

# “May God Bless Nnamdi Kanu Wherever He Is”: Biafran Separatist Nationalism in Nigeria and the Emerging Roles of Igbo Christian Leaders

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**Abstract:** The Biafran separatist calls of Nnamdi Kanu and IPOB have spread like bush fire over the years among Igbo people. Presently, it is one of the most discussed topics among Igbo people and Nigerians. The narrative of both Kanu and IPOB operate is that Igbo people are marginalized in Nigeria and therefore need freedom. This article examines how some Christian leaders of Igbo extraction now fit into the picture as regards Biafra separatist cause. Utilizing oral interviews and the theory of marginalization, the article illustrates how some Igbo Christian leaders are now supporting the Biafran separatist cause. Their strategy appeals to the Christian faith for justification for Biafran separatism. Hence, ‘spiritual legitimization’ of the Biafran cause by some Igbo Christian leaders helps make Biafran separatism more appealing to many Igbo youth. Christianity now plays a role in the Biafran separatist struggle, although usually neglected in the discourse on Biafra.

**Key words:** Biafra, marginalization, Igbo, Christianity, politics

## Introduction

“I want to tell you something, wherever he is. May God bless him because if someone has risen to shout [that] his brothers are suffering, may God bless his courage.” These were the words of Rev. Fr. Ejike Mbaka, the spiritual director of The Adoration Ministry (Enugu) in a viral video during his sermon of 29 April 2021. In this sermon, Mbaka alluded to the believed suffering and marginalization of the Igbo people of Nigeria.<sup>1</sup> This narrative is the basis for agitation by the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB)—led by Mazi Nnamdi Kanu—for an independent state of Biafra.<sup>2</sup> Mbaka is not the lone Igbo Christian voice regarding the marginalization of the Igbo people, particularly in the present democratic dispensation. B.N. Onuagha, the Methodist Bishop of Onitsha, commented on the present Biafran agitation started by Kanu and IPOB: “To

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me, any Igbo person criticizing Kanu now is a lost soul, bastard, and naïve. No apology. Those Igbo rejoicing are only but being ignorant of the hand writing on the wall.”<sup>3</sup>

Prior to the emergence of Muhammad Buhari as the president of Nigeria in 2015, one would be hard-pressed to hear such comments coming from Igbo Christian leaders. According to some, “The intensified agitation for the sovereign state of Biafra as we have it today is tied in with the present political dispensation which began in 2015. That some Christian leaders of Igbo origin are aligning themselves with IPOB’s call for the state of Biafra has a lot to do with the marginalization of the Igbo people by the present Nigerian government.”<sup>4</sup> Or, similarly, “as it stands today, many Igbo people believe that they are being marginalized in Nigeria, a belief that has heightened since the present political dispensation that began in 2015. This has every connection with why many Igbo people are now speaking out, including some Christian leaders.”<sup>5</sup>

This article argues that some Christian leaders of Igbo background have an emerging role in the struggle for a state of Biafra through ‘speaking up’ for Kanu and the IPOB in various ways. While the article does not claim that the Church in Igboland has become pro-Biafra, the role these Christian leaders are now playing is not so much of a surprise given the supportive role Christian institutions played in the breakaway Biafran state from 1967-1970. According to Omenka, the church was very supportive of the state of Biafra during the Nigeria-Biafra civil war and did much to champion its cause.<sup>6</sup> A highly placed church member in Biafra even regarded the civil war as “a struggle between Christians and the devil.”<sup>7</sup> This shows why the church deemed it worthy to support the Biafran cause at that time.<sup>8</sup> Christian leaders’ support of the Biafran struggle of 1967-1970 could partly be rooted in the belief in freedom for the oppressed and unjustly treated.<sup>9</sup>

That said, no study has recognized this role or Christian leaders’ present position on agitation for Biafra by Kanu and IPOB. Previous studies on the Biafran agitation have largely focused on its ethnic/territorial dimension (Onuoha 2011, Okonta 2012, Adibe 2017), political economy (Nwangwu et al. 2020), genocidal dimension (Heerten and Moses 2014), herdsmen and insecurity dimensions (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung 2021), politics of imbalance perspective (Osaretin 2019, Njoku 2020, Aribisala 2015), among others.<sup>10</sup> Noting this gap in literature, the aim here is to analyze the emerging role of Igbo Christian leaders in current agitations for a state of Biafra. Methodology and a theoretical framework precede an operationalization of key words. Thereafter, the article describes the marginalization of Igbo people after the loss of civil war followed by an account of the emergence of radical Igbo separatist nationalism, a brief overview of Christianity and politics in Nigeria, and a discussion on ‘spiritual legitimization’ of the Biafran separatist cause by Igbo Christian leaders.

### **Methodological and Theoretical Considerations**

In 2020-2021, we conducted oral interviews with Igbo Christian leaders and youth: nine Christian leaders and nine youth. Our selected informants cut across five Igbo states that form the south-eastern geo-political zone of Nigeria. Our distribution of participants also cuts across denominational affiliations. Since the Biafran agitation is a sensitive topic, our participants have pseudonyms in the article to protect their identity. The interview questions were semi-

structured. Complementing oral interviews are secondary sources that include newspapers, journal articles, and books.

