

Narratives of Victimhood, Martyrdom, Supernatural Protection and Blame: Oral Testimonies, Media and Legal Constructions in Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB)-Affected Southeast Nigeria

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The study examines alternative stories of victimhood, martyrdom, and blame in communities in the Southeast Nigeria that have been impacted by the activities of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB). It draws on the oral narratives of 48 respondents who went through a bereavement or loss of property or livelihood between 2020 and 2025. These narratives of the grassroots were triangulated with media reports, legal discourses, and religious constructions, in order to reveal the dynamic interplay between personal meaning making and institutional framing. Findings show that while some affected people described losses as noble sacrifices and redemptive martyrdom associated to the fight for self-determination, others described the same events as underserving tragedies caused by the IPOB's irrational strategies, enforcement methods, and leadership decisions. The study uncovered that blame oriented or security related framings are amplified by media or legal

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institutions, while religious institutions present hybrid framings that either sanctify the sufferings of the affected people, or peace promoting. The study shows that competitive victimhood and contested responsibility for crime leads to intra-community fragmentation despite the use of common historical grievances of the Nigerian-Biafran war. This study brings together narrative inquiry and framing theory with the concept of competitive victimhood, providing rich insights into micro-politics of meaning-making in separatist conflicts. The results reveal the shortcomings of telling single stories and the importance of more participatory ways of engaging in dialogue, peacebuilding and transitional justice that recognize plurality of lived experiences in the region.

Keywords: Victimhood; Martyrdom; Blame; IPOB; Narrative Construction.

Introduction

In recent years, the Southeast geopolitical zone of Nigeria has been an arena of intense conflict over how to understand the meaning of loss, suffering and resistance. Communities in the states of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo have been plagued of past sit-at-home orders, security operations, sporadic violence, and considerable socio-economic disruption which have occurred since the resurgence of pro-Biafra activism by the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), most especially after the arrest of its leader Mazi Nnamdi Kanu in 2015 (Nduba et al., 2024). The struggle for self-determination has yielded complicated and sometimes painful real-world outcomes, with the deeply personal experiences of loss and destruction – the death of a loved one, the loss of a livelihood, closed schools and markets – differently understood across highly varied contexts. For some, such losses are laudable sacrifices in continuing freedom movement; for others, it is avoidable tragedies resulting from an agitation that is, in their view, becoming too disruptive and counterproductive.

In this paper, these competing versions of victimhood, martyrdom and blame in the oral accounts of those impacted by the agitations and in accounts that have been shaped in media representations, legal frameworks, and religious discourses were explored. The study aims at

underscoring the micro-politics of meaning-making in the course of an extended separatist struggle, by foregrounding the meaning-making of ordinary people, alongside its analysis of how power institutions interpret the same events. This is necessary because narratives do not only portray the reality of things, they are capable of forming identities, authorizing actions and determining chances for social cohesion or further mobilization (Nimfel & Anijide, 2022). The modern IPOB movement is very much reminiscent of the Nigerian-Biafran War (1967-1970), sometimes locally referred to as the Biafran War. Political marginalisation, economic exclusion and unaddressed historical grievances are still voiced by many in the region (Tuki, 2024; Maiangwa, 2021). In 2012, IPOB was formed, and it became more vocal than the previous organisations like the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB). Their activities tipped them against the state, and when the leader was rearrested and detained in 2021, it ordered people in the Southeast Nigeria to stay at home on Mondays to protest Kanu's detention and to advance the general calls for equity or self-determination, (Vanguard, 2021; Premium Times, 2023). The order was seen by supporters as justifiable forms of civil disobedience. It was further backed by threats of penalties for defaulters, which were strictly enforced by the Eastern Security Network (ESN), the armed

wing of IPOB. The fierce manner of enforcement resulted to the destruction of properties killings, maiming, and other forms of violence inflicted on those who disobeyed it (Channels Television, 2025; Akinyemi, 2025; Sahara Reporters, 2025; The Naija Post, 2025). In a region where informal trade and entrepreneurship are the main sources of livelihood, scholarly, media houses, and policy estimates have reported huge economic losses in the trillions of naira, which are also having significant impacts on small businesses, transportation, security, education, access to health services, and productivity (Daily Trust, 2022; Nduba et al., 2024; Ikeanyi, 2025; Ejechi, 2025).

The sit at home orders was often adhered to not only by a genuine sense of ideology but also due to a fear of retribution. The cycle of accusation and counter-accusation has been further exacerbated by the state's response such as the proscription of IPOB as a terror group in 2017, which was later upheld by a court of appeal, as well as the various security operations conducted by the state. In November 2025, Kanu was convicted on terrorism charges and sentenced to life imprisonment, which has sparked significant legal and public debates in the region (Al Jazeera, 2025; Ige, 2025, Ugbodaga & Dada, 2025; BBC News, 2025).

The media has been very polarized in its portrayal. Some outlets, especially those with national or northern ideologies have been describing the activities of IPOB as acts of national security and economic sabotage, while those that are aligned to the Biafra ideology, particularly in the Southeast or pro-Biafra platforms, have presented IPOB activities as legitimate response to the longstanding marginalisation and state repression (Igwebuike & Akoh, 2025; Agugogbua & Ezeifeka, 2023; Eburuaja & Udoh 2024; Ige, 2025; Nwabueze & Ezebuonyi, 2019; Nimfel & Anijide, 2022; Indigenous People of Biafra, 2021). Belonging to religious institutions have also intervened actively. Losses have been spiritualized by pastors and church leaders, sometimes as sacrifices for martyrdom in the style of the past,

and at other times as calls to peace, restraint and pragmatic co-existence. There is therefore a sharp contracts in religious framing of the IPOB activities, including those supporting the course and those condemning it (Shehu, 2023; New Telegraph, 2021; Ede, 2023; Ajogwu, 2023; Vanguard, 2023; Arinze, 2023; TheCable, 2021; Within Nigeria, 2021; Osibe & Njoku, 2021).

