

African Zion:  
Studies in Black Judaism



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Edited by

Edith Bruder and Tudor Parfitt

**CAMBRIDGE**  
**SCHOLARS**  

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**P U B L I S H I N G**

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## INTRODUCTION

### EDITH BRUDER AND TUDOR PARFITT

Over the last hundred years, in Africa and the United States, through a variety of religious encounters, some black African societies adopted—or perhaps rediscovered—a Judaic religious identity. *African Zion* grows out of an interest in these diversified encounters with Judaism, their common substrata and divergences, their exogenous or endogenous characteristics, the entry or re-entry of these people into the contemporary world as Jews and the necessity of reshaping the standard accounts of their collective experience.

In various loci the bonds with Judaism of black Jews were often forged in the harshest circumstances and grew out of experiences of slavery, exile, colonial subjugation, political ethnic conflicts and apartheid. For the African peoples who identify as Jews and with other Jews, identification with biblical Israel assumes symbolical significance. The Bible that brought Africans the narrative of the Hebrews' destiny and deliverance is central in the formation of their sacred world. All these movements partly rely on the narrative of the scriptures as a form of resistance to a feeling of oppression and on a common need to recover identity and history. The reading of the Old Testament, specifically the Psalms, Proverbs, and Prophets, influenced the formation of the cultural framework upon which black people began to construct a collective identity.

African Americans' identification with Judaism was informed by the social and political orientations of black people in the United States and was often embedded in response to discrimination. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the appropriation of Jewish history by African Americans followed the path of a search for origins that gave them back a history and allowed them to overthrow American racism's hierarchy of values. The wider argument identifying the Hebrews of the Bible with a black nation came to be an important strand in pan-African American movements in their formative period. Marcus Garvey, J. A. Rogers and George G. M. James, among many others, considered themselves to be the *only* true physical descendants of ancient Israel, which claim had been recurrent for well over one hundred and fifty years.

In Africa the construction of Judaic identities by missionaries and colonial civil servants formed an insistent part of the interface between indigenous peoples and colonialism. The Israelite paradigm formed an essential building block in the colonial attempt to comprehend African religious culture and African society. The last several decades have witnessed some surprising consequences of such colonial activity in the emergence of a significant and growing number of sub-Saharan African ethnic groups in Ghana, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, South Africa and elsewhere, who trace their origins to Israelite antecedents or to the Lost Tribes of Israel.<sup>1</sup> These groups may be viewed along with older Judaising groups such as the Lemba of southern Africa and the Abayudaya of Uganda as a new Judaic African fraternity increasingly linked by e-mails, Facebook and the like.

Since the beginning of the twentieth century there have been links between Judaising groups in Africa and African American Jews in the United States—the so-called Israelites massacred at Bulhoek in South Africa in 1921 had had connections with William Crowdy, the American founder of the Judaising Church of God and Saints of Christ in Lawrence, Kansas.<sup>2</sup> These links have grown vastly in importance and scale over the last few decades with the rise in internet communication, and other modern media so that there is now a world-wide virtual community of black Jews of different sorts, who follow events with the closest attention.

What interests us in this volume is the way in which the religious identification of African American Jews and African black Jews—“real”, ideal or imaginary, has been represented, conceptualized and reconfigured over the last century or so. These essays grow out of a concern to understand Black encounters with Judaism, Jews and putative Hebrew/Israelite origins and are intended to illuminate their developments in the medley of race, ethnicity, and religion of the African and African American religious experience. They explore and review the major characteristics of the external and internal variables that shaped these group religious identities in Africa and the United States and reflect the geographical and historic mosaic of black Judaism, permeated as it is with different “meanings” both contemporary and historical.

Another purpose of the book is to offer a more thorough understanding of the ways in which Africans in Africa and African Americans in the United States have interacted with mythological substrata of both Europeans’ and Africans’ ideas of Jews and Judaism in order to create a distinct Jewish identity. The recurrence of some narrative patterns, such as the myth of the Lost Tribes of Israel or the arrival of Jews in Egypt following Jeremiah after the destruction of the First Temple, represents a



complex search for origins, involving multiple dimensions (ethnic, religious, spatial, historical, social, mythical, linguistic, and more recently genetic).

In countering their experience of exclusion, the notion of being the chosen people and the identification with the biblical Jews took deep roots in the African American imagination. The reinterpretation of African religious phenomena through the Israelite paradigm has created a new interest in reinvented traditions, customs and shared histories. Between the 1920s and the 1930s, several African American Jewish synagogues were built in the cities of New York, Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, and Chicago and gave rise to complex and multifaceted black Jewish religious communities. In many of these new black-Jewish religious groups, not only were the symbols and images of Judaism employed allegorically, but Jewish practices led to the construction of new identities by which blacks became Jews in different ways.<sup>3</sup>

The spread of myths connecting Africa with the Jews which arose primarily in the European and Middle Eastern imagination in the early Middle Ages and which can be clearly seen in the ninth century *Sepher Eldad* as well as in the later Prester John legends became an axiomatic feature of medieval thinking about Africa. Such myths were used and reused, exploited and reinvented by colonialism in many distinct loci in Africa, where they served missionary and colonial interests and impacted local sensibilities.<sup>4</sup> Colonization during the nineteenth century can be seen as an intercultural exchange in which African and European subjectivities were negotiated and renegotiated. A new consciousness emerged among Africans who discussed, argued, and reconfigured their identities in new religious and political languages that modified their understanding of themselves.<sup>5</sup>

The essays in this volume illustrate the fluidity of cultural and religious categories as well as the shifting meanings of race and ethnicity in the historical experiences of black Jews. The Judaizing process among some African societies follows the ideological bias of some African American movements, insofar as they perceive the theoretical basis for their Judaic status through the identification of Africans not with white Jews but with Ethiopians who themselves are seen as the true descendants of the Jews of the Bible. In fact it is the supposed blood link and Middle East historical origins which predominate over issues of belief or praxis. When identifying as Jews and with other Jews, African Americans and Africans deny the existence of distinctive categories in popular concepts of Jews and subvert the racist image of blacks. Their self-definition lies in their

collective historical and cultural experiences that have led them to assume a shared history with the Jewish people.