Marginalization is the basic theory that guides our discussion. While marginalization features in literature dealing with inclusion and social exclusion, it is surprising that marginalization is rarely defined.<sup>11</sup> This may be because, as Mowat argues, both inclusion/social exclusion and marginalization are taken to mean the same thing.<sup>12</sup> Thus, these terms are mostly used interchangeably. According to Razer et al. social exclusion is a state in which people or groups “lack effective participation in key activities or benefits of the society in which they live.”<sup>13</sup> In this sense, social exclusion connotes marginalization. However, one thing lacking from this definition as it relates to marginalization is the feeling that the socially excluded have about their plight. It is in this regard that we agree with Mowat: “Marginalization is more than a state; it encompasses feelings about that state. To be marginalized is to have a sense that one is neither a valued member of a community and able to make valuable contribution within that community nor able to access the range of services and/or opportunities open to others.”<sup>14</sup> It is on this basis that we chose marginalization as the underlining framework for our study. The present Biafran separatist agitation is reflective of feelings the Igbo people have about their ‘present state’ in Nigeria today.

### **Key Terms**

In this study, Christian leaders refer to priests and pastors who are leaders of churches in Igboland in different capacities. They cut across denominations to include Roman Catholics, Methodists, Anglicans, and Pentecostals. We concentrate on their individual views and not the official position of their churches on Biafran separatism. As we stated in the introduction, we have not come across any official church position in Igboland supporting the Biafran separatist struggle as advocated by IPOB. However, some Christian leaders are issuing personal opinions on the issue and it is their thoughts we concentrate on in this work.

As regards the use of Biafran separatist nationalism, we refer to the present agitation for a sovereign state of Biafra that is independent of the Nigerian state, i.e., a restoration of the breakaway Biafran state as was led by the late Chukwuemeka Ojukwu from 1967-1970. This is somewhat related to Igbo self-determination. The present Biafran separatist struggle, as we shall explain below, began with Ralf Uwazurike and his Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) in 1999. From 2012, the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) took over agitation for a sovereign state of Biafra.

### **From the Center to the Fringes: Marginalization of the Igbo People**

Prior to the Nigeria-Biafra civil war of 1967-1970, Igbo people carved out a niche for themselves in the political leadership of Nigeria. Literature on colonial politics tells of the exploits of Igbo people in the anti-colonial struggle, documenting the nationalist efforts of Nnamdi Azikiwe, M.C.K Ajuluchukwu, Nwafor Orizu, Osita Agwuna, and Jaja Wachuku, among others.<sup>15</sup> Between 1929 and 1960, although ethnic politics became deeply entrenched in Nigeria as Nnoli and Aluko have argued, Igbo politicians were key players.<sup>16</sup> Azikiwe, emerged as the first indigenous governor-general and president of Nigeria between 1960-1966.<sup>17</sup> Such were his exploits, that Chinua Achebe called him “the father of African independence.”<sup>18</sup> During the

early years of Nigerian independence, Igbo politicians also played a key role in piloting the affairs of the young country. Jaja Wachuku became senate president and the first speaker of the Nigerian House of Representatives. Achebe further wrote that during the First Republic, the Igbo people virtually led the nation in every sphere of life, including politics.<sup>19</sup>

However, many Nigerians greeted the first republic with mixed feelings as those saddled with the task of piloting the affairs of the country did not live up to high expectations. Corruption within government and deeply entrenched ethnic and religious sentiments ruled the political life of the period, leaving some Nigerians dissatisfied with the political class.<sup>20</sup> This dissatisfaction became the backdrop of the coup led by Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu on 15 January 1966.<sup>21</sup> The ethnic composition of the coup plotters—mainly Igbo—led to a backlash by Hausa/Fulani and Yoruba who interpreted the coup as an attempt by “the ambitious Igbos [sic] of the east to seize the control of Nigeria.”<sup>22</sup> Most of the coup casualties were of Hausa/Fulani and Yoruba ethnicity. Nevertheless, we find prominent Igbo politicians also earmarked for execution in accounts of the coup plotters.<sup>23</sup> After the coup, General Aguyi-Ironsi, an Igbo from Umuahia, took over power as the military leader of Nigeria. In the wake of all this, Igbo people became targets for reprisal in the northern and western parts of the country.<sup>24</sup> This resulted in death and destruction of property of Igbo people in these areas. These targeted attacks against the Igbo in northern and western parts of Nigeria led some to describe them as “the Igbo pogrom.”<sup>25</sup>

The violence perpetuated against the Igbo in northern and western Nigeria, alongside a counter coup on 29 July 1966 carried out by northern military officers, set Nigeria on a path to war. Disagreements between the Yakubu Gowon’s new military government and Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, the military governor of eastern Nigeria, did not calm matters. All these led to the outbreak of civil war. Thus, from 1967 to 1970, the Nigerian federal government and the secessionist Republic of Biafra fought a brutal war resulting in a great number of deaths.<sup>26</sup> Various accounts detail the huge number of lives and property lost by Igbo people during the war.<sup>27</sup> By 1970, the Republic of Biafra had been defeated and surrendered sovereignty to the government of Yakubu Gowon.