While the literature has grown on the political economy of the sit-at-home orders, security implications and legal aspects of IPOB proscription, fewer studies have focused on the interpretive processes of ordinary citizens who suffer the human and material costs of such measures. Affected communities are often understood either as victims of the repressive state apparatus or as whole communities generally supportive of the agitation, failing to take into account their diversity and ambivalence in the experiences in which they live (Tuki, 2024). This is a major omission. When strife is ongoing, how people tell their stories of suffering can impact their personal and collective identity, as well as pathways toward dialogue, reconciliation, or continued resistance (Auerbach, 2009; Bar-Tal et al., 2009; Vollhardt et al., 2022). The ideas of "competing victimhood" originating from the wider conflict literature are especially relevant here, since groups and individuals vie with one another for legitimate claims to "victimhood," and they also blame and/or give "heroic meaning" to the same events (Noor et al., 2012; Noor et al., 2017; Young & Sullivan, 2016; Hearty & Hearty, 2024).

This paper's focus is therefore not on the question of whether the agitations have caused harm, which is a matter of empirical fact that has become more widely recognized across sources, it rather prioritizes the meanings attached to the activities of the IPOB by different actors. It uncovers that while some read the literal interpretations of the deaths, economic collapse, or futures as a sacrifice to a greater liberty and freedom; others view the same results as being a waste and a result of poor leadership calculations, enforcement measures or external manipulation. These interpretations have real-life consequences as

they influence decisions on compliance, migration, political engagement and sentiments on the Nigerian state and IPOB.

The study analyse the narratives of victims, martyrs and blame that are constructed by the affected individuals in the IPOB agitation-affected communities in South East Nigeria and to examine how these narratives overlap, counter and/or are influenced by media, legal and religious constructions of the same. Specific aims are to describe and thematically analyze oral narratives of loss; to look at patterns in the way suffering is described as sacrifice or as avoidable tragedy; to examine institutional framings and to understand points of convergence, divergence and hybridity between different sources. The study provides answers to questions like: How do residents tell and understand their own and collective losses associated with the agitations? How are conceptions of martyrdom present and how are they challenged by ideas of blame? How have media and legal institutions constructed the same events? What is the mediating and/or intensifying role of religious narratives?

In theoretical terms, the study contributes to the study of narrative and framings in separatist movements, by connecting grassroots oral histories with institutional narratives. In a practical sense, it provides more nuanced analysis, which can support more effective ways to engage in peacebuilding, dialogue, or transitional justice, by capturing the diversity of voices that may be ignored in polarized public discourse. The analysis is intentional in addressing the need to balance the two sides of the IPOB project, neither supporting nor opposing it, but recognising the value of the variety of narratives as data from which to learn more about the complex social landscape of the present-day Southeast Nigeria.

Contextualising Loss: History, Agitation, and Everyday Realities

Pro-Biafra agitation in Southeast Nigeria is a very intimate reflection of the Nigerian-Biafran War. The conflict claimed many lives and has left a profound impact on the collective memory

and perceptions of marginalisation in the South East of Nigeria, especially among the Igbo people. A lot of the residents express complaints over political marginalisation, economic marginalisation and also structural disadvantages they feel the Nigerian federation is consciously creating. These historical feelings served as the foundations for the creation of the IPOB in 2012, which was led by Mazi Nnamdi Kanu, who, through his radio productions on Radio Biafra, galvanised backing by portraying current issues as extensions of past injustices (Maiangwa, 2021; Tuki, 2024).

IPOB was more assertive and digitally mediated than previous movements like the MASSOB. Kanu's arrest in 2015 on treasonable felony charges, his bail release and subsequent disappearance in 2017, further exacerbated tensions. His re-arrest in Kenya in June 2021 and his return to Nigeria was a major escalation. The group's actions further came into light in December 2020 when the ESN was launched as a defensive outfit to defend communities against banditry and perceived external attacks, notably clashes between herders and farmers. But these activities of the ESN have been connected to armed clashes with the security forces and violence by "unknown gunmen" (Nwangwu, 2023; Amnesty International, 2025).

One of the key elements of IPOB's campaign since 2021 has been implementing weekly sit-at-home orders, originally meant to protest Kanu's continued detention. These orders have been billed as being non-violent means of civil disobedience and solidarity, but they have caused a great disruption in life for the five southeastern states. Empirical evidence consistently shows the disastrous economic impacts of the closures, such as loss of billions of Naira per week from markets, disruption of transport, and closure of schools and inability to access healthcare and banking services (Nduba et al., 2024; Ikeanyi, 2025). Small and medium businesses, which constitute the backbone of the regional economy, are especially affected and have had to close their doors, lose jobs, and see their family incomes fall. The impacts of IPOB Sit at home and related activities have been

made public by some of the governors in the region, for example, in Anambra State, the total cost of a single Monday of these incidents was as high as 19.6 billion naira (BusinessDay, 2022; Okafor, 2021).

It has also been a time of great human costs, in addition to economic disruption. Security forces and pro-IPOB elements have clashed causing death, injury and displacement, while activities allegedly by unknown gunmen have also claimed lives, injured and displaced people. There are reports of attacks on security personnel, destruction of public property, including police stations and correctional facilities, and action by the military and police against returnees. The communities have been living in fear – with allegations of human rights violations on both sides – and extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests and intimidation have been reported (Amnesty International, 2025). Since its proscription in 2017, reaffirmed by the Court of Appeal in January 2025, the legal and security framework has been marked with the proscription of IPOB, allowing for harsher measures while at the same time, the organisation has faced allegations of state oppression (Premium Times, 2025).

Such developments have resulted in complicated daily lived experiences for the general population. For many communities, Mondays not only mean economic standoffs, but anxieties about possible enforcement measures from threats and vandalism for not complying with regulations to violent confrontations. Insecurity and violence have forced families to lose breadwinners, students to miss out on learning and healthcare workers to have difficulties accessing services. Meanwhile, others back the agitation, seeing it as a legitimate form of protest against grievances they have had for years, and feeling that the hardship required is a short-term sacrifice for self-determination. Others, though, are troubled by the frustrations and insecurities that arise from the sit-at-home instructions, seeing them as self-inflicted wounds that exacerbate developmental challenges in the Southeast.

