Abstracts

From Near East to Africa

1. The search for the autochthonous Jew in Africa: N.Sloushtz, Zionism, Territorialism and the racial discourse
   Prof. Emanuela Trevisan Semi, Universita Ca' Foscari, Venezia, Italy
   A comparative analysis will be done about the construction of the "autochthonous" Jew in Africa through the writings of Slouschz and Faitlovitch. Both scholars shared similar views on the Jews of Africa who were seen not as possible converts (as opposed to their teacher Joseph Halévi's view) but always as autochthonous. It will be shown that Zionism, territorialism and pan-Hebrew ideology influenced that construction.

2. Israelite-Assyrian tradition of origin of the Yoruba
   Prof. Dierk Lange, University of Bayreuth, History Department, Germany
   Researchers claim that a number of sub-Saharan ethnic groups can be traced back to Israelite antecedents. However, in most of the cases presently debated the available evidence is insufficient to convince academic historians of the validity of these allegations. In fact, the traditions of origins put forward so far to support claims of Israelite origins are considered too vague or they are thought to have resulted from recent manipulations. In the case of the Oyo-Yoruba, the canonical tradition of origin has been recorded at the end of the nineteenth century but it has subsequently been misinterpreted on account of its own localizing tendency and of post-colonial afrocentric scholarship. A new interpretation taking into account ancient Near Eastern historical developments and local telescoping shows that the dynastic tradition of Oyo reflects in largely correct chronological order: the history of Israelite kings, the deportation of Israelites to Assyria, the history of Assyrian kings, oppression by Egyptian authorities and migration to sub-Saharan Africa. Supported by ethnographic data, these results of the comparative analysis of Yoruba and ancient Near Eastern evidence throw new light on the historical dimension of Israelite origins in Africa in a case, in which such ancestry has not yet been claimed by the people themselves.

3. Identity and Genetics: the case of the Lemba
   Prof. Tudor Parfitt, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, England
   Thirty years ago very few people had heard of the Lemba tribe of southern Africa. Their claims to a Jewish past were known to a handful of people in parts of South Africa and Zimbabwe. However today they are internationally known, and in some Jewish circles are considered to be a peripheral Jewish group. I shall consider the role that genetic studies on the tribe conducted in the 1990s and since played in the evolution of their Jewish identity, and in the way they have been viewed by others.

4. In and Out of Africa: Black Hebraic Cartographies of Belonging and Difference
   John L. Jackson, Jr. Professor of Communication and Anthropology, University of Pennsylvania, USA
   This paper examines one form of Black Jewry/Hebrewism by focusing on a group of African Americans who emigrated from the United States in the late 1960s. It analyzes this group’s journey from Chicago to Liberia, their initial stop, as well as their subsequent move to southern Israel, where they have resided for the past forty years. This transnational spiritual organization consists of satellite communities on four continents (Europe, North America, South America, and
Africa). The presentation will place this particular version of Black Hebrewism in critical conversation with other contemporary and historical revisionist projects meant to theorize African Diasporic links to Hebraic/Jewish authenticity. This presentation particularly attempts to analyze this group’s re-conceptualization of Israel as “Northeastern Africa,” a re-mapping of the region that underlines this community’s expansive development projects throughout the continent of Africa, including attempts to build larger versions of their kfar in Ghana, Benin, South Africa and Toto. This paper examines what this group’s symbolic deployments of Africa (which includes their very own travelling museum chronicling Hebrewism throughout that continent) mean for their fundamental understanding of Jewish/Hebrew identity and community.


The recently much publicized genetic results of the Lemba put the Lemba of Southern Africa in the spotlight (Thomas et al 1998; 2000; Soodyall 2010). From DNA samples, taken specifically from the Bhuba, the priestly family of the Lemba, a very close relation has emerged between them (the Bhuba) and those of the cohanim (priesthood) in Israel and all over the world. Much has been written about the Lemba, but very little about their priestly family, the Bhuba, who show 53% presence of the CMH (Cohen Modal Haplotype).