Although the government of Gowon stated the war had “no victor, no vanquished” it was a watershed moment for Igbo people in two capacities. First, it marked the relegation of Igbo political elites to the fringes. Hausa/Fulani and Yoruba politicians tightened their grip at the center. Unlike the pre-war Nigeria, where Igbo were key players, post-war Igbo political elites became alienated from the leadership of Nigeria. In this regard, “it is clear that the loss of the war alienated the Igbo people from the ruling Nigeria. This is clear to the point that fifty-one years after the war, Igbo people have yet not produced a president in Nigeria.”<sup>28</sup> Supporting this argument, “the loss of the war in 1970 has a connection with the Igbo political situation whereby the Igbo people have failed to produce a president in Nigeria. Since 1970, Igbo political class has never succeeded at having a grip at the presidency as the northern and western regions have.”<sup>29</sup> The Igbo nationalism that emerged after the war, as heralded by the Ohanaeze-Ndi-Igbo socio-cultural organization, focused on “unifying the Igbo and addressing most of their post-war challenges like population displacement and marginalization.”<sup>30</sup> During the Second Republic that began in 1979, Ohanaeze immersed itself in partisan politics characterized

by elitism and submission to the ruling bourgeois of other ethnicities.<sup>31</sup> Igbo at the grassroots became alienated from both Igbo and Nigerian politics at large.

Second, the loss of the war seemed to have marked Igbo people as conquered politically, a separatist ethnic group not be trusted with the leadership of Nigeria. Closely aligned with the loss was renewed violence against Igbo people, particularly in Hausa/Fulani dominated northern Nigeria. It is in this regard that Nwuba asks, "What then was the fate of Easterners after the war? More killings of Christians mostly Igbos[sic], burning of churches and markets in northern part of Nigeria by Muslims, Boko Haram, and Fulani Herdsmen have been talk of the day in present day Nigeria and no government has been able to abridge the case."<sup>32</sup> One of our informants adds, "Hatred of the Igbo people by other ethnicities in Nigeria since the loss of the war is much. This is why we witness an unending violence against Igbo people particularly in northern part of the country. This is because they see us as a powerless people that must be dominated and get away with it."<sup>33</sup>

### **Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB)**

Post-war Igbo nationalism, as Nwangwu et al. argue, centered on Igbo socio-cultural groups and organizations such as Ohanaeze-Ndi-Igbo, Aka Ikenga, and Alaigbo Development Foundation (ADF).<sup>34</sup> However, as we have seen, the approach of these groups to Igbo nationalism was conservative, and equally alienated the Igbo grassroots. Thus, Nwangwu has called this conservative approach *ako-na-uche* Igbo nationalism or 'dealing with issues cautiously.'<sup>35</sup> Except for a brief return to civil rule between 1979-1983, almost the whole of the 1970s-1990s were dominated by military regimes that did not want to hand over to a democratically elected government. While successive military regimes during these decades clamped down on political agitations, Sani Abacha proved to have been the most repressive of them all. The execution of Ken Saro-wiwa, the leader of Movement for the Survival of Ogoni people (MOSSOP), was testament to how General Abacha dealt with agitations, be it existential, political, or ideological.<sup>36</sup> In this regard, we argue that repressive military governments in Nigeria during that time forced Igbo organizations to remain conservative as opposed to any radical or confrontational form of nationalism.

This conservative approach, however, changed in 1999 as Nigeria returned to civil rule. Ralph Uwazuruike (from Okwe in Okigwe area of Imo state) emerged on the scene with his formation of the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB).<sup>37</sup> The formation of MASSOB marked a radical departure from the conservative approach to Igbo nationalism.<sup>38</sup> MASSOB, at its formation, had the aim of promoting the interests of Igbo people.<sup>39</sup> However, the MASSOB agenda soon became clear: to fight against the marginalization of Igbo people and for the restoration of the defunct sovereign state of Biafra.<sup>40</sup> MASSOB, through the activities of Uwazurike, was able to secure the support of other Igbo networks. Demonstrations and protests that featured the Biafran flag became a repeated strategy of MASSOB during the 2000s. MASSOB hoisted the Biafran flag for the first time at the commercial city of Aba in Abia state in 2000.<sup>41</sup> By 2005, the activities of MASSOB became noticeable enough to attract the attention of President Olusegun Obasanjo's government. The state arrested and detained Uwazuruike with treason charges brought up against him. Released in 2007,

Uwazurike found himself arrested once again in 2011 alongside 280 members of MASSOB. He was, however, released a few days later by the then President Goodluck Jonathan.

