing the expansion of the outgroup’s presence and influence in the geographical domain of the ingroup. Proponents of the ITT observe that one main reason intergroup threats should be taken seriously is the divisive effect they could have on intergroup relations whether they are validated concerns or groundless imaginations (Stephan, Ybarra and Morrison 2009, 44). With the perception of outgroup threats, members of ingroups support or take actions which aim to counter the threat and/or protect them from the outgroup. These could be nonhostile, as in negotiation, but they could be more conflictual and escalatory (Stephan and Stephan 2016, 137ff; Stephan, Ybarra and Morrison 2009, 44ff). In the case of Nigeria, many Igbo Christians’ perception of realistic and symbolic threats from Islam and the Muslim population in Nigeria drives the seeking of ingroup protection through Nigerian partition. They believe that as a sovereign state, Biafra’s borders and Christian predomination would serve as strong and effective deterrents to Islamisation.

Data and methods

Research design

As a research paradigm, pragmatism involves a practical approach that “takes the research problem as its fundamental concern,” assessing “the value of research strategies and methods in terms of how well they work at dealing with that problem” (Denscombe 2010, 324). Rather than following an either-or approach that chooses between qualitative and quantitative designs, the pragmatic inquirer asks what strategy is “more effective in relation to the research problem” (Denscombe 2010, 324). The pragmatist may cross “the boundaries of conventional paradigms of research by deliberately combining methods drawn from different traditions with different underlying assumptions” (Denscombe 2010, 137). With mixed methods, an inquirer combines data-gathering approaches which could each be self-sufficient. Key informant interviews can provide rich qualitative data, as surveys produce useful quantitative results. This study has adopted the former to obtain detailed information from a relatively small number of purposively selected key informants, and surveys to gather less-detailed data from a larger sample. This combination has enabled triangulation and yielded valuable insights into the research question.

Data collection

In July and August 2020, the authors interviewed 21 purposively sampled Christian Igbo men between the ages of 27 and 45, who are strong supporters of Biafra’s restoration. More than thirty-four persons contacted to participate in the research declined or did not respond. Interviewees resided in various parts of south-eastern Nigeria. They include six Roman Catholics, seven Anglicans, and eight members of other Protestant and independent churches, representing the major Christian denominations in Igboland. Interviews aimed to discover whether and how participants’ support for Biafra’s restoration was influenced by their identity as Christians and views about Islam and its relationship with Christianity. Interviews

lasted for about twenty minutes. Participants were informed of the purpose of the research and how their data would be stored and used. Interviewees consented to participate in the study. Alphanumeric pseudonyms, BN1 – BN21, are used for the participants.

Table 1: List of interviews

Pseudonym	Age group	Sex	Occupation	Date of interview in 2020
BN1	31-40	M	Business owner	6 July
BN2	31-40	M	Graduate student & self-employed	14 July
BN3	41-50	M	Civil servant	14 July
BN4	31-40	M	Salesman	18 July
BN5	41-50	M	Self-employed	18 July
BN6	21-30	M	Undergraduate	20 July
BN7	31-40	M	Business owner	26 July
BN8	41-50	M	Community worker & private company employee	27 July
BN9	41-50	M	Civil servant	27 July
BN10	41-50	M	Self-employed	3 August
BN11	21-30	M	NGO staff	6 August
BN12	41-50	M	Medical worker	7 August
BN13	31-40	M	Medical salesperson	8 August
BN14	41-50	M	Business owner	9 August
BN15	31-40	M	Graduate student, part-time teacher & self-employed	9 August
BN16	21-30	M	Self-employed	10 August
BN17	31-40	M	Self-employed	12 August
BN18	31-40	M	Business owner	12 August
BN19	41-50	M	Self-employed	13 August
BN20	31-40	M	Private company employee	14 August
BN21	31-40	M	Business owner	21 August

Note: Table created by the authors.

The distribution of the 21 interviewees' opinions across the Igbo population in south-eastern Nigeria was assessed using a questionnaire circulated in September and October 2020 in Enugu and virtually on Facebook, WhatsApp, and www.nairaland.com. Used widely by youths in Nigeria, Nairaland is a public forum that allows registered users to post and respond to other users' posts. In addition to the three questions in Table 2, the web-based survey and the questionnaire circulated in Enugu contained the following two open-ended questions asked in the interviews: (1) Please list the reasons why Nigeria is not working, and (2) Please list the reasons why you want Biafra. As in other postcolonial African states, historical and more contemporary factors that determine Nigeria's progress are multiple. Some are largely local, such as Nigeria's justice system, and the successive performance of actors governing its 36

states and the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. Other influences emerge from foreign actors, such as international monetary organisations, investors, and fellow UN member states. When the survey asked research participants whether they think “Nigeria is not working as it should because there are many Christians and many Muslims living together in the country”, the authors sought to understand where respondents position Christian-Muslim differences in Nigeria in the list of factors affecting Nigeria’s progress. 178 Igbo Christians responded to the web-based questionnaire, and 51 others in Enugu filled out the hard copies. Overall, there were 229 questionnaire respondents, including 203 men and 26 women between the ages of 24 and 37.