Notions of difference embedded in the Judeo-Christian tradition were largely responsible for constructs of western race theory, which played a decisive role in shaping the development of racialized identities. Tudor Parfitt's chapter looks at the development of the Hamitic Hypothesis throughout the nineteenth century and traces the way the arguments embedded in this racial manipulation played out with two African Judaizing groups—the Beta Israel and the Lemba—but his argument could be applied to many more groups both in the United States and throughout Africa. There are now grounds for exploring the possibility that some of these phenomena were formed from specific historical contacts. Genetic population research has become interlaced with history, popular discourses, and myths and has thrown unexpected light on a number of issues of origin throughout the world. Some markers have helped to cast light on the Lemba tribe of Zimbabwe and South Africa and suggest that their traditions may indeed be founded on some historical reality and that there were ancient connections between the African interior and the Middle East.<sup>6</sup>

In Nigeria, it is the Igbo claim of Jewish “racial” origin which more than anything underlies their identity. Approximately thirty thousand Igbo people regard themselves—and are regarded by other Nigerians and Africans—as Jews. In delineating the proto-history of the Igbo, Edith Bruder's chapter engages with broader narratives of Nigerian political and social history to contextualize the proto-history of the “Jews of Africa”, from the colonial period to the Biafra war (1890-1970). In the Nigeria State marked by post-colonialism upheavals, political ethnic conflicts and economic uncertainty, Bruder describes the motives and mechanics behind the identification to Judaism of the Igbo people in the course of the twentieth century. She examines how the making of Igbo Jewish affiliation is “symbolically constructed” and magnified as a “modern project” in an arena characterized by local ethnic competition for power, legitimacy, and prestige.

During the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-70, when the Igbo fought for their own independent Republic of Biafra, the idea became popular that like Jews, they were surrounded by enemies and threatened by genocide. They lost the war, but thirty years later, when ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria escalated again, secessionism among the Igbo revived, and with it the idea that their Jewish identity sets them apart from other African peoples. In his chapter Johannes Harnischfeger points out the way Igbo nationalists admire the Jews of modern Israel who have established, in a

hostile political and economic environment, an affluent high-tech society. Even those Igbo who are not affiliated with Judaism and who maintain Christian belief and praxis tend to see themselves metaphorically as God's chosen people, and thus akin to the ancient Hebrews and Biblical Jews.

Although the popularity of the myth of a Hebrew, Israelite or Jewish origin of the Igbo can be documented amongst the Igbo Diaspora, perhaps as early as the nineteenth century the existence of modern Jews—as opposed to the Hebrews or Israelites mentioned in the Bible—remained largely unknown to the majority of Igbo until the establishment of the State of Israel. On the other hand the knowledge Jews had about the Igbo was scant. Apart from an early attempt in the nineteenth century, official connections between Jews and the Igbo started to materialize only in the 1950s. Daniel Lis has analysed the policy of the state of Israel towards the Igbo in order to see if Israeli responses to rumours about the Jewish identity of the Igbo have been factors in the construction of a Jewish identity and in the association of the Igbo with Israel.

Like the Igbo of Nigeria, another group, in the southwestern corner of Ghana, the House of Israel of Sefwi Wiawso—drawing on the teachings of earlier black Jewish movements—think of themselves not as converts to Judaism, but as “reverts”, returning to what they always have been. Janice Levi's chapter examines the peculiar status of their claim, beliefs and practices.

For years, the scholarly consensus has been that African and African American traditions put forward to support claims of Israelite origins were utterly a-historical and were on occasion the result of different sorts of colonial misconceptions and manipulations. No doubt this is largely true. But there may be some exceptions.

Using hitherto unexplored sources, in his chapter about the Bayajidda legend of Daura, Dierk Lange traces the immigration of the Hausa from the Near East via two different movements, a mass migration of people from Palestine and a lonely ride of the son of the king from Baghdad. He suggests that the mass movement refers to the flight of resettled deportees of the Assyrian Empire and that the lonely ride may be associated with the retreat of the Assyrian crown prince in consequence of the final Assyrian defeat. The Israelite form of the legend and its Assyrian reshaping are explained by the Assyrian exile of Israelites lasting from 722 to 605 BCE and by the presence of carriers of this tradition among the immigrants.

Magdel Le Roux focuses her chapter on the Lemba in Southern Africa and provides interesting additional data in investigating the functioning of oral traditions in a pre-industrial society in respect of the relation between “facts” and “history.” Le Roux follows currently fashionable trends in

New Archaeology, History of Religion and Old and New Testament Studies—and, by so doing, tries to highlight a contemporary approach to an understanding of the Old Testament and early Israel.

The quest to discover traces of ancient Judaic peoples in the African continent engaged a number of key individuals throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Emanuela Trevisan Semi's chapter examines the quest for the "indigenous Jew" in North Africa. In circles influenced by the thinking of Israel Zangwill, the leader of the Territorialism movement, by colonialism and by current theories of race, the eclectic figure of Nahum Slouschz was of major importance. Slouschz, who was a Hebrew scholar, epigraphist, historian and archaeologist went on a series of missions and focused on proving both the existence of indigenous African Judaism and the Jewish ancestry of the Hellenes and Phoenicians.

The black Jewish community *par excellence* and the one which exerted the greatest influence on both American and African Judaic expressions was the Beta Israel (also known as Falasha) community of Ethiopia. In her chapter Shalva Weil traces diachronically the yearning for Jerusalem among the Beta Israel. The Beta Israel who come predominantly from North-West Ethiopia live today in Israel. In Ethiopia, they practised a Torah-based Judaism, without observing the Oral Law. Significantly Beta Israel liturgy is replete with prayers of longing for Jerusalem. Through an analysis of the *Segd* festival dedicated to the theme of longing for Jerusalem, and Hebrew literature which is now emerging among young Ethiopian-Israelis, Weil examines the dissonance between heavenly and earthly Jerusalem.