Very scanty information is available about the Bhuba specifically and we therefore need to rely heavily on oral traditions of Bhuba families collected during a recent field study mainly in the Mpumalanga Province. To my knowledge the oral traditions of the Bhuba have never been recorded in these areas before. The question is if there are any remnants of the ancient priesthood still to be found among the Bhuba? Are the Bhuba closely enough linked to ancient Israelite practices to justify calling them a paternally inherited Jewish priesthood? And what is their function in the Lemba communities today? Much of the Bhuba's supposed heritage and religio-cultural practices are preserved in their oral traditions, especially through their songs, recitations and prayers.


The present paper analyzes the twentieth-century phenomenon of the affiliation between Judaism and approximately thirty thousand Igbo people of Nigeria. Using the claim of Jewish heritage of the Igbo as a basis, the paper examines the processes and interactions operating between Europeans and Africans during the colonial era, as well as the archaeological findings on the ancient site of Igbo-Ukwu, suggesting foreign antecedents in the region before the arrival of the Portuguese in the mid-fifteenth century. This lecture tries to assess the plausibility of the existence of early trans-Saharan contacts with Jews reaching back to the pre-Roman period, which could have implemented a Jewish collective religious identity.

7. Jewishness, the Genesis of the Igbo Nation and the Israeli Factor Daniel Lis, Institute for Jewish Studies, University of Basel, Switzerland

This paper will present some recent findings drawn from doctoral research over the last five years on the Jewish identifications of Igbos from Southeastern Nigeria. Combining anthropological research amongst Igbos in Nigeria, Switzerland and Israel and with historical and contemporary sources about the Igbos the paper will discuss, if and how the State of Israel intervened, directly or indirectly in the development of an Igbo-Jewish identification. Of special interest are documents from Rabbinical Courts in Israel and Israel’s High Court.

8. Igbo Nationalism and Memories of Biafra Dr Johannes Harnischfeger, University of Frankfurt, Germany

During the Biafra war, the Igbo stood alone against the rest of the Nigerian federation and against an 'international conspiracy' of European, African and Arab countries. As victims of genocide and discrimination, 'surrounded by enemies', most Igbo have the impression that their historical experiences resemble those of the Jews, and many claim that they are actually descendants of a lost tribe of Israel. Identifying with God’s chosen people enables them to construct an ethnically exclusive form of Christianity that sets them apart from other Christians in Nigeria and in Europe who betrayed the cause of Christianity when they allied with Muslim 'jihadists' during the civil war. However, the object of Igbo identification is also the modern Israeli nation that has managed to defend its independence in a hostile environment. Israel is only half the size of Igboland and even more densely populated, yet its inhabitants have turned it into a competitive high tech society. Igbo could achieve the same if freed from their backward African environment. An independent Biafra would be a viable state like Israel.

9. West African Jewries

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Janice R. Levi, Graduate Student, Indiana University, African Studies

West African Judaism has largely been ignored in the pages of scholarship and history in comparison to Jewries in North, South, and East Africa. West Africa, historically rich with Jewish presence through migration and trade, presently possesses small pockets of Jewish communities rarely recognized within the discourse of global Judaism. However, these burgeoning communities, especially Sefwi Wiawso of Ghana, are eager to discover and preserve their heritage as well as establish a strong Jewish identity within West Africa. Examining interactions between West African Judaism and the worldwide Jewish Diaspora together with other African Jewries along with their association with the plethora of religions (including Islam) in Africa illuminates West African Jewries’ perception of their own role in relation to the greater Diaspora. In addition, the influences of various local cultures affect this expression of Judaism and the construction of their identity. Furthermore, discovering the sentiments felt by Muslims living in West Africa towards present day Jewish communities, particularly in regards to the strenuous relationship of Jews and Muslims vis-à-vis the global Palestinian/Israeli conflict helps to contextualize the dialogue involving West African Jews. These determinants facilitate West African Jews’ questions of identity and feelings of camaraderie with Jews worldwide.