Data analysis

After collecting, transcribing, and organising the data, the authors read them a few times to get a general overview of the data. Following the thematic method of qualitative analysis, the authors examined notes taken during the research and the interview transcripts for “repeated patterns” and “common or shared meanings” regarding the religious drivers of participants’ support for Biafra’s restoration (Kiger and Varpio 2020, 847). During the primarily inductive coding, statements in each transcript that were significant to the research question were identified, such as:

(1) “*Ndigbo* [Igbo people] are children of God...God will deliver us from this country with Biafra” (BN17).

(2) “These people want Sharia...There is Sharia in the north” (BN2).

(3) “I went to a federal government college in the north...most of my good friends are Muslims. Our call for Biafra is not about Islam at all” (BN12).

Three significant repeated patterns were identified from the data, namely:

(1) Christians and Muslims can hardly coexist peacefully in Nigeria.

(2) Christians and Muslims can peacefully coexist in Nigeria.

(3) Biafra and individuals demanding its restoration have divine support.

Alphanumeric codes, A1-A2, B1-B3, and C1-C3, were assigned to questionnaire responses, which were examined to determine whether they reflected the themes identified in the interviews. Overall, questionnaire responses showed that the views expressed by the interviewees were held by many more Igbo Christians who support Biafra’s restoration. This triangulation helps to validate the results.

The drivers of contemporary Biafran separatism: A literature review

Nwangwu et al. (2020, 3) observe that Nigeria’s return to democracy in 1999 helped widen “the democratic space for people’s expression of grievances that were restricted during military rule”. This facilitated the emergence of Biafran separatist movements and other “ethnic activist groups” in the country (Nwangwu et al. 2020, 3). Prior research on separatism indicates that various factors contribute to it, including ethnic or national pride, religious and ethnic differences, ingroup perceptions of unfair treatment or deprivation, perceived alienation of the ingroup from the rest of the society, lack of trust in the outgroup, grievances, elitist instrumentalisation, resource curse, and a state’s inability to achieve or sustain legitimacy among its people (Chalk 2008, 1-3; Collier and Hoeffler 2004, 2005; Ekeke and Lubisi 2019; Karl 2005, 26; Liow 2006; O’Loughlin and Tuathail 2009, 593-4; Okwueze 2003, 99; Papyrakis 2017, 176ff; Ross 2004; Sugunnasil 2006, 120; Tan 2000, 268ff; Ugwueze et al.

2020, 92-5). Studies about the causes of the demand for Biafra's restoration have pointed to some of these factors.

It has been described as Igbo nationalism (Nwangwu et al. 2020; Onuoha 2012). This is because the Biafran republic being sought is meant to be a predominantly Igbo state, and most of those who support its restoration are members of the Igbo nation. To justify their demand for Biafra, individuals and groups refer to markers of Igbo identity and argue that the Igbo are a distinct people whose belonging to Nigeria was an undesired result of European colonisation. For instance, even though the Igbo did not exist under a single state or political authority in the pre-colonial era, "Igbo society and culture enjoyed a basic uniformity of pattern and of cosmological and social ideas" (Afigbo 1981a, 1). Contributing to an existing shared notion of Igbonness, the Igbo language also marks the Igbo as "a distinct group" (Afigbo 1981b, 10, cited in Uzozie 1991, 5; cf. Van Den Bersselaar 1998, 101ff).