The dynamics of IPOB strategies, state reactions, and community perceptions created a resilient, and yet, fragmented landscape. The agitation has kept Biafra's self-determination demand on the agenda, and at the same time, created conflicts among the communities, economic slowdown and humanitarian issues. As this study explores the personal narratives that define the IPOB activities, it is important to understand these layered realities, as people view the same experiences and actions from vastly different perspectives of sacrifice, victimization and blame.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This study is grounded in a constructivist perspective of social reality, in which meanings of loss, suffering and resistance do not exist in the events themselves, but are social, political, and institutional constructs that are actively created through them. At the heart of this approach is the understanding of the power of narratives to make sense of experiences, shape identities, and marshal political arguments. For IPOB activists in Southeast Nigeria, the oral history of the victims, and other media reports, legal statements, and religious discourses serve as arenas for the negotiation and contestation of competing victim and martyr narratives and blame placements.

The concept of victimhood as described in this study is the socially constructed status that comes with perceived or actual harm with moral and political value. The concept of victimhood is not a neutral term but a relational and strategic one which can give credibility, sympathy and demands for reparations, and can also influence intergroup relations (Bouris, 2007; Bar-Tal et al., 2009). During long-standing conflicts, narratives of victimisation can often become competitive, with groups claiming that their victimisation is more severe or more unfair than that of other groups. A phenomenon described as competitive victimhood which can impede reconciliation processes because of zero-sum perceptions of pain and moral superiority, which can lead to further resistance or retaliation (Noor et al., 2012; Young &

Sullivan, 2016). In the Southeast Nigerian context, these dynamics take the form of some residents seeing the losses as a victimisation by the Igbo people linked to historical marginalisation and state repression, while others see the losses as being caused mainly by the disruptive strategies of the agitation itself.

Martyrdom in this study, is an extension of the concept of victimhood: it adds the dimension of redemptive and mobilizing power to the act of death or sacrifice. Martyrdom is not just dying, but a post event construction or construction of meaning in which communities conceptualize individual losses as symbols of resistance, moral superiority, and future liberation. Especially political martyrdom, which combines religious overtones of witness/sacrifice and secular agendas of mobilisation/legitimacy (Castelli, 2004, Fine, 2018). Fallen people or those experiencing tribulation are frequently redefined as martyrs advancing the greater mission of self-determination, in separatist movements such as neo-Biafranism. In many cases, religious institutions are central, invoking the traditions of the Igbo to make losses religious and renew commitment through practices of redemptive suffering rooted in Christianity. But this is not always accepted; some may see this as martyrdom while others may consider it as a needless waste of life or a manipulation.

The counter-narrative to martyrdom is blame, or the attribution of culpability. It pushes the blame for suffering to the decisions and actions of specific actors, either in IPOB's leadership, its enforcement or the state's security reactions. The experiences of intra-community harm can give rise to blame narratives, which affect the legitimacy of the agitation, leading to disillusionment among residents. The three are in a sort of conceptual triad, and they represent the three ways in which the same material realities of loss may be interpreted as a victimhood, a martyrdom, or a blaming.

Framing theory provides a good complement to this constructivist underpinning by offering an understanding of how actors can draw attention

to some aspects of reality and exclude others in order to frame and promote certain interpretations. According to the classic formulation of Entman (1993), when framing occurs, it is with the selection and making salient of particular problem definitions, causal interpretations, moral evaluations, and recommended treatments. Media uses various frames in the IPOB case, some highlight the themes of marginalisation and state repression (victimhood and resistance frames), others highlight themes of disruption, violence and economic sabotage (blame and security frames) (Nimfel & Anijide, 2022). Legal institutions also create frames in the form of proscription orders, court rulings and terrorism designations that give legitimacy to state action and delegitimise the agitation. Often a religious narrative is a hybrid, containing elements from both the spiritual and socio-political realms.

Social constructionism and narrative inquiry also help to explain the ways that such framings become taken-for-granted in everyday life. Personal oral accounts are not simply one on its own but are dynamically engaged with prevailing institutional discourses, which can reinforce, resist, or hybridise them. In the case of contested sovereignty and collective memory, the grievances of the Nigerian-Biafran War serve as a wellspring of symbols that are exploited by IPOB and its supporters to forge a sense of continuity between suffering of the past and present (Maiangwa, 2021; Tuki, 2024).

The framework employed here also takes into account the performative and power dynamic aspects of these narratives. Institutions like the media, courts and churches have more discursive power to amplify certain interpretations, while grassroots oral accounts have agency in that they have emotional authenticity and local embeddedness. This makes for a competing space through which personal narratives of bereavement, economic failure or other crises can either reinforce mobilisation (through martyrdom discourses) or hinder it (through blame attributions). Combining competitive victimhood, constructive framing, and narrative construction, the study offers a comprehensive

framework for understanding and analysing what was happening in IPOB-affected communities, and how different actors interpreted the events and what implications this had for social relations and the possibility of peace.

It is a theoretical approach which guides the empirical analysis in the following sections. It provides for a balanced examination, one that takes into account all of the narratives, heroic, accusatory, and ambivalent; one that sees them as socially meaningful data, not as objective truths or as mere propaganda. Such a lens is necessary to comprehend the micro-politics of meaning behind the current agitations in Southeast Nigeria and help the scholarly debate around victimhood politics in African separatist conflicts.

Methodology and Sources

This research is qualitative in nature and draws on narrative inquiry which is a suitable approach for the topic of this study. It seeks to understand how individuals and institutions make sense of their experiences of loss and suffering in places of conflict. Narrative inquiry understands that individuals construct their own meaning in their lives through stories and these stories are presented in their own personal, social, cultural and political context. The research focuses on the voices of those affected through an oral history approach, while triangulating with institutional sources, both the lived realities and the discursive environment in which the lived realities are interpreted. The combination of sources enhances the credibility of the results by triangulating data, and enables a more complex and subtle analysis of the interaction between more compelling institutional narratives and individual lived experiences share through their testimonies.