10. Celebration among the Tambahoaka peoples of Madagascar
Dr Stanley Quanbeck, Madagascar and England

After attending this celebration in 1979, a group of researchers from the University of Antananarivo wrote a pamphlet describing this tradition that they refer to as "Antambahoaka Sambatra". They propose that this is only the beginning of documentation in a joint research about "Antambahoaka" society, whereby they are encouraging the study of "Sambatra" tradition among the Tambahoaka peoples, by asking "what are the possible meanings of each aspect of the customs involved in this "Sambatra", and what are the reasons each element or object used is needed in the accomplishment of this ritual? Specific questions that the researchers ask (translated from the French) are: How is the "Antambahoaka Sambatra" similar to the celebrations of circumcision in other parts of Madagascar and how is it different?
What are the possible meanings of each aspect of the customs involved in this "Sambatra" (as above)? Seventeen rites are listed in the pamphlet obtained from the Museum of Art and Archeology of Madagascar, including such rites as: Water ablution done three times, in different places; Seven-day celebration (announced by blowing of a conch shell) leading to boys entering into the ‘community’; Raising the peak of the house later dismantled after one week; Simulation of crossing over of rivers, while being pursued. To be noted is that these Malagasy researchers state: "Many questions are posed and remain, but this is our history that is revealed to us by a study of this ancient institution ("Sambatra")".

11. Defining the authentic: finding expression for the journey of Hebrew Israelite Women
Ms Esther Roniyah Stanford-Xosei (Jurisconsult, England, Guyana and Barbados) and Ms Yishibah Emunah Baht-Gavriel (Psychologist, Curator African Edenic Heritage Mobil Museum, Trinidad & Tobago, England and Israel)

The African Hebrew Israelite woman of contemporary times straddles complex worlds; one, the biblical past which has continued to define and shape the deep consciousness of women globally through the prism of Judeo-Christianity; Hebrew Israelite women who were seasoned through the exile of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and African-centred feminists who have rejected the text. There are those who have been re-awakened, re-imaged and who have applied this culture from contemporary visionary perspectives.

This paper will present a comparative analysis of two groups of women's experiences: 1. Rastafari practising women and African Hebrew Israelite women both of whom draw their spiritual and cultural values and customs principally, from the Old Testament text. The paper will locate these two groups of women within the historical timeline and social context of their evolution and consider how patriarchal and matriarchal systems have influenced, empowered or undermined their sense of identity.

12. Film, These are my Names
Ruth Mason – journalist Israel

In Ethiopia, babies are given multiple names by close relatives. Younger siblings will come up with a name of their own, for to call an older sibling by a given name is disrespectful. One's last name is one's father's first name.

When Ethiopian Jews immigrated to Israel, officials decided that the grandfather's first name would be the last name of all his descendents. And that's not the only thing that changed. As our film shows, Kenubish (they were jealous of her) became Ilana, Yeuvmert (Choice Product) became Rachel and Mequonent (Prince) became Asher. Gone were the original names and with them the
beauty, richness and connections they reflected. For each Ethiopian Jewish name reflects and contains a story, an event, a relationship – or all three. Adanech (she healed her) is so named because her ill grandmother healed when she was born. Aleli means ‘This one is mine’. His story, which highlights many aspects of Ethiopian Jewish village tradition and life, inspired the film.

Diasporas

1. Longing for Jerusalem among the Beta Israel of Ethiopia
Dr Shalva Weil, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel
Beta Israel liturgy is replete with prayers longing for Jerusalem, conceived in heavenly terms. Documentary evidence of practical steps to reach Jerusalem were taken in the nineteenth century in the aborted attempt of Abba Mahari and his following to cross the Red Sea and reach the Promised Land.

