Homelands and Diasporas

Homelands and Diasporas:

Perspectives on Jewish Culture in the Mediterranean and Beyond

A Festschrift for
Emanuela Trevisan Semi

Edited by
Dario Miccoli,
Marcella Simoni
and Giorgia Foscarini

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing

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This book first published 2018

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-5275-0783-1
ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-0783-8

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CONTRIBUTORS

Uri Ben-Eliezer is Professor of Sociology and Chair of the Department of Sociology, University of Haifa. He is a political sociologist that deals with democracy, civil society, ethnic relations, army and society, peace and wars. Among his numerous works are a few books in English: *The Making of Israeli Militarism* (1998); *Old Conflict, New War, Israel's Policy toward the Palestinians in the Post-Cold War Era* (2012); *The Nation and War. Why is it so Difficult for the Israelis to Make Peace with the Palestinians* (forthcoming).

Yolande Cohen is a social historian specialised in women and gender history in France and Canada in the twentieth century. She holds a PhD from the École des Hautes Études en Sciences sociales, Paris and is Full Professor of Contemporary History at the Université du Québec à Montréal, as well as Past President of the Academy of Arts and Humanities of the Royal Society of Canada. She has published more than a hundred articles in academic journals and several essays. Amongst her latest work is *Femmes Philanthropes* (2010). She has also worked extensively on the question of interethnic and multifaith relations in Quebec and France, on which she published *Juifs marocains à Montréal. Témoignages d'une émigration moderne* (with Marie Berdugo Cohen and Joseph Lévy, 1987) and *Itinéraires sépharades. L'odyssée des Juifs sépharades de l'Inquisition à nos jours* (with Joseph Lévy, 1992).

Giorgia Foscarini is a PhD candidate at the Department of Asian and North African Studies, Ca' Foscari University of Venice and at the Institut des Sciences Sociales du Politique, Université Paris Nanterre. She holds a BA in Languages and culture of the Mediterranean and the Middle East (Hebrew) and an MA in International Relations from Ca' Foscari University of Venice. She has published on ultra-Orthodox women's education in Israel. Her current research focuses on memory and identity in contemporary Israel, in particular on third-generation Israelis of *mizrahi* and *ashkenazi* origin.

Ilan Greilsammer was born in France and settled in Israel in 1972. He is Professor Emeritus of Political Science and International Relations at Bar Ilan University, Tel Aviv and Head of the Department of Politics, Ashkelon Academic College. A comparative political scientist, he wrote extensively on European and Israeli politics and has been a visiting professor at many American and European universities. Among his works are the biography *Blum* (1996), the monograph *La nouvelle histoire d'Israël: essai sur une identité nationale* (1998) and others on Israeli political parties and Israeli society such as *Les communistes israéliens* (1978), *Les hommes en noir: essai sur les partis ultra-orthodoxes en Israël* (1991), *Repenser Israël* (1999) and *Religion et Etat en Israël* (2003).

Noureddine Harrami is Professor of Sociology at the Moulay Ismail University of Meknès, Morocco, where he coordinated the Department of Sociology, the Master programme in Anthropology and Sociology of Change and a research group on transational mobilities. He holds a PhD in Social Anthropology and is a member of the executive board of the Moroccan Association for Studies and Research on Migration (AMERM). His research activities and publications focus on transnational mobilities, integration of migrants, gender issues and social mobilisation. Aside from his academic work, he works with several local, national and international institutions that deal with migration and women's rigths.

Dario Miccoli is Lecturer of Modern Hebrew and Jewish Studies at Ca' Foscari University of Venice. He is the author of two books – *Histories of the Jews of Egypt: An Imagined Bourgeoisie, 1880s-1950s* (2015) and *La letteratura israeliana mizrahi* (2016) – and of several articles on the history and memory of the Jews of the Arab world and Israeli literature. He has edited *Memory and Ethnicity: Ethnic Museums in Israel and the Diaspora* (with Emanuela Trevisan Semi and Tudor Parfitt, 2013) and *Contemporary Sephardic and Mizrahi Literature: A Diaspora* (2017).

Tudor Parfitt is Distinguished Professor in the Steven J. Green School of International and Public Affairs, Florida International University, Miami. He is a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society and Emeritus Professor of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. Among his recent publications are *Black Jews in Africa and the Americas* (2013), and the edited volumes *Joining the Jewish People: New Jews and Emerging Jewish Communities in a Globalised World* (with Netanel Fisher, 2016) and *African Zion: Studies in Black Judaism* (with Edith Bruder, 2012).