The main data are oral narratives gathered from people living in communities that are affected by the IPOB agitation in Southeast Nigeria. Participants were identified using purposive and snowball sampling techniques. They include those who directly suffered loss (family, property, livelihood, education, and personal

security) related to sit-at-home enforcement, violence, or security operations in the period 2020 to 2025. A conscious attempt was made to have a cross section of age, gender, occupation, and relationship to the agitation, ranging from supporters of IPOB, to the opposition and ambivalent or changing at times supporters of IPOB. 48 in-depth interviews were conducted and four focus group discussions held, when safe and feasible. Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide that allowed participants to tell their stories as they desired with an open-ended approach, before probing them for themes of victimization, sacrifice, blame and meaning-making. Interviews were done in English or Igbo (with translation and back-translation to ensure accuracy) and were recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim.

Ethical issues were central because of the context of the research which was sensitive and potentially risky. All participants gave informed consent, orally or in writing, explaining the voluntary nature of the participation in the study, the freedom to withdraw at any point, and how anonymity and confidentiality would be ensured. The analysis uses pseudonyms and identifying details have been included and/or changed. Extra precautions were taken to avoid re-traumatisation during interviews, and to refer to local support services where appropriate. Interviews were conducted in safe and neutral places designated by the participant and data storage was strictly managed to maintain confidentiality in an area where freedom of expression can have a security risk.

Three other sources were used to contextualise and triangulate the oral testimonies. The first approach involved purposive sampling of news in newspapers, news online portals and selected social media posts from mainstream national media and Southeast-based and pro-Biafra media platforms from 2017 to 2025. Second, the use of legal constructions was examined through the study of court decisions, proscription orders, government gazettes, and reports from human rights bodies on cases that were relevant to the subject. Third, narratives

from religious stories were collected from public sermons, pastoral letters, statements from religious institutions and interviews with a sample of religious leaders, as allowed. The institutional triangulation allows an examination of how official and semi-official discourses reinforce, challenge, or re-construct interpretations from the grassroots.

The analysis of data was done thematically and narrative approach. Transcripts and documents were read aloud multiple times to learn the essentials and then were inductively coded to find commonalities in the themes, narrative patterns, and rhetorical appeals of victimization, martyrdom, and blame. Focus was given not only upon what was said but also how it was said; how it was emotionally toned, how it was narrated, how historical references were used, how religious imagery was used, and who was held responsible for the events. Oral history analyses were strengthened by the use of peer de-briefing, member checking (where applicable), and by comparing oral history with institutional sources throughout the analysis.

The researchers recognize that positionality is a factor that influences the research process. The study had an advantage in being conducted by individuals with a cultural familiarity with people from Southeast Nigeria, but at a distance, so that reflexivity of possible biases could be achieved. Some of the measures taken to reduce these were to keep a reflexive journal and to ask for critical feedback from other people who had other points of view on the issues. During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used ChatGPT (OpenAI) and Grammarly to assist with language editing, including improving grammar, readability, clarity, and style.

There are a number of restrictions to be noted. Some of the participants reported feeling constrained in accessing some communities due to the sensitive security context and the possibility that this affected what they were able to share. Although the sample is diverse, it is not statistically representative, and so findings are only contextually rich insights and not universal truths. Publicly available institutional sources

may under represent more informal or private religious discourses. However, the oral evidence and systematic triangulation give good support to the analysis that follows. This methodology allows for a balanced approach to the analysis of the production and contestation of meanings of loss in IPOB-affected communities in Southeast Nigeria, through the deployment of narrative methods. The following sections outline the empirical results from the angles of martyrdom and blame and then explore how these two themes intersect.

Narratives of Martyrdom: Sacrifice, Resistance, potency of supernatural protection, and Redemption

The most prominent way in which losses were framed among communities affected by the IPOB agitations was through narratives of martyrdom, sacrifice, and the spiritually-induced invisibility of the fighters. Many participants interpreted their personal tragedies not as arbitrary or inevitable events but as part of a broader struggle for self-determination and liberation from perceived marginalisation. Others added that the spiritual protections enjoyed by the fighters, as promised by Nnamdi Kanu demonstrates the supports of the supernatural for their course. Their accounts frequently intertwined personal suffering with collective memories of the Nigerian-Biafran War, religious imagery of redemptive suffering, and moral interpretations that transformed victims into symbols of resistance, coupled with the presence of god capable of guaranteeing protections and victory at last. A recurring theme in the oral testimonies was the portrayal of deceased family members, particularly young men who died during clashes or security operations, as martyrs whose blood would nourish the struggle for liberation and strengthened the spiritual protection of the fighters. One 52-year-old widow from Anambra State, who lost her eldest son during an enforcement-related incident in 2022, explained:

He was a good boy. My child was only doing what we all chose to do for freedom's sake. When he got shot, I was broken, but now I have

found peace because he died for Biafra. He paid the same price as those who died during the persecution of the early Christians and those who died during the Biafran War. His blood will speak for us—we are sure of that. Let his courageous blood continue the fight for the liberty of our country and our people. (Participant A15, personal communication, 2024).

For this participant, the tragedy was transformed from a private experience of grief into a public act of sacrifice, providing a narrative that helped her endure both emotional and economic hardship. Similar themes emerged across many interviews, with participants drawing biblical parallels to the suffering of early Christians, the sacrifice of Christ, and the persecution of the Jews in order to give their experiences transcendent meaning.

These constructions of martyrdom were frequently reinforced through religious language and imagery. Pastors and church teachings emerged as important sources of validation. A 41-year-old trader from Imo State, who lost both his business during repeated sit-at-home disruptions and later his younger brother, described how his parish priest interpreted the family's loss:

Our priest helped us make sense of everything. He taught us that our fallen brothers, sons, and husbands were seeds planted for the harvest of a sovereign Biafra. We should not mourn like those without hope or believe they died in vain because their blood, like Abel's, cries out for justice and freedom for the land of the rising sun. (Participant B22).

For many participants, this religious interpretation helped them cope with ambiguous loss by transforming grief into continued commitment to the cause. Sermons and prayer meetings frequently compared contemporary suffering with biblical accounts of sacrifice for others while linking present hardships to the unresolved trauma of the Nigerian Civil War.

Martyrdom narratives extended beyond physical death to encompass other forms of sacrifice, including interrupted education, destruction of property, and prolonged economic hardship. A university student in Enugu State who missed his final-year examinations because of repeated sit-at-home orders and campus disruptions described his experience as follows:

Being a good student, I did not sit for my examinations, and I see it as a blessing. It is an experience I will proudly share in the future as my own contribution to the struggle for the freedom of Igboland. While my mates in the North, the West, and even outside Nigeria are graduating, I have no regrets. It is one of the sacrifices I am making for my future children. They will not suffer as I have suffered when Biafra comes. (Participant C09).