In their formative period, among the African American Jewish congregations, some referred to themselves as Israelites, others as Jews, Hebrews, Canaanites, Essenes, Judaites, Rechabites, Falashas and Abyssinians. In his chapter Jacob Dorman focuses on the beginnings of African American Jewish congregations in the United States and the numerous schisms among Rabbi Wentworth Arthur Matthew's Black Jews in New York, as well as his unsuccessful attempts to gain recognition from white Jewish organizations between 1930 and 1964. Dorman examines the various rejections which in 1945 led members of Matthew's congregation to form *Kohol Beth B'nai Yisrael*, which split again into two separate synagogues in 1954. The direction of such groups was to a large extent a function of the incomprehension of white American Jews who had the greatest difficulty accepting the historical narrative of American blacks drawn to Judaism and a Judaic past.

Janice Fernheimer calls attention to an important New York-based non-profit organization, *Hatzaad Harishon* (The First Step) which was

created in 1964 and lasted until 1972. *Hatzaad Harishon* included Jews of all colours and aimed to foster a new reality that would recognize the equality of black and white Jews. Fernheimer analyzes *Hatzaad Harishon's* interactions between white Jews and black Jews which were marked by sensitivity to the shared diasporic experience of American Jews and African Americans of whatever faith. She concentrates on the period of heightened sensitivity to race inspired by New York's turmoil over the Ocean Hill-Brownsville affair.

Jewish engagement with the field of Diaspora Studies is a potentially rich site for multi-layered examinations of politics, the movement of peoples in history, and core issues of justice. Marla Brettschneider's chapter offers a study of the internationally acclaimed Afro-Caribbean writer Jamaica Kincaid who has come to represent a quintessential Caribbean woman's voice. She is also Jewish, though there is almost no mention of the basic fact of her Jewishness in the vast literature on Kincaid, nor is there any analysis of the meanings of Jewishness in her work. Brettschneider's analysis of Kincaid's work uses a Jewish lens to highlight and makes sense of distinct facets of power and resistance strategies for the colonized and those in Diaspora. Her theoretical approach shows how we might more fluidly make sense of emergent fields of study in order to place or replace the paradigm of Jewish identity as well as African and Jewish experiences globally in new ways.

Yulia Egorova's chapter provides a comparative perspective on African and African American Judaising movements by looking at the Bene Ephraim community of Madiga Dalits of Andhra Pradesh, India. Egorova demonstrates how discourses of social liberation developed in the community and from the late 1980s expressed themselves through a declared descent from the Lost Tribes of Israel. Their claims and development resonate with those of African and African American Hebraic groups and mirror rhetorical liberation strategies of other Dalit movements in India. She pays special attention to the specific practices developed by the Bene Ephraim on the ground and the differing types of engagement with the Jewish tradition they demonstrate.

Be it in Africa or the United States, the great ethnic and cultural diversity of Africa has been rendered yet more complex by participation in Christian, Islamic and other religious expressions. As they did for other religions, African Americans and Africans understood and experienced the Jewish religion, on their own terms and with significant modifications from most normative models. John L. Jackson's chapter delineates the emigration story of the African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem, a group of African Americans who left the United States for West Africa—and then

“Northeast Africa” or the modern state of Israel—in the late 1960s. Jackson demonstrates that the African Hebrew Israelites represent a complicated kind of Afrocentrism, a Hebraicised version that does (and does not) conform to certain canonized renditions of Afrocentric thinking.

Contemporary and past black Jewish identity construction is situated at an interesting crossroads which represents a double legacy: that of Black American identifying with Judaism and Jewish texts, and the real or imaginary historical contacts of Jews and/or Judaism, in ancient times, with African peoples. The essays in this book converge in offering a network of theoretical suggestions about the profound roots of African Jewish identifications and the amazing diversity that is embodied in black Jewish life. African Americans and Africans have had so many explicit and implicit exchanges with Judaism over so long a historical period and in such a vast area that a complex web has been produced. To grapple with this complexity this volume employs a variety of methodological approaches from anthropology, phenomenology, history, archaeology, linguistics, genetics and religious and cultural studies. The structure of the book is divided into three sections; each one explores a different cluster of groups or traditions. The first section examines the construction and the development of Judaic identities among some African societies in Africa. The second section explores the common themes and diverse histories linking African Judaism to History, New Archeology and Old Testament exegesis. The negotiation of Jewish identities, in the United States, India and Israel, the relationships and the “crisis” within African American Jewish congregations are the subject of the third section.

Even if the theoretical scope of *African Zion* is expansive, it was not possible to include all the areas of Africa—such as Rwanda-Burundi, Cameroon, Cape Verde Islands—and the African Diaspora, such as the West Indies, and coastal regions of Central America which share a number of profound affinities with Judaism. These topics would fill an additional volume.

In fact, this volume tries to assess out how we might more fluidly make sense of an already balkanized field of study in order to place black Jewish religious experiences globally in a discrete and satisfactory context. We hope that these considerations will stimulate future debate.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> On African Judaism see: Edith Bruder, *The Black Jews of Africa, History, Identity, Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Tudor Parfitt, *Black Jews in Africa and the Americas* (New York: Harvard University Press, 2012); Tudor Parfitt *The Lost Tribes of Israel* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2002); Tudor Parfitt and Emanuela Trevisan Semi, *Judaizing Movements: Studies in the Margins of Judaism* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> On the Bulhoek tragedy see Joan Millard, “The Bulhoek Tragedy,” *Missonalia*, <http://www.geocities.com/missonalia/bulhoek.htm> (accessed March 26 2011). On Crowdy see Arthur H. Fauset, *Black Gods of the Metropolis: Negro Religious Cults of the Urban North* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1944), 31-40; Elly Wynia, *The Church of God and Saints of Christ: The Rise of Black Jews* (New York: Garland, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> On African-American Jews see Yvonne Chireau and Nathaniel Deutsch ,eds. *Black Zion. African American Religious Encounters with Judaism* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Howard M. Brotz, *The Black Jews of Harlem* (New York: Schocken Books, 1970); Ulysses Santamaria, “Le judaïsme dans la culture négro-américaine,” in *Les Temps Modernes* 444 (July 1983): 63-64; Melville Herskovitz, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1941); Graenum Berger, *Black Jews in America: A Documentary with Commentary* (New York: Federation of Jewish Philanthropies, 1978).