MASSOB's approach to Igbo nationalism connected in ways the prior conservative approach could not. The Igbo grassroots—at that time and since—felt discontent with both Igbo political elites and those of Nigeria more broadly. Before long, however, both state repression and internal leadership intrigues within MASSOB weakened the organization.<sup>42</sup> Others would thereafter also appeal to the grassroots with discourses on Igbo marginalization. By 2012, Nnamdi Kanu, a Nigerian-British Igbo activist (from Umuahia in Abia state), appeared on the scene with the formation of Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB).<sup>43</sup> As an outspoken Biafran separatist organization, IPOB's approach to Igbo nationalism is radical and confrontational. Beginning with his underground broadcasting exploits with Radio Biafra based in London, Kanu began to make himself popular among the Igbo grassroots, using Radio Biafra to generate support for the IPOB's cause.<sup>44</sup> Kanu's narrative centered on marginalization of Igbo people by the Nigerian government and freedom for Igbo people while criticizing the corruption that has become recurring with successive Nigerian governments. He succeeded in 'selling' this narrative to a wide-swath of the Radio Biafra audience both in Nigeria and the diaspora. Politically alienated grassroots Igbo threw their weight behind Kanu and IPOB, and so it has remained until now.<sup>45</sup> The membership of IPOB at present includes artisans, traders, commercial motorcyclists, commercial tricycle (*keke*) riders, and taxi drivers as well as unemployed and under-employed graduates.<sup>46</sup>

During 2020-21, the authors interviewed a group of Igbo youth about marginalization and entrenched poverty in their states. For the youth who are pro-IPOB, the only way out for Igbo people is the actualization of Biafra. One of them told us, "I am a graduate yet I ride *keke* because I do not have a good job. I believe that by the time a sovereign state of Biafra has been actualized, many Igbo youth like me would have jobs. There would be also development more than what we have today in Nigeria."<sup>47</sup> Another of these youths stated:

I am married. I have got secondary school education but I am a commercial motorcyclist. I know that I have lost the chance of securing a good job with the present political configurations of Nigeria where corruption has become the order of the day. While I do not believe that violence or war is a good approach to the Biafra cause, I do believe that if the state of Biafra is actualized, my children would have better opportunities than I have. Things will surely get better for them when Biafra is actualized.<sup>48</sup>

Another youth—a local palm wine seller—goes on that, "Where I came from, there are no dividends of democracy since 1999. There are no tarred roads, light or pipe borne water. If Biafra is actualized, I believe my people would definitely feel a great touch of development. This is why I support the Biafra struggle."<sup>49</sup> These alienated Igbo grassroots comprise the main membership of IPOB.<sup>50</sup>

With the support of the Igbo underclass, IPOB intensified its agitation for the restoration of Biafra. In October 2015, the Department of State Services (DSS) arrested Kanu and accused him of treason.<sup>51</sup> Earlier in 2015, during the World Igbo Congress Kanu told his audience, "we need guns and we need bullets"<sup>52</sup> This is, however, against the principle of non-violence that the organization claimed upon its founding.<sup>53</sup> This radical approach to Igbo separatism has

directly pitted Kanu and IPOB members against President Buhari's government who sees them as a threat to the country's unity.<sup>54</sup> Thus, in 2017, IPOB found itself proscribed as a terrorist group.<sup>55</sup> At Kanu's court appearance in October 2021, the federal government offered terrorism charges against him.<sup>56</sup> Kanu is in detention at the time of writing—owing to his re-arrest in June 2021—while confrontation and radicalism has come to characterize the IPOB struggle.

As it stands today, IPOB's radical approach to the Biafra separatist struggle resonates with many Igbo people, particularly the youth. Many believe the present political dispensation does not treat them fairly, with some arguing that insensitivity of the federal government fuels the current agitation for Biafra—an insensitivity supposedly peaking under the present regime of President Buhari.<sup>57</sup> One informant believes that "the Igbo people are being treated like second-class citizens of Nigeria. They are politically marginalized and clearly told that they do not belong to Nigeria."<sup>58</sup> The Monday sit-at-home tactic adopted by IPOB to protest the continued detention of Kanu—which many Igbo people now observe—is a testament to how strongly they now feel about the Biafran cause even though IPOB appears to have rescinded the protest. Another informant stated, "The Biafran agitation is the most burning issue among many Igbo people today. It has become the most discussed topic on the lips of every Igbo person now. It got to this point all thanks to the activities of Kanu and the IPOB. At least, the struggle has shown that Igbo people are capable of fighting their cause since it appears that those that marginalize us seem not to care one bit."<sup>59</sup> Some agree fully with IPOB tactics: "what we see from the activities of Kanu and IPOB is that sometimes radicalism pays. Passivism is good but not always as seen in the case of Kanu and IPOB. Their activities have succeeded in raising the consciousness of the Igbo people to their very plight in the present political dispensation of Nigeria."<sup>60</sup> Even if in disagreement, they recognize the benefit:

One may disagree with Kanu and IPOB on method and strategy employed in agitating for the state of Biafra, however one thing his activities have succeeded in doing is that it has brought to the attention of many Igbo people about their marginalization, politically and otherwise in Nigeria. For example, while an Igbo has not been allowed to rule Nigeria after the war, what about appointments into key political offices in present day Nigeria which is dominated by a particular ethnic group in Nigeria? What Kanu and IPOB are saying on the marginalization of Igbo people is true, and is currently sinking into the thinking of many Igbo people.<sup>61</sup>

Kanu and IPOB's radical approach is apparently a welcome development for many Igbo people, particularly the youth and underclass, who feel alienated from the Nigerian political configurations and the politics within their states and/or communities.