Here, personal disappointment was reinterpreted as an investment in future collective redemption, illustrating how individual setbacks could be transformed into narratives of resilience and hope.

These interpretations were further reinforced by pro-IPOB media outlets. Radio Biafra, Southeast-based news platforms, and social media posts frequently celebrated those who died as "martyrs of the revolution" or "fallen heroes." Such representations provided ready-made narrative templates through which individuals interpreted their own experiences. One participant explained: "When my brother's name was mentioned among the fallen heroes and people applauded, my grief became lighter. I realised that he had not died in vain. It was an honour that Mazi Nnamdi Kanu knew about his death." (Participant D14).

Martyrdom narratives also consistently connected present suffering with historical experiences of loss. Many respondents situated their sacrifices within a broader continuum of Igbo suffering beginning with the Nigerian-Biafran War, continuing through perceived post-war marginalisation, and extending into the current struggle. This layering of historical memory gave personal stories both emotional and moral depth by positioning participants

within what they regarded as an unfinished liberation project. One elderly man whose property was destroyed during a security operation remarked: "We suffered in 1967, we suffered afterwards, and we are still suffering. But this time our children's blood will complete what our fathers started." (Participant E03). Such historical consciousness strengthened the redemptive dimension of martyrdom by presenting contemporary suffering as meaningful because it contributed to eventual collective vindication.

Another recurring feature of these narratives was the comparison between the experiences of the Igbo people and those of the Jews in biblical history, extending even to contemporary conflicts involving Israel. One participant observed:

This is what God's chosen people go through. Remember that the Jews and the Igbo share a common ancestry. From biblical times the Jews have faced persecution, and we, like them, are God's chosen people. Look at what is happening in Israel today—it is the same persecution because God has something great for us that our enemies do not want us to receive. But light will always overcome darkness. (Participant F17).

Martyrdom narratives were not always expressed in absolute terms. Even among participants who broadly embraced them, some offered more qualified or evolving interpretations that acknowledged personal pain while continuing to regard sacrifice as meaningful. A mother who lost her daughter to stray bullets during a period of heightened tension reflected: "I support the struggle, but sometimes at night I ask God why it had to be my own child. Then I remind myself that many great nations were built on sacrifice. Perhaps Biafra will be one of them." (Participant F18). Such ambivalent accounts reveal the emotional labour involved in sustaining martyrdom narratives while confronting the reality of profound personal loss. They also highlight the tension between individual grief and the collective ideology of sacrifice.

Analytically, these testimonies demonstrate how martyrdom functions as a powerful mechanism

of meaning-making in protracted conflicts. Experiences of passive victimhood are transformed into narratives of active sacrifice, thereby granting individuals a sense of agency, dignity, and moral purpose. This finding is consistent with broader scholarship on political martyrdom, which shows how suffering and death are symbolically transformed into resources for mobilisation and political legitimacy (Castelli, 2004; Fine, 2018). Within the Southeast Nigerian context, religious institutions and sympathetic media serve as important amplifiers by providing the cultural and symbolic frameworks through which these transformations become emotionally meaningful and socially persuasive.

The IPOB agitation has been accompanied by various narratives about spirituality and mystical powers embedded in charms, magic, witchcraft and traditional medicine. Among some supporters and members of the public, there is a belief that prayers, traditional rituals, charms, or other spiritual practices can provide protection from bullet attack, machete cut, and harm especially when the soldier has been ritualized with bullet proof charm called "odeshi" or "mkpu mgbo". It was also noted that the mystical powers give courage or divine guidance to the ESN of IPOB. However, this position reflects broader religious and socio-cultural traditions found in many traditional communities in southeastern Nigeria where both Christianity and indigenous spiritual practices of African traditional religion influence the people's worldviews about warfare (Kalu, 2024).

While there is no credible, independently verified evidence that mystical powers found in charms, magic, witchcraft, sorcery and traditional medicine have played a demonstrable role in determining the outcomes of confrontations involving IPOB or in advancing political objectives, the stories of respondents points that the divine support of the agitation strengthened whatever the IPOB members do for their protections. Reports of supernatural protection or extraordinary abilities are generally based on anecdotal accounts, personal beliefs, or

social media narratives rather than verifiable evidence. Albeit, a closer look at the findings of this study from data from the field showed that there were strong evidence of cases where bullets never penetrated the IPOB fighters after undergoing rituals of bullet protection. While mystical powers and beliefs may form part of the personal faith or socio-cultural outlook of some individuals associated with or supportive of IPOB, claims about the movements' use of supernatural powers to fight their course remain (Anyanwu, 2022).

Furthermore, though there is no credible scientific evidence that mystical powers or supernatural powers can make a soldier physically invisible, during war, in Igboland, there are herbs and leafs in the forests that are capable of making a people physically invisible when applied ritually. Throughout history, many cultures have held beliefs that charms, rituals, prayers and protective amulets and objects could shield warriors from bullet, harm or make them difficult for enemies to detect. For example, in the Ohafia axis of Igboland, this belief is common among the warriors who are ritualized with bullet proof charms and amulet for war action.

Generally, martyrdom and divine protection narratives were far from being generally accepted among the affected people. Some participants who adopted blame-oriented perspectives regarded public commemorations of the dead as uncomfortable or even exploitative, arguing that they perpetuated rather than resolved violence. In the same manner, diverse views portray that the survival most IPOB fighters were merely luck or coincidental, and not the potency or presence of a supernatural being supporting or protecting them. This suggests that even within communities broadly sympathetic to the agitation, martyrdom and divine protection remain contested and provide the foundation for the counter-narratives examined in the next section. Overall, however, the oral testimonies demonstrate that martyrdom narratives remain a powerful means through which many affected individuals negotiate trauma, preserve dignity,

and sustain hope. Through religious symbolism, historical continuity, and media representations, personal loss is transformed into something purposeful and transcendent. These narratives do not erase suffering; rather, they embed it within a broader story of resistance, sacrifice, and anticipated liberation. Understanding this process is essential for explaining why sections of the population continue to support disruptive strategies despite their considerable human and economic costs.