The question of who the Igbo people are and where they came from is yet to be resolved, even though it arouses enormous interest among them (Afigbo 1991b, 34f; Ekwuru 2009, 19-20; Isichei 1976, 3). Among the most ancient peoples in Nigeria, the Igbo have lived in the region that became Eastern Nigeria for so many centuries that it is difficult to determine their origin (Ohadike 1994, 2). A narrative states that they originated directly from *Chukwu*, the creator God, through a place in Igboland called *Nri* (Ugwu 2014, 17; cf. Afigbo 1981a, 31ff). Some describe the Igbo as "members of the lost tribes of Israel" (Ohadike 1994, 8; cf. Afsai 2016; Lis 2015; Miles 2023). The Igbo language, beliefs and cultural practices, such as belief in supernatural beings and circumcision, have been associated with those of the Jewish and North African cultures, but the notion that Igbo people originated from these areas is still contested (Afigbo 1991b, 37ff; Basden 1966; Ohadike 1994, 3; Talbot 1969). Igbo archaeologists have located the origins of Igbo people and culture in Igboland itself. Their excavations in the region indicate that the area "had been inhabited for at least 60,000 years" and it "was one of the earliest centres of mankind's physical, technological, and cultural evolution" (Ohadike 1994, 8-9; cf. Afigbo 1991a, 1; Isichei 1976, 3-4; Shaw 1970). Generally, "the origin of the Igbo people has remained elusive, resulting in a wide range of speculation" (Ohadike 1994, 2; cf. Afigbo 1981a, 1-30, 1991a, 3; 1991b, 34ff; Ekwuru 2009, 20). However, one uncontested point is that they lived in the region that became Eastern Nigeria for many centuries before the British conquered Igboland.

The Igbo people are said to have suffered victimisation, marginalisation, and exclusion in Nigeria (Nwangwu et al. 2020, 10; Onuoha 2018, 386-7; Ugwueze et al. 2020, 95ff). Nigerian authorities' repression of Biafran separatists strengthens the latter's perception of Igbo victimisation and fuels existing separatism (Ani 2017; Nwangwu 2023, 43ff; Ojo 2023). As Ugwueze (2021, 11) observes, the repression "relives the ugly memories of the civil war" and "incubates trauma" among the Igbo. Contemporary Biafran separatism also appears to be significantly driven by economic factors. Many demanding Biafra's restoration are among south-eastern Nigeria's unemployed and low earners (Nwangwu et al. 2020, 10ff). Other drivers of Biafran separatism highlighted in previous studies include the disunity among Nigerian ethnic groups and Igbo complaints about corruption in Nigeria (Smith 2014; Ugwueze 2021, 2).

A few recent studies have considered the religious dimension of the renewed demand for Biafra. However, they mostly focus on the leaders of particular separatist groups or the

narratives employed by the organisations. There has been less attention on the relationship between Christian identity in Igboland and public Igbo support for Biafra's restoration. Nche (2023) has examined how Nnamdi Kanu, the leader of a contemporary Biafran separatist movement, IPOB, has employed religious narratives and symbols in his public speeches about Nigeria and Biafra. Similarly, Nche, Ugwueze and Ugwu (2022, 4) have studied how Kanu employs the biblical Exodus narrative to mobilise supporters. Also focusing on a pro-Biafra group, Agbo (2024) has studied how IPOB employs war narratives of ancient Israel. Other studies similarly show how MASSOB, another pro-Biafra organisation, has applied biblical stories of Israelites' bondage and triumph (Okonta 2014, 363ff; Onuoha 2018, 389).

Why study the influence of Christian identity in Igboland?

Christianity in Africa was preceded by African indigenous beliefs and practices (Mbiti 1969; Ugwu 2014; Ugwu and Ugwueye 2004). Before their encounter with the Christian religion, the Igbo people predominantly followed traditional religious systems, which involved: (1) belief in the supreme God *Chukwu* and other supernatural beings, (2) belief in a "personalised providence" called *Chi*, (3) ancestor veneration, (4) sacrifices to *Chukwu* and other spiritual beings, (5) rites of passage, such as birth and death rites, (6) sacred myths, (7) consultation of oracles, and (8) divination, among other things (Isichei 1976, 24ff; Ejiogu 2011, 49-50; Metuh 1973; Ubah 1988, 71-5; Uchendu 2023, 40ff; Ugwu 2014). The beliefs and practices were tied with their view that the universe consists of the natural world, where humans and other tangible realities exist, and the supernatural realm, inhabited by *Chukwu*, ancestors, and other spiritual beings. *Chukwu* was understood as the creator of the universe who wields profound influence on the natural world. It was believed that *Chukwu* and some spiritual beings are benevolent, but others are evil. Hence, roles and practices existed in society that aimed to mediate between the natural and divine worlds to ensure the well-being of the living (Uchendu 2023, 43). Isichei (1976, 25) notes that "the living, the dead, and the unborn [were believed to] form part of a continuum".

