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Book Reviews

Edith Bruder

The Black Jews of Africa: History, Religion, and Identity. Oxford University Press. 2008. 304 pp., ISBN 9780195333565, $58.00.

William F.S. Miles

Jews of Nigeria: An Afro-Judaic Odyssey. Markus Wiener Publishers. 2013. ISBN 1-558764662, $68.95/$24.95.

There are most likely two major audiences for a pair of books about black Jews in Africa. First, of course, are the scholars interested in the religions of Africa; and second, Jews interested in the idea of Jewish 'peoplehood' and what comprises Jewish identity. Indeed, the numerous 'Judaizing' groups whose assertions of Jewish identity arose in the twentieth century in more than a dozen African nations cry out for explanation. How did they come to this self-proclaimed identity, what is their theology and practice, and is there a definitive answer to the question, 'Are they Jews?' Although the numbers of Africans practicing Judaism in some form are tiny compared to the overall population, there are tens of thousands in this curious demographic, and the implications for Israel—which is currently home to 130,000 Ethiopian Jewish citizens, many of whom are struggling to adapt—are potentially significant.

Beginning in the mid-1970s, the Ethiopian Jews, who have been studied and written about abundantly, won recognition from the Israeli Rabbinate. However, the other Judaizing communities on the African continent have not come close to receiving the same acceptance or attention. Bruder's *The Black Jews of Africa* remedies that neglect and shines a wide and revealing spotlight on these unrecognized groups and how they came to construct their Jewish identity. Moreover, as she states in her introduction, their existence 'challenges existing western racial ideas on what constitutes Jewish identity and ethnicity'(5). However, Bruder concerns herself with tracing their development and describing their current communities; she does not attempt to arbitrate the challenge to the prevailing ideas of Jewish identity.

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In a different type of book, William F.S. Miles, a Northeastern University political science professor who has been visiting Nigeria since the 1970s, narrates his intense and personal encounter with the Igbo Jews of Abuja. Miles engaged them not as an academic, even though he focuses on Nigeria professionally, but as a Jew intrigued by the religious practice and self-proclaimed identity of coreligionists he was unaware of until 2008. In his anecdotal *Jews of Nigeria*, he introduces us to the people he has come to know, their individual paths to Jewish self-identification, and how religious life is practiced among the Igbo Jews (whom he has dubbed 'Jubos'). Like Bruder, Miles believes that the black Jews he writes about should give all those interested in the boundaries of the Jewish people 'something to wrestle with' (ix).

Bruder's comprehensive work began as a doctoral thesis supervised by Tudor Parfitt, a veteran scholar in this field. She examines both mythical and historical accounts of a Jewish presence in Africa from ancient to modern times. Bruder brings into sharp focus how their putative Hebraic origins were introduced to them by the European colonial powers. Her purpose is 'to review the processes and the immensely complex interactions that shaped these new religious identities'(4), and she ambitiously seeks 'to disentangle—in regions with little written history—the true from the likely and unlikely' (99).

Her book is organized into three sections. Part 1 provides a background in the common biblical tropes that contributed to the formation of ideas about Africa in ancient times, including the concept of the Lost Tribes, the land of Kush, the relationship between King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, the creation of the Great Zimbabwe, and the medieval writings of Eldad HaDani, Benjamin of Tudela, and others. Part 2 introduces the once-prevalent idea of the shared blackness of Africans and Jews. As implausible as it sounds, evidence that 'black' was a symbol for evil and otherness from Roman times to the nineteenth century is plentiful. She cites the Roman historian Tacitus, who pejoratively characterizes Jews and Africans similarly. 'What was seen as their physical ugliness—long nose, flat feet, and hairy body—was merely a component of their blackness' (46). Seventeenth-century travelers 'accepted stereotypes of Jewish racial otherness, including the belief that Jews were black-skinned' (47). Bruder introduces the Hamitic hypothesis, according to which some black groups originated 'in the north' as descendants of the biblical Ham. The theory was used to explain the discovery of African civilization and accomplishments, such as the Great Zimbabwe.

Bruder provides abundant and fascinating accounts of the ways in which Europeans consistently and creatively misinterpreted their observations of African practices. For example, Henry Flynn, stationed in the Natal in 1820 as part of the Native Affairs Commission, believed he had found practices among

Zulus that indicated their descent from the people of the Book. These include 'circumcision, rules regarding chastity, rejection of swine's flesh' and others too numerous to list (69). Influenced by the Hamitic hypothesis, Flynn concluded that the Zulu people were descendants of biblical personae and 'have been very superior to what they are at the present time" (69). In short, according to the Hamitic Hypothesis whatever is 'civilized' or laudable could not have originated in Africa itself.