<sup>4</sup> On Eldad the Danite and Prester John see Eliakim Carmoly, *Relation d’Eldad le Danite, voyageur du IXè siècle* (Paris: Dondé-Duprey, 1838); Elkan N. Adler, *Jewish Travellers: A Treasury of Travelogues from Nine Centuries* (London: Bloch Publishers, 1930); David Wasserstein, “Eldad ha-Dani and Prester John” in *Prester John, the Mongols and the Ten Lost Tribes*, ed. C. F. Beckingham and B. Hamilton (Aldershot: Variorum, 1996), 213-236. Pierre-Gustave Brunet, “La légende du Prêtre Jean,” in *Extrait des Actes de l’Académie des Sciences, Belles lettres et Arts de Bordeaux* (Bordeaux: C. Lefebvre, 1877), 1-27.

<sup>5</sup> David Chidester, *Savage Systems, Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996); Jean, and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa*. Vol.1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

<sup>6</sup> Amanda B. Spurdle, and Trefor Jenkins. “The Origins of the Lemba, ‘Black Jews’ of Southern Africa: Evidence from p12F2 and Other Y-Chromosome Markers.” *American Journal of Human Genetics* 59 (1996): 1126-1133. Mark G.Thomas, T. Parfitt, D. A. Weiss, A. Skorecki, J. A. Wilson, M. Le Roux, N.Bradman, and D. Y. Goldstein. “Y Chromosomes Travelling South: The CohenModal Haplotype and the Origins of the Lemba—the ‘Black Jews of Southern Africa.’” *American Journal of Human Genetics* 66 (2000): 674-686.





**PART ONE**

**CONSTRUCTING JEWISH  
OR HEBREW/ISRAELITE IDENTITIES  
IN AFRICA**

# CHAPTER ONE

## (DE)CONSTRUCTING BLACK JEWS

### TUDOR PARFITT

Recent times have witnessed radical changes in the conception and configuration of Jews and Judaism, as powerful racialised constructions of past centuries have been absorbed by communities throughout the world and as the rigid divisions between religious traditions have begun to crumble. Inexorably, Judaism has developed into a global construct, which touches peoples in every corner of the globe, of every color, of every faith, of every ideology, and with the advances in the technology of communication, at a faster and faster rate.

The construction or deconstruction of black Jews has a good deal to do with concepts of “race” and I must make a few observations about this problematic word. The word “race” was barely used before 1800, excessively used until the end of the Second World War and has now passed its sell-by-date. The reason for this is that in the sense it is almost always used, it is without signification. It does not signify anything in the natural world. Race is quite simply a figment of the imagination; biological differences are illusory, and belong not to the biological or physical sphere but to the realm of human culture and cultural subjectivity. The demolition of race started in academic circles at the beginning of the twentieth century with the anthropologist, Franz Boas and others and the last nail in its coffin was struck by modern genetics towards the end of the last century. Attitudes towards “race” are created and exist in the symbolic universes where human beings translate the utterly misleading facts of the physical difference of others into often-painful stereotypes and racial ideologies. In other words, like so much else, race is a social and religious construct.

In the western world the social and religious factors, which shaped the articulation and expression of race, are to be found unsurprisingly in the dominant influence on the evolution of western culture—namely the scriptures of the Judeo-Christian tradition and particularly the Hebrew Bible. Until the mid-19th century the commonly accepted western view

among even well educated people was that the various branches of mankind derived from a founder group consisting of the three sons of Noah and their wives, who thanks to Noah's famous ark were saved from the flood, while the rest of mankind perished. Shem was the father of the Semitic peoples, Ham of Africa, and Japheth of Eurasia and at different times these names were also given to language groups. This was the practically uncontested narrative of human geography until the end of the Renaissance period, when one or two isolated heretics like Paracelsus and Giordano Bruno started to evolve taxonomies of humanity based not so much on interpretation of the scriptures as on physical characteristics.

With the waning of Biblical authority during the period of the Enlightenment round the end of the eighteenth century, new racial theories unfettered but still influenced by the Biblical paradigm started to develop. For a while a connection between Ham and Africa was preserved as it was so politically and economically expedient. The Biblical curse of Ham's son was seen as subjecting his descendants—black Africans—to eternal servitude. The frequency of the use of Ham in the great debates on slavery reached its *apogée* in about 1800 when slavery was at its numeric peak and started to wane once the slave trade was banned by the British in 1807 and slavery was finally done away with completely in the United States in 1865. With its demise slavery no longer needed to be justified by the Genesis account. As the exploration and subjugation of Africa continued and as European commercial and imperial interests changed and developed, and as attitudes towards slavery softened, so an explanation for the history, or non-history, origins and relative status of different African peoples became more urgently required.<sup>1</sup>

One new idea, which was a blend of nineteenth century racial theory and Biblical exegesis was called the Hamitic Hypothesis, which argued that superior peoples—that is people of a superior “racial” composition—in the African continent, were of non-African “Hamitic” origin and that they had conquered the “negro” population at some remote point in history. The Hamitic hypothesis was conventional academic wisdom from about 1800 until around 1965.<sup>2</sup>

The Hypothesis conscripted Biblical history and what was at that time becoming known of the history of ancient Egypt in such a way as to make what they called Caucasians—another term without signification—the legitimate heirs of these histories, neatly excluding “negro” Africans from this Eurocentric framework, while preparing the ground for the conferral of a ready-made history on certain other groups of favored Africans and others.