Furthermore, religion shaped many aspects of society because there was hardly any separation between "the secular and the sacred, the natural and the supernatural" (Isichei 1976, 24). For example, the political system was intertwined with indigenous religious beliefs and practices (Ejiogu 2011, 45ff). "Norms that guided the practice of authority in all aspects of Igbo social, economic and political organisation" were validated and shaped by Igbo religious beliefs (Ejiogu 2011, 47). Religion and law were closely associated, given that "many of the most powerful legal sanctions are derived from the gods" (Meek 1937, 20; cf. Ejiogu 2011, 47; Isichei 1969, 129). In short, "the Igbo were nothing if not profoundly religious, and all accounts of their life reflect that fact" (Isichei 1976, 24).

By the time Nigeria gained independence, Christianity had become the major religion in Igboland. How the Igbo people have widely accepted and sustained the Christian religion demonstrates their close association with religion. According to Isichei (1976, 160), "the history of Christianisation of Igboland begins in 1841", when a former Igbo enslaved person called Simon Jonas, who had been resettled in Sierra Leone after his rescue, preached in Aboh, in the southern Nigerian area presently called Delta State. Jonas had visited Aboh in the company of two British Church Missionary Society (CMS) representatives, James F. Schön, a German missionary, and Samuel Ajayi Crowther, a Yoruba ex-slave (Ekechi 1971, 2). Able to

use the Igbo language, Jonas acted as their interpreter. He “made a favourable impression” during his short stay there and “children enthusiastically gathered around him day by day in order to learn about the Bible” (Ekechi 1971, 2). In 1857, “the first permanent [CMS] mission in Igboland was established at Onitsha”, in the south-eastern state presently known as Anambra (Isichei 1976, 160; cf. Ekechi 1971, 4-6; Kalu 2003, 82; Njoku, Iheanacho and Onyekwelibé 2017, 469; Ubah 1988, 75). A massive conversion of the Igbo to Christianity arose from the subsequent missionary activities in the late 19th and early 20th centuries by the CMS, “Roman Catholic missionaries, the Society for African Missions, ...[and] other smaller evangelical missionary trusts from Europe and America” (Uwaegbute 2021, 44; cf. Ekechi 1971; Ilogu 1985; Kalu 2003). Part of these processes were driven by the Igbo people (Isichei 1973, 207, 1976, 160-5; Kalu 2003). The Igbo worldview and belief in the creator God, *Chukwu*, facilitated their acceptance of Christianity. According to Isichei (1976, 25), “the missionary naturally concentrated on an aspect of Igbo religion which corresponded closely with his own: the idea of God, eternal, the Creator of all things”. Furthermore, Christian expansion in Igboland after 1900 was aided by the British conquest of the region. For instance, it enabled European missionaries to access the region’s interior parts and created new employment opportunities for educated people, thereby promoting the natives’ attendance at mission schools (Ekechi 1971, 114, 128ff; Isichei 1976, 116-8).

With the spread of Christianity in Igboland, the prominence of traditional religion diminished. By the time the Nigeria-Biafra War broke out in 1967, Christianity was the major religion in Igboland, contrasting it with the north-eastern and north-western areas of Nigeria where Islam dominated. As a result, some Igbo people regarded the events leading to the war as results of hostility towards the Igbo Christian identity and the war as “a conflict between Islam and Christianity” (Omenka 2010, 369). Presently, the vast majority of Igbo people in the five states in the South-East geopolitical zone are Christians, including Catholics, Protestants, and members of various independent churches, and only a small population self-identify as traditionalists, Muslims, followers of other religions, or non-believers (Stonawski et al. 2016, 2-3; Uchendu 2023, 48; United States Department of State 2022, Section 1). Similar to Nigerians in the South-South region, up to 97 per cent of the Igbo in the South-East zone are Christians (Uchendu 2023, 48). In contrast, Islam is the main religion in the North-East and North-West regions, while Christian and Muslim majorities live in the North-Central zone. The South-West is also largely Christian but its Muslim presence is higher than that of the South-East (Mustapha and Bunza 2014; United States Department of State 2022, Section 1). Accompanying these religious differences between the regions are differences in worldviews and values. In the present-day South-East region, the Christian religion plays an influential role in people’s lives and how they interpret personal experiences and respond to issues in their environment.

Findings: Religion and public Igbo support for Biafra’s restoration

Christians and Muslims can hardly coexist peacefully in Nigeria

One significant finding of this research is that most questionnaire respondents have religious concerns. 57.6 per cent (N = 132) of 229 participants believe that Christians and Muslims cannot live together peacefully in Nigeria, and therefore, one way to achieve peace

among the various peoples within Nigeria is to divide the country into more religiously homogeneous units, including the Republic of Biafra that will be inhabited mainly by Igbo Christians, and at least one predominantly Muslim country where Islamic law could be adopted. 49.78 per cent (N = 114) of participants think that Nigeria is functioning poorly because there are Christian and Muslim majorities living in the country. A minority of the respondents (N = 22), who find the strong Islamic presence in Nigeria deeply problematic, had a more extreme belief that religious diversity is the main reason why the country is not functioning satisfactorily. (*Table 2 may be placed around here*).