In our own lifetimes, the Beta Israel fulfilled their dream and immigrated to Zion. Literature emerging among Ethiopian Jews in Israel expresses the dissonance between heavenly and earthly Jerusalem.

It is possible that in a paradoxical manner, despite the difficulties experienced by Ethiopian Jews in integrating into Israeli society, the longing for Jerusalem among the Beta Israel may be a precedent for other ethnic groups who perceive them as successful role models.

2. “We are Israelites but not Jews”: Orientalism and Israelism in the Holiness-Pentecostal Movement and the beginnings of Black Israelite Religions in the 1890s
Dr Jacob S. Dorman, Assistant Professor, Department of History and American Studies Program, University of Kansas, USA
To date, scholars have recognized that Black Holiness churches produced many Black Israelite movements that believe that the ancient Israelites were Black and believe contemporary Africans and African Americans to be their descendents. Yet few have explored the theological bases or social contexts of such movements in the 1890s. This paper finds that Israelism was widespread throughout the Holiness movement, among believers of all races present in the turn of the century United States. Furthermore, it attributes this Christian Israelism to a strain of evangelicalism that not only sought to understand linguistic difference in Orientalist terms, but provided the impetus for the rise of the Pentecostal movement’s emphasis on speaking in tongues. By examining the social contexts of the Holiness movement in the Western Plains and Upper South, it is possible to document the move towards Hebrew Testament practices, seventh-day Sabbath observation, and other ritual aspects of Israelism that pioneers such as Bishop William Christian and Prophet William Saunders Crowdy brought into early Holiness/Pentecostal as well as Israelite churches. Because Crowdy’s Church of God and Saints of Christ spread to South Africa in 1903, this era in American Holiness Christianity proved foundational for the rise of Israelite churches in Africa.

3. Interrupting Whiteness: Hatzaad Harishon, Black Jews, and Burkean Invention
Dr Janice W. Fernheimer, Assistant Professor, University of Kentucky, USA
Hatzaad Harishon (H.H.)—a biracial non-profit organization founded by white, liberal Jews—was the first organization specifically formed to foster interaction and unity among the black and white Jewish communities in New York. H.H. emphasized “klal Yisrael” and identification with the modern nation-state of Israel to facilitate improved relations between the races. This paper shows how Hatzaad Harishon and their youth group demonstrate the successful use of what Burke terms “identification,” and unfortunately, the limits of the resolutions that such identification can achieve. H.H.’s Zionism helped create consubstantial space, both imaginatively and geographically, that connected New York’s Black and white Jews. I interpret Hatzaad Harishon’s founding and development through the mid-late 1960s as an exemplar of Burke’s identification. Unfortunately, success could only be achieved as long as black Jews conformed to the standards established by the mainstream Jewish community. While Hatzaad Harishon worked hard to “expand the scope” of Jewish peoplehood so that black faces were recognized as part of it, they could not make the next step, “Hatzaad Hasheni,” which would have allowed black Jews to participate in the other half of the dialectical process. The second step involves allowing black Jews to shape and expand what counts as legitimate Jewish culture—to allow invention and constitution to take place alongside identification. This paper argues that H.H.’s trajectory calls attention to our need to further develop Burke’s identification to allow for “inventional transcendence.”
4. Theorizing Diasporic Interstices: African Heritage Jews in the Americas
Dr Marla Brettschneider, Professor Political Philosophy University of New Hampshire, USA
The paper is based on a study of the internationally acclaimed writer Jamaica Kincaid as part of a broader work on Jewish women’s political thinking. Kincaid was raised on the small Caribbean island of Antigua and later moved to the United States. She is also Jewish and active in the Jewish community in Vermont, U.S. There is almost no mention of the basic fact of her Jewishness in the vast literature on Kincaid, nor is there any significant analysis of the meanings of Jewishness in her work.
Kincaid has come to represent a quintessential Caribbean woman’s voice. Her work stands out in any study of Africana, Caribbean and African American, and African Diaspora literature. Central themes in her work have been the ravages of colonialism and imperialism, migration and diaspora, exile and loss, global inequalities as they have played out in named locales, self exploration and family relations.
The themes in Kincaid’s work are perennial Jewish themes. Yet we immediately reach an impasse when we begin to analyse the contribution of Kincaid’s work to Jewish life and the ways that a Jewish lens deepens the impact of understanding her work in areas in which it is more often studied. Analysis of Kincaid’s work requires a theorizing of the interstices of Diasporas: African Diaspora, Jewish Diaspora, Latin American and Caribbean Diasporas, as well as the gendered nature of Diaspora and Diaspora studies.