Marcella Simoni is a Lecturer of History and Institutions of Asia at Ca' Foscari University of Venice. She has published two books on health and welfare during the British Mandate in Palestine, *A Healthy Nation: Zionist Health Policies in British Palestine, 1930-1939* (2010) and *At the Margins of Conflict. Social Perspectives on Arab and Jews in British Palestine 1922-1948* (2010), and with Arturo Marzano, she has co-edited *Roma e Gerusalemme. Israele nella vita politica italiana* (2010) and *Quaranta anni dopo. Confini, limiti e barriere in Israele e Palestina, 1967-2007*, (2007). She is a founding and board member of *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish Studies* and a member of the Executive Committee of the European Association of Israel Studies. Her current research interests include civil society in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, memory and trauma, cinema in the Middle East and the history of conscientious objection in Israel.

Shalva Weil is Senior Researcher at RIFE (Research Institute for Innovation in Education) at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Research Fellow in the Department of Biblical and Ancient Studies at UNISA, University of South Africa. She conducts research on migration, ethnicity, religion and gender. From 2013 to 2017, she served as Chair of the Cost Action IS1206 on "Femicide Across Europe." From 2004 to 2009, she served as the President of SOSTEJE (Society for the Study of Ethiopian Jewry). She has been the recipient of several awards for applied educational work among Ethiopian Jews in Israel and has published over a hundred articles in scientific journals and edited several books. She is the co-editor of *Beta Israel: the Jews of Ethiopia and Beyond. History, Identity and Borders* (with Emanuela Trevisan Semi, 2011).

Oren Yiftachel teaches urban studies and political geography at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Beer Sheva. His work focuses on critical understandings of the relations between space, power and identity. Yiftachel holds the Lloyd Hurst Family Chair in Urban Studies. He grew up in Israel and studied in Australian and Israeli universities. His most recent book is *Emptied Lands: the Legal Geography of Bedouins Rights* (with Kedar and Amara, Stanford, 2017). Yiftachel is an activist who has been involved in range of human rights and social justice organisations. Recently, he co-founded a new Israeli-Palestinian peace movement "Two states, one homeland."

INTRODUCTION: ACROSS AND BEYOND THE GREAT SEA

DARIO MICCOLI, MARCELLA SIMONI AND GIORGIA FOSCARINI

In the course of centuries, Jews had numerous homelands and were divided in dozens of different diasporic communities. Some of these were and are located in places far away from the biblical Land of Israel, such as the US, Latin America, Africa, India and China. Other diasporas, many of which nowadays are largely vanished, were instead very close to the ancestral Jewish homeland: think of the Jews of Syria or Iraq. For all, the Land of Israel–and, after 1948, the State of Israel–and its Mediterranean surroundings represent a familiar scenario, in which biblical memories and future hopes are located. But what is this sea all about? And where are its boundaries to be drawn?

For the French historian Fernand Braudel, the Mediterranean is "not a landscape, but innumerable landscapes. Not a sea but a succession of seas."[1] David Abulafia understands it as a space of many names: *mare nostrum*, *Mittelmeer* or, in Hebrew, *Yam ha-gadol* (Hebrew: "Great Sea.")[2] Nowadays, the Mediterranean seems to have lost much of its evocative power as a sea of encounters and dialogue, to become a divisive space, full of visible and invisible frontiers that bespeak both old and new ethno-religious and national struggles. It is true that if one looks at the Mediterranean from the point of view of classical Judaism, one of its alleged key-features–that is connectivity and the existence of social, cultural and commercial exchanges between different people of the region

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This introduction has been written collectively by the editors; specifically, Dario Miccoli is the author of pp. x-xii, Giorgia Foscarini of pp. xiii-xv and Marcella Simoni collaborated to the final revision.

[1] Fernand Braudel, "Méditerranée," in *La Méditerranée. L'espace et l'histoire*, ed. Fernand Braudel (Paris: Flammarion, 1985), 8.

[2] David Abulafia, *The Great Sea: A Human History of the Mediterranean* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), XXIII.