Fourteen interviewees (BN1 – BN10, BN14, BN15, BN19, BN20) expressed concerns about Islam and showed they preferred the division of the country into religiously homogeneous units. Interviewees sometimes linked or attributed insecurity in Nigeria to religious diversity and perceived Islamic expansionism. For example, BN4 said:

Are you telling me that you don't see the problems we have in the [South-] East today? Look at how Fulani people attack our farmers and kill our people. Everyone is afraid. These people want to take over. Islam believes in total control. Please stop making peace and use the blessings God gave you to bring your people out of this suffering. Biafra is our only hope.

Here, BN4 refers to conflicts between herders and farmers in south-eastern and other parts of southern and north-central Nigeria. Estimates suggest that about 60,000 deaths have resulted from herder-farmer conflicts in the country between 2001 and 2018, in addition to other adverse effects such as population displacement (Ossai 2021b, 413). Mostly occurring within Christian farming communities, the conflicts “caused over 3,500 deaths” between January 2016 and October 2018 and “about 2,500” deaths “between 2017 and May 2020” (Ossai 2021b, 413-4). The conflicts follow the noticeably increased migration of mainly Muslim herders and their cattle from the north southward. This migration has been attributed to climate change, desertification, environmental degradation, insufficiency of grazing resources in the drier north, structural factors, lack of an effective land tenure system, and so on (Akov 2017, 288; Chukwuma 2020, 54-5; Eke 2020, 747-8; Ojo 2020, 91). However, the above statement by BN4 and previous research by Chukwuma (2020, 67-9) and Ojo (2020, 91) indicate that the Muslim herders are also perceived by some Christians in southern Nigeria as agents of Islamic expansion who migrate into Christian farming communities to promote Islamic presence.

BN1, BN3, and BN10 were concerned that Muslims were working to Islamise the Christian parts of Nigeria. A similar idea has been expressed by Christian leaders and organisations in the country, such as the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) (Aluko 2019; Opejobi 2017). Among other people, the Muslim political elite, including former President Muhammadu Buhari, were thought to be critical agents of Islamisation. For BN2 and BN5, the effort to Islamise Nigeria is shown by the Buhari administration's attempt in 2019 to construct settlements for Muslim Fulani herders in non-Muslim parts of the country. BN2 explained:

these people [Muslims] want Sharia...There is Sharia in the north. It is better to give them their own country. We are Christians here. Don't you know that when they come, they will increase later, and the time will come when they start wanting Sharia?

BN2 was worried that the construction of settlements in Igboland for northern Nigerian Muslims would lead to a progressive increase in the Muslim population in Igboland, which the establishment of Islamic law and institutions would accompany. These participants' concerns

about Islamisation are shared by several other Christians in Igboland and Nnamdi Kanu, a famous Biafran separatist, who leads one of the most active contemporary Biafran separatist movements (Nche 2023, 26-7).

Table 2: Views about Christianity and Islam in Nigeria

(A) Do you think Christians and Muslims cannot live together peacefully in Nigeria?		
	Respondents	% of respondents
A1. They can	97	42.35
A2. They cannot	132	57.64
Total	229	
(B) Do you think Nigeria is not working as it should because there are many Christians and many Muslims living together in the country?		
B1. Yes, I think that is the main reason	22	9.60
B2. Yes, I think that is one of the main reasons	114	49.78
B3. No, I do not think that is why Nigeria is not working	93	40.61
Total	229	
(C) Do you believe that Nigeria can get better?		
C1. Yes	68	29.82
C2. No	94	41.22
C3. Maybe	66	28.94
Total	228	

Note: Table created by the authors.

On 27 October 1999, Zamfara State in north-western Nigeria introduced expanded Sharia, followed by eleven other states in the north, namely, Bauchi, Borno, Gombe, Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Niger, Sokoto, and Yobe (HRW 2004, Section IV; Ossai 2020, 312-3; Ostien, Nasir and Kogelmann 2005). The development was followed by Christian protests and Muslim counter-protests, resulting in Christian-Muslim clashes, for example in Kaduna (2000 and 2002) and Jos (2001). The conflicts were described as “the worst clashes since the Civil War of the late 1960s” (Tayob 2005, 45). More than 2000 lives were lost due to the conflict in Kaduna in early 2000 (Little 2007, 258). The adoption of expanded Sharia in northern Nigeria is often cited as what could happen in Igboland if Islamic expansion in the region is not restricted.