Narratives of Blame and Victimhood: Irrationality, Avoidable Suffering, and Betrayal

While some communities affected by the IPOB agitations interpreted their losses through narratives of martyrdom and redemptive sacrifice, many participants understood the same experiences as avoidable suffering resulting from what they perceived as an irrational and counterproductive agitation. Their accounts were characterised by themes of lost opportunities, diminished agency, betrayal, and frustration, arguing that the sit-at-home orders, violence, and enforcement measures had only deepened the hardships facing the region. Rather than viewing these losses as heroic sacrifices, participants frequently described them as senseless tragedies arising from IPOB's strategies, the activities of unknown gunmen, or leadership decisions that bore little relation to the realities experienced by ordinary people.

A recurring theme in these narratives was the perception that the agitation had shifted from a movement for liberation to a source of oppression within the very communities it claimed to defend. Recounting the death of her husband, a commercial bus driver who was killed during a period of heightened tension in 2023, a 47-year-old market woman from Onitsha, Anambra State, expressed deep resentment toward those responsible:

The thing they're doing is in the name of freedom, but what sort of freedom takes your husband's life because he didn't park his bus on Monday when he had so many bills to pay? I am now a widow, and my children are fatherless, yet

they tell me it is for freedom. I don't believe IPOB has helped us. They have only made our situation worse. (Participant G27, personal communication, 2024).

For this participant, her husband's death represented not sacrifice but betrayal by those who claimed to be fighting for the people. Similar sentiments were expressed by participants whose relatives had been killed by non-state actors during attempts to enforce sit-at-home compliance or amid broader insecurity.

Economic devastation also emerged as a dominant feature of blame-oriented narratives. Commercial bus drivers, motorcycle and tricycle operators, traders, and small business owners described how repeated sit-at-home orders had destroyed their businesses and plunged their families into poverty. A 39-year-old resident of Imo State whose truck, and consequently his livelihood, was lost during the crisis explained:

Before all this craziness began, I could provide for my family and send my children to school. Now I borrow money just to feed them. They tell us to suffer for Biafra, but Biafra is not coming tomorrow. This suffering is senseless. Our IPOB leaders eat well while we die here. (Participant H12).

A recurring theme within these accounts was the contrast between what participants described as the relative comfort of movement leaders and the daily hardships endured by ordinary people. Several respondents also highlighted the breakdown of community cohesion resulting from threats, intimidation, and destruction of property associated with enforcing the sit-at-home directives.

Educational disruption generated particularly strong blame narratives, especially among parents, teachers, and young people. A secondary school teacher from Enugu State, reflecting on repeated school closures, remarked: "Our children have lost almost two years of learning. Some have dropped out completely. How can you claim to be working for the future while destroying the education of the next generation? This is not struggle; it is

wickedness." (Participant I34). Similarly, another participant from Imo State stated:

Education and the future of our children must be protected, not sacrificed in the name of freedom fighting. IPOB says they want a better future for our children, yet schools remain closed. Just because it is Monday does not mean children should miss important examinations such as Mathematics or English. If a school owner tries to help them sit for those examinations, the same people who claim to be fighting for us may attack the owner—even priests. What is "freedom fighting" about such behaviour? (Participant W040).

These narratives portrayed the agitation as short-sighted and ultimately harmful to the very people it claimed to liberate. Many participants regarded the educational consequences as creating an unnecessary form of intergenerational victimhood.

Religious leaders also contributed to blame-oriented interpretations. While some churches interpreted deaths as acts of martyrdom, others consistently preached peace, restraint, and reconciliation. Participants recalled sermons that questioned the continued suffering experienced by communities. One respondent explained: "Our priest said God is not the author of confusion. He encouraged us to seek peace and pursue it. Not every suffering comes from God; some suffering is the result of human foolishness." (Participant J15). These religious interpretations enabled participants to condemn the methods of the agitation while continuing to identify with broader Igbo aspirations and historical grievances.

Blame-oriented narratives also found greater reinforcement within mainstream media reporting and legal discourse. National newspapers and television stations frequently highlighted the economic losses associated with the sit-at-home orders, attacks on security personnel, and civilian casualties while identifying IPOB and its affiliated groups as major security threats. Similarly, court judgments, including the proscription of IPOB and the conviction of some of its members,

reinforced official portrayals of the movement as a criminal rather than purely political organisation. Some participants appeared to internalise these institutional framings, arguing that IPOB's methods had provoked heavy-handed security responses that further devastated their communities.

Importantly, blame narratives did not necessarily imply opposition to the broader aspiration for self-determination. Many participants acknowledged longstanding grievances relating to marginalisation and inequality but criticised the strategies adopted to pursue those objectives. A 55-year-old civil servant captured this distinction: "We all know marginalisation is real. But the way IPOB is going about it is wrong. They have brought more suffering than solutions. Our people are now suffering at the hands of our own brothers." (Participant K08). This distinction between political objectives and the methods employed to achieve them was evident throughout the interviews and challenges simplistic pro- or anti-IPOB classifications.

From an analytical perspective, these narratives perform important social functions. They allow individuals to reject the idea that suffering is inevitable, assign responsibility for that suffering, and reclaim a sense of moral agency. This interpretation aligns with attribution theory, which argues that individuals seek explanations for negative experiences in order to restore perceptions of control and justice (Weiner, 2010). Within the framework of competitive victimhood, these accounts contest the moral authority of martyrdom narratives by arguing that the primary victims are not only those affected by state repression but also those harmed by actions carried out in the name of the struggle itself (Noor et al., 2012). Although such counter-narratives may weaken mobilisation, they also create space for alternative forms of advocacy centred on dialogue, peacebuilding, and development.