A discourse now developed in which only the descendants of Ham's *youngest* son Canaan was considered to be black at all; it was only his offspring which populated sub-Saharan Africa and who were cursed. "Hamites" now began to refer to a variety of lighter skinned peoples who included the ancient Egyptians, Phoenicians, Canaanites, Somalis, Ethiopians and Israelites. Whatever real civilizing progress Africans had made throughout history, it was argued, was due to these foreign, invading Hamites. Thus in a distortion which had some obvious value for invading western colonists, the high points of African history were presented as belonging exclusively to its historical invaders. A paradigm was established justifying western colonial intervention in the continent and establishing the majority of Africans (the non-Hamites) as inferior, debased and worthy of subjugation. The idea that the "negro", either in the past or present, possessed any artistic or intellectual achievement was rejected. The Hamitic theory denied him forever the possibility of being in control of his own destiny. The paradigm was designed, in Homi Bhabha's phrase, "to construe the colonised as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction."<sup>3</sup>

A good deal of western investigation of the racial nature of "Hamitic" tribes was associated with establishing "sameness" between them and Europeans to bolster the theory and "difference" between Europeans and "negroes". This was a way of proposing that these superior Africans had some kind of a link no matter how tenuous, with their colonial European masters and their sacred history, and indeed with the rest of mankind, while "negroid" Africans had no such links. J.C. Prichard (1786 - 1848) the British ethnologist summed it up thus:

"Tribes having what is termed the Negro character in the most striking degree are the least civilized and are in the greatest degree remarkable for deformed countenances, projecting jaws, flat foreheads and for other Negro peculiarities and are the most savage and morally degraded. The converse of this remark is applicable to all the most civilized races. The Fulahs (and) Mandingos and others ... have, nearly European countenances and a corresponding configuration of the head."<sup>4</sup>

Edmund Dene Morel, (1873-1924) the British journalist, wrote ecstatically of the remarkable knowledge the Fula had of the Hebrew legends and of their wonderful racial characteristics:

"the straight-nosed, straight-haired, relatively thin-lipped, wiry, copper or bronze complexioned Fulani male, with his well developed cranium, and

refined extremities; and the Fulani woman, with her clear skin, her rounded breasts...”<sup>5</sup>

These “superior” peoples were often dubbed Israelites while perceived Jewish physical and other characteristics were systematically attributed to them. Elsewhere in the world from north east India to Australasia these mechanisms in a marginally different framework were systematically applied to those groups favored by colonists and missionaries who showed some cultural or religious—often imagined—similarity to the practices described in the Bible. In time these constructions were internalized and created a vast number of Judaising or Israelite communities throughout the world. In Africa there are a millions of Igbo and Tutsi as well as many others who passionately believe in their Israelite origins.

The career of the Asantehene, Osei Agyeman Prempeh II, is instructive. When the Ashanti monarchy was restored by the British in 1935 the king commissioned a book. Doubts of various sorts had been voiced about his legitimacy and in order to put the record straight he decided to prove for once and for all his inalienable right to the Golden Stool of the Ashanti, by compiling a history of his people. His purpose was to demonstrate that the power of the Golden Stool dominated the natural order of things and that this was divinely ordained. The first chapter “The First Inhabitants of the Gold Coast” stressed the Israelite origins of the Ashanti aristocracy. In a letter to the committee which had supervised the compilation of the book, Osei Agyeman Prempeh II noted:

“I know it truly to be the fact that in the ancient past Ashanti people lived by Jerusalem and removed little by little to live again to Egypt then to here... When I talked to you of it, it was said that it was the fact that it was our Noble Families of Ashanti who have travelled from far but the rest of the people were natives from here... This could be, for Nobility even up to the present day are a light colour (like red) even when most Ashantis are dark black (African-type).”

Overall, Osei Agyeman Prempeh II held to the idea of Israelite and Egyptian origins for the Ashanti and inserted this into his “History” because it clearly reinforced his view that the Ashanti elite was distinct from and superior to the people it ruled. Osei Agyeman Prempeh II wanted the traditional power structures restored so that its royal family might resume its former all-powerful role in controlling Ashanti affairs. The Hamitic hypothesis, linked in this case to Israelite history with all its religious implications proved irresistible to a Christian king keen to restore the traditional order. There could be no better way of legitimizing his rule

and his right to rule than linking himself and the elite from which he sprang to the chief actors in the sagas of western sacred history.<sup>6</sup>

In this chapter I shall briefly describe the ways in which the Hamitic Hypothesis played out in the evolution of the Beta Israel or Ethiopian Jews and the Lemba of southern Africa. The problematic which this chapter addresses is: were the *Beta Israel* and the Lemba constructed out of European myths and racialist and colonial fantasies of the “other”, in the same way as north and south American native populations, the Igbo, Ashanti, Yoruba, Tutsi, Zulu, Masai, Maori, Karen tribes and many others, or are they “authentic” historical Jewish communities, who may be viewed as descending from some ancient Israelite, Hebrew or Jewish stock? A secondary question is: does it matter?

Before proceeding, mention must be made of the work of Edward Said which speaks of the colonised “other” as the *object* of anthropology, trapped in a construct of subservience to colonial power by white Christian Europe. Said’s work and that of other post-colonial theorists has no doubt helped our better comprehension of the mechanisms of biological and cultural racism throughout the colonial project. However, Said has had little to say about the Jews—and even less to say about how Jews themselves in fact served universally as “objects”, which could reinforce biological and cultural stereotypes as well as providing useful models of essentialisation. Although the Jew is and has been, in every conceivable way, an archetypal “other” both in Europe and in parts of Asia and Africa he/she has not been the focus of the vast bulk of the work done on the “other” in the context of post colonialism. Said has argued that Jews, and by implication Zionists, are themselves involved in a neo-colonial enterprise and do not therefore qualify as a people oppressed by colonialism and do not belong to the problematic; it is also argued that Jews in addition are too central to a whole range of intellectual and cultural concerns both in Europe and the United States to be viewed as outsiders. What follows is an attempt to re-orient the discussion by describing the way in which Jews, as minorities, their religion and their language were constructed as imagined communities as an essential part of the colonial enterprise.