BN7, BN8 and BN15 observed that genocide was carried out during the Biafra War and that this genocide was an attack on the Igbo and their Christian identity. For instance, BN7 stated:

the genocide we faced during the war will show you that they don’t want us. The maltreatment is still happening. See the government; how many Christians or Igbo people are in top offices? They want to rule everybody. We all know that our brothers and sisters living in the North are afraid. I think we are just deceiving ourselves with this one Nigeria thing.

Similarly, Omenka (2010, 369) has observed that during the war, some Igbo people regarded the pogroms that preceded the war as an attack on their Christian religion and the war itself “as

a conflict between Islam and Christianity”. This interpretation was present even as the Nigerian Head of State, Yakubu Gowon, and many soldiers on the federal side were Christians (Omenka 2010, 368-9). Some Christians outside Biafra challenged the characterisation of the war as a conflict between a “Muslim North” and a “Christian East”, but this did not hinder the war’s religious interpretation (Omenka 2010, 379-88). In sum, the current study finds that many of those demanding Biafra do so because of the belief that restoring Biafra would provide security for the Igbo from Islamisation and that dividing Nigeria into religiously homogeneous units would generate more peace and prosperity for the Igbo and other nations that presently constitute Nigeria.

Christians and Muslims can coexist peacefully in Nigeria

42.35 per cent (N = 97) of 229 respondents believe that Christians and Muslims can live peacefully in Nigeria and 40.61 per cent (N = 93) of the respondents do not regard the presence of Christian and Muslim majorities in Nigeria as the reason the country is not functioning satisfactorily. Seven interviewees, including BN11 – 13, BN16 – 18, and BN21, held that their support for Biafra was not motivated by concerns about Islam. BN12 explained, “I went to a federal government college in the north...most of my good friends are Muslims. Our call for Biafra is not about Islam”. BN11 and BN18 noted that even though the Boko Haram insurgents and the northern Nigerian herders attacking Christian farming communities might be Muslims, the entire Muslim population in the country should not be condemned. Besides, BN12 observed, “there are good people and bad people among Christians and Muslims”. BN16 added that “*Umuigbo* [Igbo people] do business in the north [of Nigeria], Pakistan, any Muslim place”. These responses indicate that some Igbo Christians demanding Biafra’s restoration are not influenced by perceived threats from Islam and the Muslim population or the view that Christian and Muslim majorities can hardly coexist peacefully.

Biafra and individuals demanding its restoration have divine support

While participants were divided on the issue of Islam, seventeen interviewees expressed their belief that God is behind Biafra and the Igbo people openly supporting its restoration, who have become possible victims of state repression. For BN15, BN17 and BN19, the divine backing exists because Igbo people are “children of God” meant to inhabit a prosperous Biafra where God’s pleasant arrangements for the Igbo will be actualised. Believing the widely held but disputed narrative that the Igbo people are members of Israel’s lost tribes, BN17 stated that “we [Igbo people] are Israelites. Have you heard that God failed Israel? Biafra will come. I cannot lose hope”. He noted that the Igbo people demanding Biafra’s restoration had met severe state hostility in Nigeria and received limited global support, but he would continue supporting Biafran separatist movements in various ways because he was certain that Biafra would be restored in “God’s time”.

BN9 believes in divine support and protection for Biafra and its supporters because the Igbo, he says, “are not wrong. We are asking for our rights. We did not choose to be in Nigeria”. BN14 explained:

our men of God in the [South-] East [of Nigeria], America, Europe, and everywhere are praying. Buhari [the then Muslim president] is killing us, but some of them [the religious leaders] don’t hide. They say it in the church...they pray for Biafra. Everyone

knows the truth, but some people are pretending. This country cannot be one. You know that it is not working for anybody.

The view that Nigeria cannot be united and that God will “deliver” the Igbo from Nigeria was held by other participants. About 40 per cent (N = 94) of 228 questionnaire respondents believe that “Nigeria cannot get better”. Around 28 per cent (N = 66) were unsure whether it would, and only about 29 per cent (N = 68) thought a prosperous and more satisfactory Nigeria could emerge.