### **Christianity and Politics in Nigeria: A Brief Analysis**

During the Nigeria-Biafra civil war, the seeds of Christian revival began to be sown in southern Nigeria that fully germinated in the 1980s when the Pentecostal revolution took shape. It was during this time that new forms of Christianity began to take an active part in politics in Nigeria. According to Vaughan:

Just as the new generation of evangelicals transformed the internal core Pentecostal churches, so too have they altered these churches' relationships with

the broader Nigerian public, especially since the 1980s, when some leading Pentecostal ministers pushed for greater involvement of their movement in national politics.<sup>62</sup>

For Uwaegbute, “the collapse of a political structure which failed to deliver the ‘goods’ of self-rule in Nigeria after independence...” led to active participation of Pentecostals in politics in late 1980s.<sup>63</sup> Marshall’s work situated Pentecostal political theology in the situation of Nigeria during the 1970s.<sup>64</sup> Then the 1980s saw an economic meltdown in the country. A breakdown of the political structure—characterized by corruption and an inability to deliver the “goods” expected of self-rule in Nigeria—shaped the political theology of Pentecostalism. A failed political structure, along with the inability to redeem people’s trust, led to the involvement of the Pentecostals in Nigeria into politics anchored in a desire to redeem the political landscape through conversion to godly living.<sup>65</sup>

Throughout the late 1980s and 1990s, Pentecostals took active part in political engagements. This led other strands of Christianity to play a more active part in the political process as well. Such was the case of Moses Adasu, a Roman Catholic priest, elected as the governor of Benue state in 1992 upon a claim that he was in “politics to baptise it.”<sup>66</sup> Jolly Nyame, a minister in the United Methodist Church, successfully ran for governor of Taraba state in 1992. With the return to democracy in Nigeria in 1999, Christianity began to play a more active role in the political process of Nigeria with Pentecostals at forefront, particularly with Olusegun Obasanjo, a Pentecostal, becoming the president of Nigeria.<sup>67</sup> Christians of various denominations joined the political process with diverse intentions. Also at this time, the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) became prominent, speaking out against marginalization of Christians and related issues in the country.

In the present democratic dispensation, however, the involvement of Christians in politics in Nigeria has become ambivalent, especially for Pentecostals. According to Obadare, the importance of Pentecostal involvement in politics in Nigeria since 1999 has been mainly to counter Islamic involvement in the political process in the country. As such, this involvement is counter-productive as “a reactionary force with a demobilising effect on civil society.”<sup>68</sup> While this may be true, some Pentecostal leaders—and other Christian leaders as well—have been at the forefront of fighting against injustices concerning Christians in Nigeria. From 2015 when President Buhari came into office—and the perceived marginalization of certain ethnicities and religions became an issue—some Christian leaders began to speak out for the oppressed and marginalized. In this sense, Christianity remains involved in politics.

### **‘Spiritual Legitimization’ and the Emerging Role of Igbo Christian Leaders**

The appeal of separatist Igbo nationalism pursued by Kanu and IPOB is widespread. While this message attracts mostly the alienated Igbo underclass, beyond this also lies a group of Christian leaders. For example, Rev. Fr. Ejike Mbaka is a charismatic Roman Catholic priest of the Enugu diocese and the spiritual director of Adoration Ministry Enugu, Nigeria (AMEN). Initially sceptic of both Kanu and IPOB, Mbaka denounced the agitation for Biafra as “evil” in 2015.<sup>69</sup> Mbaka went further, also stating: “President Buhari’s action has proven that the south east has not been marginalized. I would have reacted if no minister emerged from the zone.”<sup>70</sup>

By 2017, however, Mbaka seemed to have changed his position on agitation for Biafra and admitted that there is “nothing bad about the agitation for Biafra” but cautioned that Igbo political elites must lead the struggle. Mbaka had not yet bought into IPOB’s marginalization narrative:

Please nobody should tell you again that the Igbos are forsaken. We are believing in nonsense. If poor children should begin agitating for Biafra, there is nothing bad in Biafra agitation. We are not saying that there shouldn’t be agitation for Biafra. But let our political cream, those with whom the land stands with: If you come to Anambra, people like Ekwueme, Peter Obi, Emeka Ofor, and all the Ubas that fill Anambra, all of them will come out, you come to Enugu, all the likes of Ekweremmadu, Ken Nnamani, what Enugu state stands gallant with, Sullivan, all of us will come out.<sup>71</sup>

By 2021, Mbaka became critical of Buhari’s government and threw his support behind the detained Kanu. He blessed Kanu in May 2021: “Up till today, I do not know where Nnamdi Kanu is. I have not seen him face to face. Wherever he is, may God bless him.”<sup>72</sup> This act, of course, caused quite a rift between him and the bishop of Enugu diocese. During a sermon in July 2021, Mbaka openly called for the release of Kanu.<sup>73</sup>