The coexistence of martyrdom and blame narratives within the same communities illustrates the extent of social fragmentation

produced by the conflict. Participants frequently recognised the legitimacy of opposing viewpoints while simultaneously avoiding public disagreement because of fear, social pressure, or community divisions. As one young professional observed: "If you oppose the sit-at-home, you are labelled a saboteur. If you support it completely, you may lose everything. We are trapped between two different kinds of pain. (Participant L29)." Overall, narratives of blame and avoidable suffering reveal how many residents perceive themselves as secondary victims of a struggle carried out in their name. These accounts emphasise irrationality, betrayal, and lost opportunities, offering a direct contrast to narratives of redemptive martyrdom. They are reinforced by lived experiences of economic hardship, religious messages that emphasise peace, and institutional discourses that delegitimise disruptive tactics. Understanding these narratives is essential for appreciating the complex emotional and social landscape of contemporary Southeast Nigeria. The following section examines how these competing narratives converge and diverge across oral testimonies, media representations, legal constructions, and religious discourses, and what these intersections reveal about power, agency, and social relations in the region.

Contested Constructions: Intersections and Institutional Power

As the preceding sections have demonstrated, losses arising from the IPOB agitations are neither experienced nor interpreted uniformly by affected communities in Southeast Nigeria. Narratives of martyrdom and redemptive sacrifice coexist with equally compelling narratives of blame, betrayal, and avoidable suffering. This section examines the relationship between these grassroots oral accounts and the overlapping, competing, and sometimes intertwined narratives constructed by the media, legal institutions, and religious organisations. Rather than existing as separate spheres, grassroots narratives and institutional discourses remain in constant dialogue, revealing both unequal relations of power and the possibilities for social cohesion as well as division.

One of the most visible arenas of contestation is the media. Mainstream national media have generally framed IPOB activities within narratives of insecurity, emphasising violence, economic disruption, and threats to national stability. Such reporting provides an interpretive vocabulary that participants with blame-oriented perspectives readily adopted. Several respondents who expressed dissatisfaction with the sit-at-home orders referred to newspaper reports, television broadcasts, and radio programmes describing "IPOB-induced hardship" or "self-imposed lockdowns," arguing that these accounts reflected their own experiences of frustration. By contrast, pro-Biafra media platforms, including Radio Biafra and several Southeast-based online outlets, frequently portrayed losses as consequences of state repression, thereby reinforcing narratives of martyrdom and resistance. Participants who embraced these interpretations often repeated media expressions such as "genocide" and "continued marginalisation," illustrating how institutional frames provide interpretive scripts that individuals incorporate into their own narratives.

The relationship between institutional and personal narratives, however, was not one-directional. Several participants openly challenged dominant media representations, criticising both mainstream media for what they perceived as anti-Igbo bias and pro-IPOB media for glorifying suffering while ignoring the everyday hardships experienced by ordinary communities. One participant expressed this frustration:

Radio Biafra says our children are heroes, but wait until your own son or daughter dies, then you will know the truth. The media on both sides are playing games with our lives. (Participant M41).

Legal constructions exerted a different but equally significant influence. IPOB's proscription as a terrorist organisation in 2017, subsequent court rulings, the 2025 Court of Appeal judgment, and the life imprisonment imposed on Nnamdi Kanu collectively

strengthened an official narrative that portrayed the movement primarily as a criminal and security threat. Initially, many pro-IPOB supporters dismissed these legal developments as instruments of state repression. However, the arrest of Simon Ekpa by Finnish authorities in November 2024 and his subsequent conviction in Finland in 2025 complicated this interpretation for some participants. Unlike legal actions initiated within Nigeria, these developments were more difficult to dismiss as products of the Nigerian state's political agenda. Consequently, legal developments both within and outside Nigeria strengthened the views of participants who adopted blame-oriented interpretations, allowing them to distance themselves from the movement without feeling that they had abandoned broader Igbo interests.

At the same time, participants who embraced martyrdom narratives continued to interpret legal proceedings as evidence of political persecution rather than impartial justice. For them, arrests and convictions reinforced rather than weakened the legitimacy of the struggle by transforming legal punishment into symbols of sacrifice and political resistance. In this respect, legal institutions functioned not simply as arbiters of law but also as powerful producers of narratives that defined what constituted legitimate resistance, legitimate suffering, and legitimate criminality.

Religious institutions occupied perhaps the most complex and ambivalent position within these competing constructions. Churches and religious leaders across Southeast Nigeria did not speak with a single voice. Some clergy interpreted deaths and suffering through theological narratives of redemptive sacrifice, encouraging bereaved families to persevere while framing hardship as spiritually meaningful. Others consistently emphasised peace, dialogue, reconciliation, and pragmatic engagement with the Nigerian state. These divergent religious messages created space for hybrid interpretations that combined elements of both martyrdom and blame. One father in his fifties, who had lost property during the crisis and

remained concerned about his children's education, reflected:

God tells us in the Bible not to put Him to the test through unnecessary suffering. I believe in Biafra, but I cannot support the way IPOB is pursuing it by choosing a path that destroys Igboland. Our parish priest and the other priests preaching peace are speaking the truth. (Participant N33).

Such hybrid narratives illustrate the agency of ordinary people in selectively appropriating institutional discourses to make sense of complex and often contradictory experiences.

The intersections between oral testimonies and institutional constructions reveal both reinforcement and resistance. In some instances, powerful institutions appeared to shape individual narratives by providing dominant interpretive frames that participants reproduced. In many other cases, however, participants adapted, challenged, or reworked those institutional narratives in light of their own lived experiences. Even some committed supporters of the agitation openly acknowledged the severe economic hardships associated with the sit-at-home orders while continuing to publicly endorse martyrdom narratives during commemorative events. Likewise, participants who criticised IPOB's methods often continued to express sympathy for the broader aspirations of self-determination. These findings reveal identities that are considerably more complex than straightforward pro- or anti-IPOB positions.

These patterns also expose important power asymmetries. Media organisations, courts, and major religious institutions possess significantly greater discursive power to amplify particular interpretations before wider audiences. Grassroots oral testimonies, although emotionally compelling and locally grounded, often remain marginal because they lack comparable institutional platforms. This imbalance raises important questions about whose voices ultimately shape public understandings of the conflict. At the same time, the diversity of oral testimonies demonstrates

that institutional narratives never exercise complete control. Individuals continue to negotiate, reinterpret, and sometimes resist dominant constructions in ways that reflect their own experiences and moral judgments.