For BN15, Nnamdi Kanu, the IPOB leader, is “the prophet” who will “save *ndigbo* [Igbo people]” by bringing about Biafra’s restoration. The terms “deliver” and “save” which were common in interviews suggest liberation from captivity, as the Israelites were delivered from bondage in Egypt according to the Old Testament. Nche (2023, 26-7) observes that Nnamdi Kanu uses the terms to suggest liberation from the “shackles and bondage” of the “Fulani Caliphate”. By Fulani Caliphate, Kanu refers to the Sokoto Caliphate that resulted from the reformist jihad of Sheikh Uthman Dan Fodio between 1804 and 1808, which achieved a massive Islamic expansion in northern Nigeria (Last 2021; Waldman 1965). Like many supporters of Biafra’s restoration, Kanu believes that the Islamic structure established by Dan Fodio still controls most of Nigeria.

Similarly, BN19 considers Nnamdi Kanu “the Biafran Joshua”. The book of Joshua in the Old Testament says that Joshua became the Israelites’ leader after Moses’s death. He conquered Canaan, which God promised the Israelites, and distributed its lands to the tribes of Israel. Biafra is visualised by participants, including BN13, BN15 – 17, BN19, and BN20, as a version of the biblical Promised Land in Exodus 3:8 (NRSV), where:

- (1) Nigeria’s political and socioeconomic deficiencies will be absent.
- (2) The innate potential of the Igbo will no longer suffer restrictions but will become manifest.
- (3) There will be security, justice, economic prosperity, technological advancement, and robust infrastructure.
- (4) There will be efficient medical institutions that all can access.
- (5) Corruption will be eliminated.
- (6) There will be multiple opportunities for youths to actualise their potential.

This study’s finding that some Igbo Christians draw on biblical narratives to interpret their demand for Biafra aligns with Onuoha’s (2018, 369) previous observation that MASSOB, a pro-Biafra group, has invoked “biblical stories of the deliverance of the ‘children of Israel’ from Egyptian bondage, ‘David and the Goliath’ and ‘Samson and the Philistines’ and equate these with their struggle for self-determination from an oppressive Nigerian state”. Similarly, it corresponds with the observation that Nnamdi Kanu of IPOB has employed “religious narratives and symbols in the framing of the new pro-Biafra secessionist movement” (Nche 2023, 19; cf. Agbo 2024; Nche, Ugwueze and Ugwu 2022).

Discussion: Religion, intergroup threats, and contemporary Biafran separatism

The current research demonstrates that religious identity and perceptions influence the ongoing demand for Biafra’s restoration. As Christians, many Igbo people who demand Biafra justify their position using narratives and ideas from the Christian Bible. Understanding that Christianity is the major religion in Igboland and differentiating Igboland from the mainly Muslim parts of Nigeria, some Igbo people who support Biafra’s restoration visualise Biafra

as a Christian republic where challenges emerging from religious diversity in Nigeria will be absent. Additionally, some Igbo people view Biafra's restoration as a means of protecting the Igbo from threats originating from Islam and the Muslim population in northern Nigeria.

As noted in the second section of this paper, Biafra's initial secession from Nigeria was a product of colonial and postcolonial factors, such as the British merging of different peoples to form Nigeria and the killing of Easterners in parts of northern and southwestern Nigeria following the coup of January 15, 1966 (Ojukwu 1969; Odogwu 1985). Many analysts agree that the Biafra War was not a religious or Christian-Muslim conflict, given that it was not fought over a religious matter and the parties were not clearly divided across religious lines. Yet, there were Biafrans who perceived the war and the pogroms that preceded it as attacks on the Igbo Christian identity by Nigerian Muslims (Omenka 2010). The current research shows that the displeasure with the British amalgamation of the Nigerian regions in 1914, which Biafran leaders and other Biafrans felt during the Biafra War, exists among many contemporary Igbo supporters of Biafra's restoration. However, as in the War, some Igbo who demand Nigeria's partition hold religious concerns. Although previous studies show that the renewed demand for Biafra is being driven by various political and socio-economic factors, the current research adds to the emerging evidence of its religious dimension (Agbo 2024; Nche 2023; Nche, Ugwueze and Ugwu 2022).