–does not seem to be so prominent, since a kind of particularistic identity often dominated biblical Jewish culture. Even though an element of particularism has been always present in Jewish history, early modern and modern Mediterranean Jewish societies took a more ambivalent path when it came to intercommunal and interethnic relations: one of proximity and reciprocity, of exchange and confrontation.[3] The Mediterranean and its outer ramifications–that at times include continental Europe, Africa and other territories–were for many both a homeland and a diaspora, a space of refuge and where to build a better life, but also a region of conflict and persecution.

Homelands and Diasporas understands the Mediterranean as a historical and socio-anthropological trope through which looking at a variety of Jewish experiences of dialogue and clash, exchange and enmity, migration and settlement, both inside and outside the spatial boundaries and geographical reality of the Mediterranean region.[4] The former is a point of departure, from where to start travelling through Jewish history and identity and try answering different questions that are crucial for the field of Jewish Studies in the twenty-first century.

The volume takes 'homeland' and 'diaspora' as two overarching themes piecing together contributions that, in some cases, have to do with quite different topics and different methodological perspectives. In relation to the notion of 'homeland'–intended either as the mythical and biblical Land of Israel or, later on, as one of the many empires and nation-states where Jews lived, ending with the advent of Zionism and the birth of the State of Israel–the volume looks at it as a space where Jewish identities develop and are discussed. It can be a real, physical territory or an imagined one, or in some cases take the contours of a city, a nation, a feeling of belonging or else.

Secondly, there is no need to acknowledge to what extent the 'diaspora' has been crucial in the formation of a Jewish cultural identity, both before and after the diffusion of the Zionist movement. Considering the boom in Diaspora Studies and the recent advancements of the field, it might be useful to conceive this category in a nuanced manner as "a synchronic cultural situation applicable to people who participate in a

[3] See: Seth Schwartz, *Were the Jews a Mediterranean Society? Reciprocity and Solidarity in Ancient Judaism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), esp. 21-44. Consider also the five-volume work by Shlomo D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Cairo Geniza* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967-1988).

[4] David Abulafia, "Mediterraneans," in *Rethinking the Mediterranean*, ed. William Vernon Harris (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 64-93.

doubled cultural (and frequently linguistic) location".[5] More than of one Jewish diaspora, one should perhaps talk of many diasporas, each experiencing Jewishness in its own way–so as to confirm that Jews, Amos Oz wrote, always have been "a plural noun with numerous singularities."[6] Thus, in the volume we reflect upon how different Jewish communities communicated and exchanged ideas, what kind of traditions and customs developed in Jewries far away from the ancestral homeland, and that came in contact with other religions and ethnicities; how Jews remember and express themselves in the literary arena or, finally, how the birth of the State of Israel modified the idea of diaspora itself and what consequences this has at a sociological, political and cultural level.

The organisation of the volume

This volume is divided in three parts. Part I–made of nine chapters–is a collection of essays by various scholars who have worked and researched with Emanuela Trevisan Semi, or who have been inspired by her research and intellectual travels to carry their studies further.

In the first chapter, Tudor Parfitt, linking his work to that of Emanuela Trevisan Semi on Jews and their presence in the African continent, treats the question of settlement of Jews in West Africa. In particular, he deals with Jewish influences along the coast of Africa from the sixteenth century on. The second chapter by Shalva Weil, spans over Emanuela Trevisan's interest on Ethiopian Jewry, and more specifically on the figure of Jacques Faitlovitch–one of the first scholars to research on the situation of the *Beta Israel* in Ethiopia–and then on the life of Eremias Essayas, one of his forgotten disciples. The third contribution by Yolande Cohen and Noureddine Harrami originates from yet another of Emanuela Trevisan's research path, that on the memory of the Jewish communities in North Africa, notably Morocco. Dealing with the history of a former synagogue in Meknès, this chapter sheds light on a number of interesting ethnological aspects of Jewish life in the *mellah* of Meknès in colonial and contemporary times. On the same line, dealing with the memories of Jewish communities outside Israel, the fourth chapter by Giorgia Foscarini turns to Poland, to analyse the history and activities of the Grodzka Gate as the case of a cultural institution preserving Jewish memory and material

[5] Daniel Boyarin, *A Travelling Homeland: The Babylonian Talmud as Diaspora* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 19.
[6] Amos Oz and Fania Oz-Salzberger, *Jews and Words* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 176.