B.N Onuagha, the Methodist bishop of Onitsha in Anambra, also came out in support of Kanu during 2021. His support drives from marginalization of Igbo along with the issues of injustice, ethnicity and intimidation that have become part of Nigeria today.<sup>74</sup> Onuagha sees Kanu as “the catalyst providing oxygen to all the agitations in the south today, be it Biafra or Oduduwa. The question is, the injustice and oppression that Kanu is fighting, are they real or perceived. Of course, even the blind can see them. What is happening in Nigeria is total injustice, calculated intimidation, sidelining and enslaving of a group of people.”<sup>75</sup> On this basis, Onuagha denounced any Igbo supporting the detention of Kanu since “a handcuff on the hand of the leader of the indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) is a handcuff on the hands of every Igbo man.”<sup>76</sup>

Chris Udeh of Mount Zion Faith Global Liberation Ministries Nnewi dedicated a prayer session after Kanu’s 2021 re-arrest, declaring week long fasting and prayer for God to use angels to release Kanu.<sup>77</sup> The leader of the ministry told his congregation that when finished with fasting and prayer, God would release Kanu through the law court on 26 July 2021. Udeh even claimed that—after his congregants’ annual forty-day fasting—he received the revelation that a new Igbo nation would emerge.<sup>78</sup> This new Igbo nation would emerge via a new group he called Indigenous People of Igbo (IPI). In his words:

This new development is better than sticking to Biafra. The name Biafra should be dropped to embrace the new name. The Igbo must zero on the United Igbo Republic (Igbo Bu Igbo) and a new group called the Indigenous People of Igbo (IPI) are the ones God has designated to actualize the Igbo new nation. You should know that Ndigbo are republicans. The agitators must stick to this new God’s agenda. This new name will add tonic to Igbo freedom without wasting time.<sup>79</sup>

He went on to add, “Those who say they are not part of Biafra can now have their way. The United Igbo Republic is what God has ordained to actualize freedom.”<sup>80</sup> Elsewhere, Jude Chineme, the Bishop of Redemption Life Fellowship Aba in Abia state, declared that the Biafran

struggle come to fruition through Kanu. To him, God has already destined Kanu to actualize the sovereign state of Biafra.<sup>81</sup> Kanu's family even claimed that his struggle is for the liberation of Christians in Nigeria and all the oppressed in the country.<sup>82</sup>

Representatives of Igbo Archbishops—in an October 2021 letter themed “restore trust, confidence and calm in south east”—decried the current lack of peace in the region. In article nine of the letter, they plead for de-criminalization and de-proscription of IPOB as a terrorist group. This would “win the hearts of all” and give peaceful negotiation a chance through democratic dialogue to resolve the Biafran struggle. While these leaders did not openly endorse the activities of IPOB in their letter, they offered recognition of the right to self-rule by Igbo people as pursued by IPOB.

Igbo Christian leaders are speaking out in support of Kanu and IPOB by which they ‘spiritually legitimize’ Biafra separatism. Spiritual legitimization provides a cause with divine ordering and legitimacy from religious leaders. According to our informant George, a priest, spiritual legitimacy aligns with Biblical teachings to stand up against marginalization and oppression of people.<sup>83</sup> For George, Igbo Christian leaders supporting agitation for Biafra are doing their duty as men of God. In his words, “God does not condone the marginalization and oppression of people. The Bible condemns it. This is what we see in the case of the Israelites when their Egyptian overlords were oppressing them. God had to raise Moses to liberate them from bondage.”<sup>84</sup> Similar thoughts came from Kalu, also a priest, who believes that Christian leaders should speak out against the marginalization of the Igbo people. Those who have supported the IPOB separatist cause are in line with what Christian leaders should do as representatives of God:

Marginalization, injustice and all the like are the basis of the agitation of IPOB for a separate Igbo state. With regard to the Igbo situation in Nigeria today, this is the case. So, what then do Igbo Christian leaders do when their people are being marginalized? Fold their arms? No. They should strongly speak out against such as IPOB is doing now. So, for me it is not bad if Christian leaders support the separatist agitation of IPOB as we have it today. The Bible does not support the marginalization of people in any way and this is what Kanu and IPOB are doing.<sup>85</sup>

For Joe, another priest, the marginalization of Igbo people fuels the present separatist sentiments.<sup>86</sup> Part of this marginalization, is Igbo exclusion from key political appointments in the present political administration.<sup>87</sup> The underdevelopment and poverty that Igbo political leaders have not succeeded in reducing only exacerbates this tension. For him therefore “a lot of issues are associated with the IPOB agitation now. First, is the believed marginalization of the Igbo people in Nigeria. Second, is the discontentment of many Igbo people, particularly the youth, with Igbo political leaders who have not been able to better the lives of these people.” On this basis, he concludes that there is nothing wrong with Christian leaders of Igbo extraction choosing to support the separatist cause of IPOB—although he does not believe that Igbo separatism would be a better alternative for the Igbo people.

Our interview with Kenneth revealed that Igbo people believe in their marginalization, mostly by the leadership of Nigeria.<sup>88</sup> However, like Joe, he believes that separatist agitation also gains traction through the underdevelopment and poverty in Igbo states. By implication, Kenneth sees Igbo political leaders as underperforming, thereby leading to discontentment of

many Igbo people, particularly the youth: “The youth do not have jobs, so why would they not prefer a separatist cause that offers them hope?” He contends that it is the duty of Christian leaders to speak out against marginalization although this should be with caution to avoid heating up the polity. For Anya, Igbo people undoubtedly receive unfair treatment in Nigeria.<sup>89</sup> Appointments into key political posts sidelines Igbo people from having a say in the country. For him, it is right for Christian leaders to fight against marginalization of the Igbo people. The Bible is against injustice and oppression that Igbo people are going through in Nigeria presently. Therefore, he concluded there is nothing wrong with Igbo Christian leaders supporting the IPOB separatist cause.