For hundreds of years Ethiopia was the locus *par excellence* of the Israelites-in-Africa myth and until the nineteenth century attempts were still being made to locate the Lost Tribes of Israel in and around this mountainous African kingdom. The mediaeval world buzzed with strange rumors of the Lost Tribes and other strange Judaic peoples in the mountains of Ethiopia. Abraham Farissol (c.1451-c.1525) the great Sephardi polemicist and geographer who spent most of his life in Ferrara

commented on accounts he had heard from “the black priests, who relate in detail the reality of many Jews among them (in Ethiopia).” Further information about Israelites in Ethiopia was provided by the seventeenth century Portuguese Jesuit missionary Balthazar Tellez (1595-1675) who wrote “there are still many of these Jews, whom they there call Falaxas. These still have Hebrew Bibles, and sing the Psalms very scurvily in their synagogues”. Tellez and Farissol both constructed the *Beta Israel* as Jews. Tellez claimed they had “no settled dwelling” and suggested (falsely) that they owned Hebrew texts and also spoke Hebrew “but with much corruption in the Words”. In reality, the *Beta Israel* community had no knowledge at all of Hebrew. There is no mention in any of the literature that they owned or held any Hebrew texts, of any description, but of course Jews elsewhere in the world had Hebrew texts, as Tellez knew, and knew Hebrew, and therefore in order to construct their Jewishness, Tellez made the *Beta Israel* Hebrew-speaking and singing and provided them with Hebrew books.<sup>7</sup>

For those travellers and missionaries who penetrated the kingdom, the construction of extraneous origins for some of Ethiopia’s peoples was a way of accounting for certain unexpected phenomena such as sophisticated building, complex social structures or Israelite like practices as was the case elsewhere in Africa and the world, along the lines of the Hamitic hypothesis.

When the Scots traveller James Bruce (1730 -1794) who traveled in Ethiopia between 1769 and 1774 came across the *Beta Israel* they explained “that they came with Menelik from Jerusalem” so Bruce could note “that they perfectly agree with the Abyssinians in the story of the Queen of Saba”. From as early as the sixteenth century, however, Ethiopian non-Beta Israel sources began to suggest that the *Beta Israel* had come to Ethiopia after the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans in AD 70: this may reflect a Portuguese influence on local views of Beta Israel origins. By the time the Swiss Lutheran missionary Samuel Gobat (1799-1879) visited the *Beta Israel* in 1830 there was a mixed tradition: as he put it “they do not know of what tribe they are; nor have they any adequate idea as to the period when their ancestors settled in Abyssinia. Some say that it was with Menelik, the son of Solomon; others believe that they settled in Abyssinia after the destruction by the Romans”. Gobat, however, was adamant that he knew who they were and where they were from. He wrote,

“It is generally maintained by themselves that they came over prior to the time of Solomon and Rehoboam; but notwithstanding the prevalence of this opinion, it is probable that the migration, properly so-called, did not

take place until after the destruction of Jerusalem. It is well known that the Jews swayed the scepter of dominion over Arabia, and a portion of Persia, for several ages previous to the appearance of Mohammed; but when that malignant star arose, they withered beneath its influence, and soon bowed to the Arabian yoke. But as Christian Ethiopia resisted... the Jews who resided within her borders, were screened from the powers of the destroyer, and succeeded in maintaining their political constitution; and it is affirmed that they have still preserved their religion without contamination...”

Their status as black Jews became institutionalized when perhaps at the suggestion of Joseph Wolff, the Jewish convert to Christianity, missionary and fervent seeker of the Lost Tribes, Gobat urged the London Society for the Promoting of Christianity amongst the Jews to take over the mission to the Beta Israel which it did in 1859.<sup>8</sup>

There was not exactly a stampede on the part of western Jews to go and greet their long-lost black brethren in Ethiopia. Filosseno Luzzato (1829 -1854) the erudite Italian Sephardi scholar was one of the first to take an interest when he read about them in Bruce’s *Travels* when he was a young lad. Subsequently he made contact with the Franco-Irish traveller and *savant*, Antoine d’Abbadie, who travelled in Ethiopia between 1837 and 1848, whose replies to Luzzato’s probing questions made their way into the European Jewish press including the *Jewish Chronicle* in London. Despite this, western Jews only started to show anything other than a superficial interest in them once it became known the *Beta Israel* were being targeted as Jews by the London Society.<sup>9</sup>

The *Beta Israel* certainly did not perceive themselves as Jews (*ayhud* in the Ge’ez language). They thought of themselves as Israelites. In earlier periods *ayhud* had been one of several derogatory designations for the Beta Israel by Christians, but the term was equally used to describe pagans or Christian heretics. It was never used by the *Beta Israel* themselves. Joseph Halévy (1827- 1917) the Ottoman born Jewish-French Orientalist and traveller, most famous for his remarkable journeys in the Yemen, and the first western Jew to my knowledge, to contact the *Beta Israel*, did not realize this when, in 1867, he went to Ethiopia as an emissary of the *Alliance Israélite Universelle*. At his first encounter with the *Beta Israel* he whispered in Amharic “Are you Jews?” They looked a little embarrassed but didn’t respond. Then he asked: “Are you Israelites?” and, as he wrote, “A movement of assent mingled with astonishment, proved to me that I had struck the right chord”. Jacques Faitlovitch (1881-1955) did much to consolidate a construction of the *Beta Israel* as non-Ethiopian



outsiders descended from a pre-Talmudic lost tribe of Israel which had found its way from ancient Israel to Ethiopia.

This racial-religious construction was accompanied by another racial construction which was at odds with the *Beta Israel's* account of themselves: the construction of the community as black. The color terms in Ethiopia include white for foreigners (*ferenji*), red (*qey*), black (*t'equr*) and light brown (*t'eyem*). The *Beta Israel* never considered themselves as the “racially inferior” *t'equr* but as *qey* or *t'eyem*. If you were *t'equr* the chances were that you were a slave. Faitlovitch described the Beta Israel both as Jews and black. “They have kept the flag of Judaism flying in their country” he wrote “and can proudly proclaim ‘We are black but comely’.”<sup>10</sup>

Thus from the nineteenth century Beta Israel were constructed as black Jews, who had come to Ethiopia at some time past from the land of Israel. They are still widely accepted as black Jews, of non-African origin and their “blackness” and foreignness have underpinned most discussions of the Beta Israel to this day. Once the Beta Israel rejected the appellations “Jew” and “black”, but now in Israel where they are universally known as “Ethiopian Jews”—and often as “black Jews”—they have accepted them.