Bruder also provides a cogent account of how Jewish identity was appropriated by a small but passionate cadre of African American Christians in the early twentieth century who gradually rejected Christianity, which they came to view as a religion imposed on them by white slave owners. Having been deprived of knowledge of their own history, they thought of themselves as the descendants of ancient Israelites who they believed were black. In this context, she explores the influence of Ethiopia and its small Beta Israel (House of Israel) remnant, a group that had only recently become known in the West. Influenced at the same time by the Afrocentrism of Marcus Garvey and other political theorists, black Judaism of the 1930s saw Ethiopia as a kind of African Zion.

Part 3, which comprises half the book, is where the author provides a broad-based survey of Judaizing peoples native to Africa. She gives pride of place to the stories of the Igbo of Nigeria, the Lemba of South Africa and Zimbabwe, the Abayudaya of Uganda, the House of Israel in Ghana, and even smaller self-identified communities of Jews in Mali, Cameroon, Congo, and other places. She traces the paths to constructing a Jewish identity in all their particularity since each group has its own narrative. Common threads are roots tied to the Lost Tribes, a period of Christian devotion, and favorable social and political realities. In well-documented detail, Bruder give us a vivid account of the back-story of these many surprising religious transformations and their present-day incarnations.

Noteworthy is an overlap in subject matter between Bruder's work and a book published in 2012 by her mentor, Tudor Parfitt. His *Black Jews of Africa and the Americas* (Harvard University Press), based on a series of lectures he delivered at Harvard in 2011, clearly takes aim at the same target. The difference is that Parfitt devotes more attention to the influential myths of the Lost Tribes, while Bruder's research provides a more vivid and complete picture of the practices and community life of present-day Judaizing groups in the many countries she investigates.

Miles's *Jews of Nigeria*, obviously limited in scope, is a relatively short book and conversational in tone. It narrates two visits to the Igbo—for Hanukkah in 2009 and for a bar mitzvah in 2011. Not so coincidentally, Miles learned about the Igbo from Bruder's *The Black Jews of Africa*, which he was assigned

to review for a professional journal. Interwoven with his narration, Miles presents the distinction between historicity and mythology—one of the central themes of Bruder's book, but his real interest is to give readers the 'look and feel' of Igbo religious practice and to introduce us to its leaders and practicioners. Whatever skepticism Miles may harbor about the imagined nature of the Igbo's claim of descent from the Lost Tribes is eclipsed by the sincerity and enthusiasm of their Jewish aspirations.

Two salient comments in his preface foreshadow the author's observations and attitudes. Noting the role of technology in their ability to learn about Judasim and obtain support from Israel and the United States, Miles writes, 'Jubos are probably the world's first Internet Jews' (xvi). Anticipating questions about their legitimacy, he asserts, 'Orthopraxy . . . ought to trump orthodoxy' (xviii). In his mind, the Igbo Jews' commitment and lifestyle is more relevant to their religious identity than the formal requirements of *halakha* (Jewish law).

The author's narration introduces us to his guides through the community: his driver, the Muslim-raised lawyer Abdulmalik, who as part of reclaiming Jewish roots changed his name to Pinchas ben Eliezer. His host is Habbakuk, the head of the tiny Tikvat Israel (Hope of Israel) synagogue in Abuja. Habbakuk's home of a few rooms accommodates the author along with fourteen Igbo guests, some of whom have driven an entire day to attend the bar mitzvah of his son, Hezekiah. We meet Remy Ilona, raised as a Christian, who has written a book about Igbo history from their perspective that was published by Kulanu (Kulanu.org), one of the American organizations that support this community. Through edited interviews, Miles's concluding chapter offers readers a personal glimpse into the lives of twenty Igbo men and women. In their own words, they relate their spiritual journeys, their Christian backgrounds, and the frequent hostility and rejection of friends, family and spouses prompted by their new Jewish identity.

The Black Jews of Africa and *Jews of Nigeria* are very different kinds of books, both addressing a fascinating but scarcely known 'Judaizing' of numerous African peoples. Their writing styles could not be more dissimilar. Bruder is disciplined and academic, while Miles is casual and colloquial. *The Black Jews of Africa* offers copious and informative citations and a superb bibliography (but a surprisingly scant index); *Jews of Nigeria* contains only a few citations, a selected bibliography, and no index. Nevertheless, these books are in a way a nicely matched pair because they provide complementary approaches to a relatively new field of study.

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