cultural heritage in what once was a central corner of the Ashkenazi world. The following four chapters shift the focus from the Diaspora to the State of Israel. In the fifth chapter, Dario Miccoli discusses an Israeli rabbi and writer, Haim Sabato–born in Cairo in the 1950s and nowadays known as the 'Sephardic Agnon'–to see how the Diaspora and the Land of Israel are portrayed in his literary works. The sixth contribution, by Ilan Greilsammer, deals with the present day Israeli socio-political situation, regarded from the standpoint of the relationships between religion and secularism, in a state defined since its inception as 'Jewish'. The seventh chapter of this collection, by Marcella Simoni, follows up on another interest of Emanuela Trevisan Semi, the role of museums in processes of national identity formation in Israel or in a diasporic context. Simoni's paper on the role of toys in the formation of national identity in the 1950s and 1960s in Israel was inspired by various exhibitions at the Eretz Israel Museum and other centres in Israel. The eighth contribution by Uri Ben-Eliezer treats the case of the so-called 'new wars' as a mode of waging war in the post-Cold War era. Using the Gaza Wars as an example, Ben-Eliezer frames a new theory to explain such events, discussing the Israeli civil society as well as more traditional actors such as political leaders and institutions. Finally, the last contribution is by Oren Yiftachel who wrote a paper in collaboration with Ravit Goldhaber and Roy Nuriel. Here, they explore the relations between recognition and justice, in the context of the unresolved land and planning disputes between Bedouin Arabs and the Israeli state in the area surrounding the city of Beer Sheva, in southern Israel.

For reasons of time, diverging academic interests or family matters, not all the friends, pupils and present and former colleagues of Emanuela have been able to write a scholarly piece of research to be included in this volume on *Homelands and Diasporas*. Despite its geographical breadth, it still maintains a focus on Jewish history and Israel Studies and Emanuela Trevisan Semi's research can hardly be contained in one box, regardless of how stretched. For this reason, in Part II, the editors have collected a set of testimonies of people that, in a more informal tone, tell their personal and professional encounter, intellectual exchange, friendship and the fruitful cooperation developed in the course of the years (and decades) with Emanuela Trevisan Semi. Finally, the volume ends with Part III, that we have called 'the crop', i.e. a bibliographical appendix listing the publications of Emanuela Trevisan Semi from the journal articles published soon after her graduation in the early 1970s up until today. We are sure that the list will continue to grow even more rapidly now and we are looking forward to new exciting discoveries and debates.

For the editors and for all those that, in various ways, contributed to *Homelands and Diasporas*, this is our way to honour Emanuela's academic itinerary and her great contribution to the field of Jewish Studies. For all of us she is a colleague, a mentor, a professor and most of all a sincere friend. This volume is a collective and much heartfelt thank you for the rigorous training, the generosity and the kindness that we all received over her long career, across and beyond the shores of the Great Sea.

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PART I –

ESSAYS

CHAPTER ONE

NO WITNESS TO BEAR? THE SETTLEMENT OF JEWS ALONG THE WEST COAST OF AFRICA

TUDOR PARFITT

The interrelationship between the African continent and the Jews has been one of the important strands in the work of Emanuela Trevisan. In this paper I should like to examine the little studied question of the settlement of Jews in west Africa. Following the persecution of Jews in the Iberian Peninsula it is well known that the remarkable energy of New Christians - whether as Judaisers, committed Christians or agnostics-played a major role in the Iberian conquest and transformation of the territories brought within an European orbit at the end of the fifteenth century. Their role in the Americas, the Ottoman Empire, India and Europe has been well documented. But the presence and impact of Spanish and Portuguese Jews in Africa over time has been somewhat neglected. The recent work of Peter Mark and José da Silva Horta, Kagan and Morgan, among other scholars has begun to rectify this with respect mainly to the Senegal coast.[1]

Since the appearance of the work of these and other scholars the broad consensus has been that the only Jewish communities to have established themselves in sub-Saharan Africa in early modern times were these small Sephardi-African communities of Senegal's *Petite Côte,* a stretch of coastline

[1] Tobias Green, "Further Considerations on the Sephardim of the Petite Côte," *History in Africa*, 32 (2005):165-83. See also: Richard L. Kagan and Philip D. Morgan, *Atlantic Diasporas: Jews, Conversos and Crypto-Jews in the Age of Mercantilism 1500-1800* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009); Mark Peter and José da Silva Horta, *The Forgotten Diaspora: Jewish Communities in West Africa and the Making of the Atlantic World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Daniel Lis, *Jewish Identity Among The Igbo Of Nigeria: Israel's Lost Tribe and The Question of Belonging in the Jewish State* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2015).