Following the usual logic of the Hamitic Hypothesis “Jewish” features were soon discerned among the Beta Israel. Henry Aaron Stern (1820-1885) a German Jewish convert to Christianity who worked as a missionary to the *Beta Israel* with the London Society observed of them:

“there were some whose Jewish features no one could have mistaken who had ever seen the descendants of Abraham either in London or Berlin. Their complexion is a shade paler than that of the Abyssinians, and their eyes, although black and sparkling, are not so disproportionately large as those which characteristically mark the other occupants of the land”.<sup>11</sup>

In other words, not only did these people follow Jewish customs and the Jewish faith, they also *looked* like European, Ashkenazi Jews. A member of the *Beta Israel* community, who spent many years outside Ethiopia and who had internalized these constructions of *Beta Israel* appearance mentioned to a western researcher that the community could recognize one another by their faces and particularly by their Jewish noses. Some foreign observers, persuaded that the *Beta Israel* were Jews, thought that their skin color was temporary and that once they moved to the more temperate climate of the land of Israel it would revert to an appropriately Jewish off-white.<sup>12</sup>

Attempts to discover phenotypical features specific to the *Beta Israel* continue until modern times. In a hostile pre-review of my book *Operation*

*Moses* the president of the American Association for Ethiopian Jewry disputed my claim that the *Beta Israel* looked very much like other Ethiopians. He claimed that he had observed that “a different degree of blackness of skin characterizes the Falasha from other Ethiopian tribes... they are less African and more Mediterranean than the others—they have less frequency of African associated chromosomes”.<sup>13</sup>

In other words the same kind of process has been at work among the *Beta Israel* as pertained during the same period among many other constructed Jewish groups from Africa to Australia. We now know that the origins of the *Beta Israel* do not lie either in the Lost Tribe of Dan, as claimed by the Israeli Sephardi Chief Rabbi (or *Rishon LeTzion*) Ovadia Yosef, nor in the Jewish colony of Elephantine on the Nile, nor yet in wandering Karaites as some have claimed, but rather in the evolution of a kind of Judaic-looking faith in Ethiopia which grew out of Ethiopian Christianity. This scholarly de-construction carried out over the last three decades principally by Steve Kaplan, at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, James Quirin at Fisk University and Kay Shelemay at Harvard and since about 1999 supported most unambiguously and emphatically by geneticists, has produced a radically different perspective on *Beta Israel* history “which denies their direct links to any ancient Jewish groups, dates their emergence as a separate people to the last five hundred years, and places their evolution firmly in the context of Ethiopian history and society”.<sup>14</sup>

This body of work, which inevitably has been seen as politically incorrect in Israel, given that the *Beta Israel* are now citizens of the Jewish State and, as poorly educated newcomers, have enough problems as it is, has shown that in fact there is no “blood” connection between the *Beta Israel* and Jews elsewhere. Yet a good deal of scholarly and publicistic writing continues to maintain, along the lines of the Hamitic Hypothesis (and despite a truly impressive lack of evidence) that the *Beta Israel* were blood relatives of mainstream Jews—that they were descended from Abraham and that their origins therefore were from outside the African continent. What can be said truthfully is that for half a millennium a kind of Israelitism was indeed practiced on Ethiopian soil by indigenous Africans, they suffered as a result and when they were rescued by Israel as a “faithful tribe” from stinking camps in Sudan during the Great Ethiopian Famine of 1984—an event I had the good fortune and privilege to witness—they were the first black people ever taken out of Africa not in chains.

The historical experience of the southern African Lemba tribe has something in common with that of the *Beta Israel*. Since the beginning of

the twentieth century many Lemba have claimed to be of Israelite origin, and many Europeans have made similar claims for them, although until now these claims have been denied by most South African Jews. The Lemba claim to have come from “Sena” which they placed across the sea, somewhere in the north is similar to Hamitic Hypothesis induced traditions found among very many African ethnic groups.<sup>15</sup>

Much of the colonial, travel and early ethnographic literature on the Lemba proposes an extraneous origin. From the first weeks of colonial intervention the Lemba tribe were identified as Jews and defined in precisely the same way as so many other peoples had been before and since, and for reasons embedded in the world view of the Hamitic Hypothesis.

Within months of the arrival of white settlement in Mashonaland an English colonist noted the similarity between Lemba customs and those of the Jews. These customs he wrote “together with their lighter skin and their Jewish appearance distinctly point to the ancient impress of Idumean Jews”.<sup>16</sup>

Over the last few decades as prevailing attitudes about “race” and Africa have changed, the construction of the Lemba as a “Jewish” and non-African community, particularly given their claim to have been associated with the highly sophisticated monolithic building tradition of the Great Zimbabwe civilization—one of the glories of Black Africa situated more or less in the middle of present-day Zimbabwe—has taken on a politically incorrect character much in the same way as the contrary presentation of the *Beta Israel* as an African people has taken on a politically incorrect coloring in Israel.

It is true that white racists and white supremacists until now find the tradition of an extraneous origin for the Lemba extremely useful: in 1967 George Robert Gayre (1907-1996) the notorious editor of the racist journal *The Mankind Quarterly*, wrote a book in which he posited the connection of the Lemba with what he took to be the very ancient culture of Great Zimbabwe. He argued that the Lemba had Jewish cultural and genetic traits and that their “Armenoid” genes must have been acquired from Judaized “Sabeans” who had settled in the area thousands of years before, introducing more sophisticated technologies and culture to the region. One objective of his work—along the lines of the Hamitic Hypothesis—was to show that the indigenous Shona people had never been capable of building in stone, of creating advanced social structures, as had obviously existed at Great Zimbabwe, or of governing themselves. However, there is no evidence that “Judaized Sabeans” or Jewish “Idumeans” or any other

ancient Middle Eastern people settled in the area thousands of years before—and there is every evidence that Great Zimbabwe was actually built something less than a thousand years ago over a considerable number of centuries by local people.<sup>17</sup>

The fact that the Lemba narrative has been contaminated with racist explanations of Africa has had a number of serious consequences. One is that few scholars have taken the issue of the Lemba participation in the Great Zimbabwe civilization seriously. This was pointed out in a review of my book *Journey to the Vanished City*. The idea that the Lemba were from the Middle East “simply did not fit in” wrote the reviewer