5. “Jewish sounds from Africa”
The recordings of Leo Levi and the discovery of African Jews in Italy
Dr Gabriele Mancuso, Boston University-Center for Italian and European Studies, Padua, Italy.
The myth of the “lost tribes” played an important role in Jewish history, especially in the debate over the destiny of the Jewish people. Since the conquest of Ethiopia-Eritrea by the Italian army under Mussolini’s dictatorship, but especially after WWII, the study of African Jews (mostly Ethiopian) became the subject of scientific debate, in connection with the growing phenomenon of mass conversion to Judaism by rural communities living in the south of Italy (e.g. San Nicandro, the crypto-Jews of north Calabria).
An important contribution to the study of African and other “marginal” Jews was offered by Leo Levi (1912-1982), an accomplished ethnomusicologist, the author of an extensive Jewish ethnomusicological collection which includes a section devoted to the “African Jews”, consisting of songs recorded by Levi in Israel but also in Africa, in the former Italian African colonies from the living voices of African Jews. The aim of the paper is to present the Judeo-African materials of Levi’s collection (until today almost completely neglected), to define the socio-cultural milieu in which they were produced and to analyse them from comparative and theoretical standpoint. Excerpts will also be played.

6. Jewish liberation theology? Perspectives from India and African Hebrew Israelite groups in the USA.
Dr Yulia Egorova, Durham University, England
This paper will provide a comparative perspective on African Hebrew Israelite groups in the USA by looking at the Bene Ephraim Judaising movement of India. The community of Bene Ephraim emerged in the late 1980s among the Madiga (ex) untouchables of Andhra Pradesh who declared that they descend from the Lost Tribes of Israel. In the past five years the movement has started growing with more and more groups in Andhra Pradesh claiming the status of the Lost Tribes. At the same time, the leaders of the initial Bene Ephraim community are now seeking to make community boundaries more rigid and have modified the narrative of origin of Bene Ephraim to dissociate them from other populations on the subcontinent. The paper will compare the emergence and development of the Bene Ephraim community to those of Black Hebrews and the Lemba to contribute to discussions about the constraints and the liberatory potential of Judaising movements and about perceptions of ‘Jewish physicality’.

7. Film. The Commandment Keepers
Marlaine Glicksman, USA, filmmaker, journalist and photographer
The Commandment Keepers is a one-hour documentary work-in-progress on the Commandment Keepers Ethiopian Hebrew Congregation, a highly observant African American synagogue founded in 1919 by Rabbi Wentworth A. Matthew in Harlem, where it carries on for more than four generations later. The film is the dramatic portrait of a people caught between two often-conflicting worlds,
Black and Jewish, who continue to hang on to their beliefs despite the obstacles, in their own words, “by a thread”—and a grasp of steel. The Ethiopian Hebrew Congregation is a synagogue where greetings of “Shalom!” are heard throughout; whose members keep kosher; kiss the mezuzah; steadfastly observe the Jewish holy days and laws; speak fluent Hebrew; and wear yarmulkes and tallit. It is also a synagogue where the rabbi carries an African cane and members wear African dress. The Commandment Keepers is a story never told before: a film about faith, identity, and redemption that challenges the myth of monolithic race and culture and the unspoken assumption that skin color somehow determines spirituality. In this community’s struggle, faith is more than skin-deep.