### Conclusion

Some Igbo Christian leaders are not only speaking out against the marginalization of Igbo people but are also supporting the separatist calls of Kanu and IPOB, mostly finding justification for their support in the Bible. This is what we term ‘spiritual legitimacy’ regarding the Biafran separatist struggle. With some of their Christian leaders supporting the separatist cause, many Igbo people have come to believe in the narrative of IPOB, and therefore join the separatist call for an independent state of Biafra. Presently, it is one of the most discussed topics among Igbo people. This article examined how some Christian leaders of Igbo extraction fit into the picture and begins to address the role that Igbo Christian leaders are playing at present, an aspect seriously neglected in the discourse on the Biafran agitation in Nigeria.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Rev. Johnson Ekwe, the Bishop of Niger- West diocese in Anambra state seems to have been the first Christian leader to openly say that the Igbo people are being marginalized under the Muhamad Buhari led federal government which began in 2015. The cleric even said that the marginalization of the Igbo people is intentional in Nigeria. For more on this see Nwaiwu 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Nwangwu et al. 2020. See also Njoku 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Onwuchekwa 2021.

<sup>4</sup> O. Eze, oral interview on 10/01/2021, Nsukka, Nigeria.

<sup>5</sup> A. Igwe, oral interview on 02/02/2021, Enugu, Nigeria.

<sup>6</sup> Omenka 2010, pp. 367-89.

<sup>7</sup> *The Biafran Sun* quoted in Omenka 2010, p. 375.

<sup>8</sup> For an uncritical assessment of the role of Christianity in the civil war, see Hassan 2022: 433-35.

<sup>9</sup> This is mostly rooted in liberation theology. See Gutierrez 1973, Nash 1984, Cone 1973.

<sup>10</sup> Onuoha 2011, pp. 402-422; Okonta 2012; Adibe 2017; Nwangwu et al. 2020; Heerten and Moses 2014, pp. 169-203; Friedrich Ebert Stiftung 2021; Osaretin 2019, pp. 2-5; Njoku 2020; Aribisala 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Mowat 2015, p. 456.

<sup>12</sup> Mowat 2015, p. 456. For points of similarities and differences between inclusion and social exclusion, see Hansen 2012, pp. 89-98; Armstrong et al. 2011, pp. 29-39.

<sup>13</sup> Razer et al. 2013, p. 1152.

<sup>14</sup> Mowat 2015, p. 457.

<sup>15</sup> Coleman 1958; Achebe 2012; Falola & Heaton 2008; Falola and Aderinto 2010.

<sup>16</sup> Nnoli 1980; Aluko 1998; Aluko 2003, pp. 253-59.

<sup>17</sup> Nnamdi Azikiwe was also the first senate president of Nigeria between January 1960 and 1 October, 1960.

- <sup>18</sup> Achebe 2012, p. 41.
- <sup>19</sup> Achebe 2012, p. 66.
- <sup>20</sup> Achebe 2012, pp. 49-50.
- <sup>21</sup> Ademoyaga, 1981; Gbulie, 1981.
- <sup>22</sup> Achebe 2012, p. 66.
- <sup>23</sup> Gbulie 1981.
- <sup>24</sup> Achebe 2012; Nwuba 2020; Hearten and Moses 2014, pp. 169-203.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibeanu et al. 2016, p. 13. See also Achebe 2012, p. 82.
- <sup>26</sup> The war has been described by some authors as the first black-on-black genocide in Africa after independence. For more see Korieh, 2012; Agbo et al. 2021, p. 95. Two million Igbo deaths have been estimated as the death tolls on the side of Biafra.
- <sup>27</sup> Achebe 2012; Effiong 2011; Madiebo 1980; Achuzia 1986; Alabi-Isama 2013.
- <sup>28</sup> K. Ilo, oral interview on 10/04/2021, Nsukka, Nigeria.
- <sup>29</sup> L. Offia, oral interview on 05/05/2021, Enugu, Nigeria.
- <sup>30</sup> Nwangwu et al. 2020, p. 11.
- <sup>31</sup> Nwangwu et al. 2020, p. 11.
- <sup>32</sup> Nwuba 2020, p. 3.
- <sup>33</sup> G. Chukwu, oral interview on 20/05/2021, Nsukka, Nigeria.
- <sup>34</sup> Nwangwu et al, 2020 p.10
- <sup>35</sup> Nwangwu, 2018.
- <sup>36</sup> Adiana.com n.d.
- <sup>37</sup> Heerten and Moses, 2014, p.171.
- <sup>38</sup> For a review of other possible reasons why radical Igbo nationalism marked by separatism, emerged among the Igbo people, see Ibeanu et al. 2016, pp.4-7.
- <sup>39</sup> Nwangwu et al. 2020, p.18.
- <sup>40</sup> Asadu 2017.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibeanu et al. p.24,
- <sup>42</sup> For example, see "MASSOB expels Uwazurike, Picks New leadership." *The Nation* (2015).
- <sup>43</sup> Around this time there were other splinter Biafra separatist organizations jostling for recognition which included Biafra Zionist Movement (BZM), MASSOB International, Biafran Zionist Front (BZF) and Biafran Liberation Council. Equally, at present, there are other ultra-radical Biafra separatist groups that have emerged on the scene probably inspired by IPOB. A typical example is the Biafra National Guard (BNG) which claims to be forcefully declaring a sovereign state of Biafra in the South Eastern part of the country. However, IPOB has denied having any links with BGN. For more see Uzoaru 2021.
- <sup>44</sup> Uwazurike claims that he made Kanu the director of Radio Biafra which he established in London. For more see Asadu 2017.
- <sup>45</sup> Beyond Igbo marginalization narrative of IPOB, the recent menace of the herdsmen in Igbo land and the apparent treating of the issue with kid gloves by the present federal government of Nigeria, also led to the popularity of Kanu and IPOB in many Igbo states. Of course, IPOB responded to the problem by setting up a regional security agency of its own to tackle the