“with the ‘Merrie Africa’ version of indigenous initiative and development that Africanists propagated in the heady days of African nationalism forty years ago. It looked too much like the racist paradigm of ‘primitive’ earthlings living in ignorance until ‘civilized’ aliens brought enlightenment. But the profession of African history is now much more self-confident, with the basic outlines of indigenous initiative and development well established. We should therefore positively welcome scholarship that seeks historical connections outside Africa, especially in Asia...”<sup>18</sup>

In many respects the modern identity of the Lemba seems to have been constructed by outside observers following the usual paradigm of the Hamitic Hypothesis. The Lemba are physically similar to their African neighbors in South Africa and Zimbabwe and (to me at any rate indistinguishable). Members of the tribe display a wide degree of color variation as do many other neighboring peoples but in general they are termed black and their appearance if one can generalize, is similar to that of other local groups. This did not prevent the travellers who ventured into Lemba areas in the past, and who thought of the Lemba as Jews or Semites, expressing the conviction as others did with respect to the Beta Israel, that the Lemba had phenotypical traits which confirmed their racial origin. One traveller described a Lemba group whose “noses are straight, and not flattened out at the base like those of the true African. Their lips, too, though broader than those of the European, are quite Caucasian when compared with the blubber excrescences carried about by the ordinary Zulu or Basuto. It was easy to believe that they were descended from some scattered remnant of the great Hebrew race.” Karl Peters—the founder of German East Africa—and later on hero of Adolf Hitler, writing of Lemba in the 1890s noted:

“How absolutely Jewish is the type of this people!” He wrote “they have faces cut exactly like those of ancient Jews who live around Aden. Also the way they wear their hair, the curls behind the ears, and the beard drawn out

in single curls, gives them the appearance of Aden—or of Polish—Jews of the good old type”.<sup>19</sup>

There is little possibility that Karl Peters really came across Lemba in the nineteenth century wearing the side locks (*peot*) worn by orthodox Ashkenazi or Yemenite Jews. Did he imagine it? Did the various aspects of Lemba life so perfectly conform with what he knew of Jews as to project upon his memory the one most obvious point of physical difference between Adeni Muslims and Jews, or between the *Ostjuden* of the time and Germans—the sidecurls?

A.A. Jaques noted in 1931 that the whites of the northern Transvaal claimed to be able to distinguish a Lemba from his features and Jacques agreed that “many Lemba have straight noses, rather fine features and an intelligent expression which distinguish them from the ordinary run of natives... One of my informants, old Mosheh, even had what might be termed a typical Jewish nose, a rare occurrence in any real Bantu”. Some of the early ethnographic works on the Lemba include profile photographs of Lemba to establish that they did indeed have “Jewish” noses. Being awarded a Jewish nose and Jewish features had its disadvantages. As Howard Jacobson points out in *Kalooki Nights*, in the general European perception “big nose bad: small nose good”.<sup>20</sup>

Constructed with big Jewish noses the Lemba were also deemed to have other Jewish qualities, some good, some bad. On the one hand as possessors of a superior blood (Jewish was considered better than black), European “look” and Caucasian features they were regularly put in a higher and more favored category than other tribes and were considered to be more trustworthy, more loyal, more hard-working and more intelligent than others.

The general racial classification in apartheid South Africa was a tripartite system of black, white and colored. The Lemba were never considered officially as “colored” but they derived certain benefits in much the same way as did colored people, from not being altogether black. It should also be stressed that by being constructed as Jews they were being inserted into a highly ambiguous racial category. European Jews may not have been black but they were racially much less desirable than Nordics or Anglo-Saxons, and Jewish immigration was not encouraged on these racial grounds. Indeed as Oren Stier has shown European Jews in South Africa were not considered by white South Africans to be white at all.<sup>21</sup>

Whites in the region of what used to be called the Transvaal in South Africa would often comment on the Lembas’ money grubbing, on their sharp business skills, on their reluctance to spend unnecessarily, on their

success, on the unusual number of Lemba who became university teachers, doctors and lawyers, viewed by them as “Jewish” professions. Some of these ideas were internalized by the Lemba themselves. In a South African compilation of “vernacular accounts” M.M. Motenda, a Lemba, observed: “The Lemba in respect of their faces and noses are well known to have been very handsome people, their noses were exactly like those of Europeans”. The Lemba were constructed as Jews and were therefore expected to have a “look” which corresponded to a Jewish stereotype. During recent fieldwork I discovered, amazingly, that in one Zimbabwe village the majority of Lemba respondents maintained that their “Jewish” nose was one of the most important things about them, one of the most important things indeed in their lives.<sup>22</sup>

No matter that outsiders usually commented on their paler skin like the Beta Israel they were always unequivocally tagged as “black Jews”. But this color designation certainly sits uneasily with the Lembas’ own view of themselves. If you ask a Lemba villager the question “who is black round here?” he will point at some Shona village far away over the hills and mutter “Ah man those Shona people up there—they are black”. However they always referred to themselves as *Varungu vakabva Sena*, “the white men who came from Sena” and frequently make fulsome allusion to the remarkable and very attractive lightness of their own skin.

My own engagement with the Lemba, resulted in a book the first edition of which connected the Lemba with the east coast of Africa. There were no written records which indicated to me anything about their ultimate origins beyond the eastern coast of the African continent. The trail, as far as I was able to determine it, stopped at the Indian Ocean. There was similarly not very much to suggest that they were of specifically Jewish origin, although there was a good deal to suggest that the religion they had practiced prior to the colonization of their areas had much in common with the religion of the ancient Israelites. Indeed their religion insofar as it was possible to reconstruct it was not entirely dissimilar to the religion of the Beta Israel prior to their Judaisation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and it was not dissimilar either to the various constructions of Israelite type pre-colonial religions throughout Africa and other parts of the world. Many aspects of their tribal practice suggested an appreciation of the concept of separation, of things, animals, people which indeed may be taken as a fundamentally Jewish religious principle. They observed a number of seemingly Semitic practices from endogamy to food taboos, a refusal to eat with other groups, a refusal to eat pork or animals which had not been ritually slaughtered, circumcision