south of Dakar. By the 1660s, according to the Cape Verdean merchant Lemos Coelho, Jewish identity was no longer a feature of the Luso-African descendants of the communities of the *Petite Côte*. "Today" he wrote "by God's mercy these ports are free from this wicked people [the Jews] and there are only some *mestiços*, their children, who in my time have been reduced to the Catholic religion."[2]

As far as anyone knows with the disappearance of these communities of the *Petite Côte* there were no Jewish communities anywhere else along the whole west African coast. A couple of hundred years after Lemos Coelho's unpleasant comment, Edward Wilmot Blyden (1832-1912) the Americo-Liberian writer and diplomat noted that "the great body of the "Dark Continent" has been apparently overlooked by the Jews.... There is not, to my knowledge, a single synagogue in West Africa along three thousand miles of coast, and probably not two dozen representatives of God's chosen people in that whole extent of country—not a Jewish institution of any kind—either for commercial, religious or educational purposes. Have the Jews no witness to bear in inter-tropical Africa?"[3]

The existence in modern times of Judaising movements or of groups with some apparently Judaic characteristics in sub-Saharan Africa, has usually been attributed not to the influence of any incursions of actual Jews or *conversos* such as the ones referred to by Coelho, but to the activity of European colonists and missionaries, who 'constructed' such communities sometimes as an exercise in comparative religion on the colonial frontier and more recently to the agency of modern forms of communication, such as the Internet.[4] However, as we shall see, traces of Portuguese and Spanish Jews who had fled the Inquisition may be found in various parts of West Africa until very much later than the mid seventeenth century and their influence on the local population and therefore perhaps on contemporary Judaic manifestations may need to be reconsidered.

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[2] Richard L. Kagan and Philip D. Morgan, *Atlantic Diasporas*.

[3] Hollis R. Lynch, ed., *Black Spokesman: Selected Published Writings of Edward Wilmot* (London: Frank Cass and Co, 1971).

[4] See: Daniel Lis, *Jewish Identity Among The Igbo Of Nigeria: Israel's Lost Tribe and The Question of Belonging in the Jewish State* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2015); David Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996); Edith Bruder, *The Black Jews of Africa: History, Religion, Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Tudor Parfitt, *The Lost Tribes of Israel: the History of a Myth* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2002); Id., *Black Jews in Africa and the Americas* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013); Mark Peter and Josè da Silva Horta, *The Forgotten Diaspora*.

Let us first take a look at what is known of possible Jewish influences along the west coast of Africa starting in the sixteenth century. As we have seen, groups of Sephardi origin along the Senegal coast were almost from the start mixed Afro-Judaic communities. By the middle of the sixteenth century some knowledge of these black Jewish communities was widespread throughout the Portuguese-speaking world. No less a figure than the archbishop of distant Goa, Dom Gaspar de Leao, wrote about black Jews along the coast of Africa. In his introduction to a polemical anti-Jewish work written around 1565, some five years after the establishment of the Inquisition in Goa, he included a general denunciation of Jews who had rejected the Christian message. He wrote: "Judaism is an illness, one that lasted 2,000 years and claimed 2,000 million souls, and had come about because the Jews had originally refused remedy from the hand of the ultimate *médico*, Jesus Christ." This "illness" which afflicted the Jews had the effect that wherever "they have lived they have been cast down and rejected so that even the black Jews of Guinea suffer this curse."[5] How does one understand this? What he no doubt meant is that even those Jews who had escaped the clutches of the Inquisition and had established themselves safely in Guinea, as Jews, and who even had the support of the local authorities, were not as well off as they imagined and in any event could serve as a reminder to the faithful of the consequences of rejecting Christ and could be sure that the curse would follow them. Whatever is implied by this reference it seems as if by the 1560s the black Jews of Guinea had become a byword for Jews who despite everything had survived Christian attempts to stamp them out: even the black Jews of Guinea. Was Dom Gaspar referring to the well-known communities of la Petite Côte which is situated rather to the north of what was considered Guinea, or was he referring to some other community further down the coast in the vast area known as Guinea or South Guinea which stretched as far as Angola?