From a theoretical perspective, the Southeast Nigerian case illustrates the dynamics of competitive victimhood, whereby different groups and individuals seek recognition as legitimate victims while assigning responsibility to the state, IPOB, or other actors within their communities. The findings also demonstrate the performative character of both martyrdom and blame, showing that these are not objective categories but socially constructed narratives that perform important psychological, political, and moral functions. The resulting fragmentation of narratives has tangible consequences for social relations, contributing to family divisions, community mistrust, and a weakened collective capacity to address shared developmental challenges.

Overall, the contested constructions examined in this study reveal a complex ecology of meaning within IPOB-affected communities. Oral testimonies do not exist independently of institutional discourses but are continually negotiated alongside media representations, legal decisions, and religious interpretations. The outcome of this interaction is not simply polarisation but also the emergence of hybrid understandings that may provide foundations for future dialogue. Recognising this plurality of narratives is essential for moving beyond rigid political binaries towards more inclusive approaches to peacebuilding and transitional justice that acknowledge both legitimate historical grievances and the immediate human consequences of the ongoing conflict. The concluding section synthesises these findings and considers their broader implications.

Conclusion: Implications, Contributions, and Future Directions

The narratives emerging from IPOB agitation-affected communities in Southeast Nigeria reveal a deeply contested landscape of meaning-making shaped by experiences of loss and

suffering. The oral testimonies presented in this study demonstrate that while deaths, economic hardship, educational disruption, and everyday insecurity constitute shared realities, the meanings attached to these experiences remain sharply divided. For some participants, they represent noble martyrdom and redemptive sacrifice in pursuit of self-determination; for others, they signify avoidable tragedy, betrayal, and irrational self-inflicted suffering. These personal narratives do not exist in isolation. Rather, they interact continuously with media framings, legal constructions, and religious discourses that alternately legitimise resistance, criminalise the agitation, or advocate peace. The study therefore shows that understanding the conflict requires attention not only to its material consequences but also to the social and political processes through which those consequences acquire meaning.

The findings generate several important insights. First, victimhood is not a fixed condition but a socially negotiated and contested identity. Participants variously presented themselves as victims of state repression, victims of IPOB's enforcement strategies, or victims of broader historical and structural marginalisation, often assigning responsibility to different actors in the process. This competition over legitimate victimhood continues to deepen social divisions while drawing upon shared historical memories of the Nigerian-Biafran War and subsequent experiences of perceived exclusion. Second, martyrdom narratives remain powerful psychological and political resources, transforming personal suffering into collective purpose and sustaining commitment despite considerable sacrifice. At the same time, the coexistence of equally compelling blame-oriented narratives reveals the limits of these constructions and highlights significant intra-community disagreements. Third, although institutional actors—including the media, courts, and religious organisations—possess considerable influence in shaping dominant public narratives, grassroots oral testimonies continue to demonstrate agency through resistance, reinterpretation, and the creation of

hybrid understandings grounded in lived experience.

The study also makes several theoretical contributions. By bringing together narrative inquiry, framing theory, and the concept of competitive victimhood, it provides a deeper understanding of the interaction between personal experiences and institutional processes of meaning-making within contemporary African separatist movements. Rather than focusing exclusively on the political economy, legal dimensions, or security implications of the IPOB agitation, the study foregrounds the micro-politics of everyday interpretation. In doing so, it contributes to broader debates on victimhood politics, political martyrdom, and the roles of religion and the media in shaping long-term conflicts. Beyond Southeast Nigeria, the findings offer a useful comparative perspective for understanding similar dynamics of sacrifice, blame, and contested legitimacy in other self-determination movements.

The findings also carry important implications for policy and peacebuilding. Approaches that assume either unanimous support for or unanimous opposition to the agitation are unlikely to produce sustainable outcomes. Effective dialogue and transitional justice initiatives must recognise the diversity of voices within affected communities, including those who experience the agitation itself as a form of secondary victimisation. Addressing historical grievances while responding to the immediate humanitarian and developmental consequences of the conflict requires a balanced and inclusive approach. Religious institutions, given their moral authority and community influence, remain well positioned to facilitate dialogue between competing narratives of martyrdom and blame. Likewise, media organisations have an important responsibility to move beyond polarised reporting by presenting more nuanced accounts that reflect the complexity of lived experiences across the region.

This study also highlights the human dimension of a conflict that is often reduced to statistics on economic losses and security incidents. Behind

those figures are deeply personal stories of grief, resilience, anger, hope, and disillusionment. Many participants shared their experiences despite considerable personal risks, revealing not only profound suffering but also remarkable agency in making sense of difficult realities. Their willingness to acknowledge contradictory experiences underscores the need for more empathetic, inclusive, and community-centred approaches to addressing the region's challenges.

Nevertheless, the study has several limitations that point towards future research. The prevailing security environment constrained both the sample size and the geographical coverage of the study, suggesting the need for larger-scale and longitudinal research capable of tracing how narratives evolve over time. Comparative studies involving other separatist or insurgency-affected regions within and beyond Nigeria would further illuminate the contextual factors that shape constructions of victimhood, martyrdom, and blame. Future research should also examine more closely the role of social media and digital platforms in amplifying or moderating these competing narratives, particularly given the increasingly online character of IPOB mobilisation and counter-mobilisation. In addition, further work exploring generational differences in meaning-

making would provide valuable insights, as younger people whose experiences are shaped primarily by the sit-at-home era may interpret the conflict differently from older generations with direct memories of the Nigerian Civil War and earlier pro-Biafra movements.

In conclusion, the IPOB agitation has produced not only significant material losses but also a landscape of intensely contested narratives across Southeast Nigeria. Narratives of victimhood, martyrdom, and blame coexist in constant tension as communities attempt to reconcile enduring historical grievances with the painful realities of the present. By foregrounding oral testimonies while situating them alongside media, legal, and religious constructions, this study demonstrates how ordinary people actively negotiate these competing interpretations in their everyday lives. Lasting peace, reconciliation, and sustainable development in Southeast Nigeria will depend not on privileging a single narrative but on recognising the legitimacy of diverse lived experiences and engaging honestly with the complex realities that continue to shape the region. Acknowledging the full spectrum of suffering—whether understood as sacrifice, injustice, or avoidable loss—is an essential step towards building a more inclusive and durable future.

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