herdsmen problem in Igboland. This security outfit is called Eastern Security Network (ESN). Equally, the issue of the continued underdevelopment and poverty that many Igbo people still wallow in, in their respective Igbo states, have left many Igbo people at the grass root angry with their leaders. This, while it have left these Igbo people alienated form their political leaders, has led to their throwing of their support behind Kanu and IPOB as a better alternative to current Igbo politicians.

<sup>46</sup> Nwangwu et al. 2020, p. 18.

<sup>47</sup> O. Ike, oral interview on 12/05/2021, Nsukka, Nigeria.

<sup>48</sup> A. Ezenna, oral interview, Enugu, Nigeria

<sup>49</sup> K. Chiemezie, oral interview on 05/08/2021, Nsukka, Nigeria.

<sup>50</sup> Nwangwu et al 2020, p. 18. Some claim that IPOB members number some 50 million across 100 countries.

<sup>51</sup> Asomba 2015; Egbejule and Anyadike 2016.

<sup>52</sup> Egbejule and Anyadike, 2016.

<sup>53</sup> Nwangwu et al. 2020, p. 19.

<sup>54</sup> For some clashes between IPOB members and Nigerian security forces, see Ibeanu et al. 2016, p. 28.

<sup>55</sup> Adesomoju 2018. See also Olokor 2021.

<sup>56</sup> Nnochiri 2021.

<sup>57</sup> Njoku 2020.

<sup>58</sup> K. Ugwu, oral interview on 19/05/2021, Udenu, Nigeria.

<sup>59</sup> P. Nze, oral interview on 25/09/2021, Okigwe, Nigeria.

<sup>60</sup> D. Ani, oral Interview on 05/07/2021 Nsukka, Nigeria.

<sup>61</sup> A. Agu, oral Interview on 10/08/202, Nsukka, Nigeria.

<sup>62</sup> Vaughan 2016, p. 150.

<sup>63</sup> Uwaegbute 2022, p. 132.

<sup>64</sup> Marshall 2009.

<sup>65</sup> Obadare 2018.

<sup>66</sup> *This Day*, 2003.

<sup>67</sup> Vaughan 2016; Obadare 2019.

<sup>68</sup> Obadare 2018, p. 30.

<sup>69</sup> *Vanguard* 2015.

<sup>70</sup> *Vanguard* 2015.

<sup>71</sup> Ogbonna 2017.

<sup>72</sup> Akinkuotu 2021.

<sup>73</sup> Ede 2021.

<sup>74</sup> Onwuchekwa 2021.

<sup>75</sup> Onwuchekwa 2021.

<sup>76</sup> Onwuchekwa 2021.

<sup>77</sup> Okonkwo 2021.

<sup>78</sup> Onwuchekwa 2021.

<sup>79</sup> Onwuchekwa 2021.

<sup>80</sup> Onwuchekwa 2021.

<sup>81</sup> Nwachukwu 2021.

<sup>82</sup> Oko 2021.

<sup>83</sup> K. George, oral interview on 10/09/2021, Nsukka Nigeria.

<sup>84</sup> K. George, oral interview on 10/09/2021, Nsukka, Nigeria.

<sup>85</sup> O. Kalu, oral interview on 12/09/2021, Nsukka, Nigeria.

<sup>86</sup> L. Joe, oral interview on 13/09/2021, Onitsha, Nigeria.

<sup>87</sup>For an analysis of Muhammad Buhari's political appointments particularly as it relates to national security agencies up to 2018, see Nwangwu et al. 2020, p. 15. While the heads of some of these national security agencies may have changed since 2018, owing to retirements or firing after Nwangwu et al. made their compilation, the fact remains that northerners mostly have continued to head these agencies as of the 2021 writing of this article.

<sup>88</sup> L. Kenneth, oral interview on 15/09/2021, Nsukka, Nigeria.

<sup>89</sup> G. Anya, oral interview on 18/09/2021, Enugu, Nigeria.