Islam arrived in Igboland "between 1891 and 1920" through Muslim migrants from Hausaland, Nupeland and Yorubaland (Uchendu 2023, 51, cf. 2011). Its progress in the region is slow. There were "less than 20,000" Igbo Muslims as of 2017, even though the religion was introduced to Igboland more than a century ago (Uchendu 2023, 52; cf. Uchendu et al. 2017). Yet, even this slow spread of Islam in the region is perceived as a threat to the Igbo. The perceived threat of Islamisation consists of "realistic" and "symbolic" elements, as classified by the ITT. As a process, the Islamisation of Igboland involves the displacement of Christianity as the major religion in the region. This process is a perceived symbolic threat because it involves the subordination of Christian values by Islamic principles. It is also a perceived realistic threat because there are fears that Muslim domination will be accompanied by physical harm or loss of resources and power for the Igbo Christian population. This perception, as the data shows, is at times based on the understanding that Islam or versions of it are a source of large-scale violence in contemporary Nigeria. It is also a product of prior conflictful intergroup relations involving Igbo Christians and those believed to be northern Muslims, such as the recent clashes between Igbo Christian farmers and Muslim herders from the north. As Stephan and Stephan (2016, 136) rightly observe, "intergroup conflict can generate perceptions of intergroup threats because people are likely to believe that the past is a prelude to the present".

The ITT distinguishes between perceived threats to the individual members of a group and perceived threats to the group as a whole. A member of a group can perceive a threat to their person due to their membership in the group while not being concerned about the threat's bearing on the security of the group as a whole (Stephan and Renfro 2002; Stephan, Ybarra and Morrison 2009:44). This study's participants mostly spoke of threats against the Igbo, rather than their selves. However, it is difficult to determine the extent to which self-protection was not a key concern for the participants even though it was not verbally identified as one. It seems reasonable to conclude that the concern for the security of the Igbo is not unconnected with concern for the personal security of the individuals whose membership in the Igbo group

makes them possible targets of outgroup harm in the Nigerian context. In any case, the perceived threats have driven separatism in Nigeria. ITT exponents observe that one main reason intergroup threats are of importance is their divisive effect on intergroup relations, which can arise whether they are substantiated or unfounded (Stephan and Stephan 2016, 137ff; Stephan, Ybarra and Morrison 2009, 44ff). With the perception of outgroup threats, members of ingroups support or take actions which aim to counter the threat and protect them from the outgroup. In the case of Nigeria, many Igbo Christians' perception of realistic and symbolic threats from Islam and the Muslim population in Nigeria drives the seeking of ingroup protection through Nigerian partition. It is believed that Biafra's borders and Christian dominance would prevent Islamisation.

Religious traditions apparently endorse the equitable treatment of individuals and groups. Yet, the unequal power of religiously different groups can influence the unfair treatment of the less powerful group by the more powerful other. Some Igbo Christians who demand Biafra hope that its existence can prevent the future emergence of a Muslim-dominated Igboland, in which Igbo Christian minorities face varying degrees of discrimination and restrictions. Christian minorities have reportedly faced discrimination in largely Muslim parts of northern Nigeria, such as (a) the restriction of Christian religious education in public schools, (b) the disapproval of the construction of Christian chaplaincies in higher educational institutions, and (c) the denial of access to state media, employment, and land for church erection (Kukah 2014, 1-21; Ossai 2020, 315-6). Even though it has helped to bridge divides in Nigeria, religion has also caused or worsened social divides in the country. The results of the current study correspond with previous research about religion's contribution to (1) violence (Appleby 2000; Juergensmeyer 2017; Stern 2003), (2) conflict in Africa (Abbink 2020; Basedau 2017; Basedau and De Juan 2008; Møller 2006), (3) Christian-Muslim conflicts in Nigeria (Boer 2003; Iwuchukwu 2013; Okwueze 1995, 2001; Sodiq 2009; Vaughan 2016), (4) separatism (Funston 2008, 30ff; Liow 2006; O'Loughlin and Tuathail 2009, 594-5; Sugunnasil 2006; Tan 2000), and (5) nationalism (Aktürk 2022; Gryzmala-Busse 2019; Van Der Veer 2013).

Conclusion

The Republic of Biafra existed from May 30, 1967, to January 15, 1970. After a 30-month war in which an estimated millions of Biafrans died, Biafra re-joined Nigeria and its former leaders invited Biafrans to re-embrace their Nigerian identity. However, there has been a demand among many Igbo people for Biafra's restoration. The current research has shown that this demand is partially motivated by Igbo people's Christian identity, perceived realistic and symbolic threats from Islam and northern Nigerian Muslims, and a notion that Christianity and Islam are incompatible. To address separatism in Nigeria, Nigerian authorities and peace actors should not ignore the religious concerns making some citizens desire the division of Nigeria into religiously homogeneous states.

Biographical notes

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Ethics Statement

This research received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the Department of Religion and Cultural Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Participants were informed of the purpose of the research and how their data would be stored and used. Participants consented to take part in the study. Data from participants presented in this article is anonymised.

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