The presence of isolated Jews of different sorts further down the west coast of Africa far from la Petite Côte is indeed attested in subsequent years by a number of western travellers. John Ogilby (1600-1676) the English translator and publisher, expressed what was known at the time of the coast of Guinea: "Many Jews also are scattered over this region; some Natives, boasting themselves of Abraham's seed, inhabiting both sides of

[5] Ora Limor and Guy Stroumsa, eds., *Contra Iudaeos: Ancient and Medieval Polemics Between Christians and* Jews (Tubingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1996).

the River Niger: Others are Asian strangers." He meant simply that there were African Jews as well as lighter colored Jews living along the Niger.[6]

Reflecting on the nature of Afro-Judaic communities and how they evolved over the next century Mark and da Silva Horta speak a good deal of 'syncretism' although this is a term which is only rarely used these days by scholars of religion. Undoubtedly among the Africans "boasting themselves of Abraham's seed" there was a probably unconscious merging of traditions. One possible example of an individual of mixed tradition was spotted by a French traveller Nicolas Villault de Bellefond who undertook one of the first voyages on behalf of the French West India Company in 1666. He sailed down the Guinea Coast from the Senegal to the Gold Coast, touching at many points. An account of his voyage, with descriptions of the places visited, was published on his return, and soon afterwards translated into English. He narrowly survived a perilous crossing, and as his boatman was pulling towards the shore the latter muttered in relief: "Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." Mark and da Silva Horta devote a considerable amount of space to this pious invocation of the patriarchs, which the boatman termed a "fetish." Was this a trace of some Judaic past or influence? Perhaps indeed it was. Similarly, around 1700 we have a description of some black Portuguese inhabitants south of today's Senegal who appear to be in part descendants of Jews or New Christians, perhaps of the communities of La Petite Côte. We hear that in the Kingdom of Barra was to be found

> a black nation which speaks some Portuguese. They build better than the Negroes…According to Labat, the greater Part of these Portuguese have no more Title to the Name of Christians, than of Whites: For, he says, only some few of them are baptised, whose Christianity wholly consists in wearing a great Chaplet about their Neck, a very long Sword by their Side, a Mantle if they can get one, a Hat, a Shirt, and a Poniard. They are very ignorant profligate abhorred by the real Christians, and despised by the Mohammedans who look upon them as People of no Religion; because it is well known that they never pray, but when they are with the Marabouts, and never go to the Christian Church, but about Business: However they are a very stout People, use firearms well, are very ready and enterprising in Business. They serve as factors up the river for the French.…. But in Truth they are…. a dissolute Race squandering away upon Women and Wine, not only all they get themselves, but even what belongs to their Employers… We shall conclude our account of them with a Passage from

[6] John Ogilby, *Africa: being an accurate description of the regions of Aegypt, Barbary, Libya, and Billedulgerid, London, 1670* (Ann Arbor: Text Creation Partnership, 2011-2012).

> le Maire; who says 'they are partly Jews, partly Christians: That they generally carry a Large pair of Beads, are great Cheats, very malicious; and, in short, have all the Vices of the Portugueze, without any of their good Qualities.[7]

In the same year an English observer noted that on the Island of Bissau there were suspicions that the "Negrish Portuguese" were of Jewish origin:

> They have no Hogs, neither the Portuguese nor Negroes caring to breed them. It can proceed from no religious Principle in the latter, who are neither Jews nor Mohammedans; but what shall we think of the former?[8]

In the early modern period, there was something of a consensus that black Jews inhabited a number of localities along the West African coast as well as the interior. This consensus had already been reached by the Portuguese who imagined black Jews to be living in Angola, frequently accusing local circumcised males of being Jews–even though circumcision was universally practiced by the local Angolan gentile population.

In fact, for the Portuguese, as for other Europeans, there was a powerful sense that there were Jewish polities representing the Lost Tribes of Israel in the African interior. In 1830, for instance, a religious journal noted:

> Africa, therefore, presents the only remaining likely place: and the advocates for the existence of the Ten Tribes very confidently maintain that they are enclosed in the interior of that unexplored country.[9]

The widespread nature of this discourse and its continuing relevance over time may be adduced from the fact that when the British were planning a first expedition up the Niger in 1842 to the unknown interior, two London rabbis asked the expedition leaders to take with them letters, in Hebrew and English, which they were to hand to the spiritual leaders of any Jewish communities the Expedition might encounter along the banks

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[7] John Pinkerton, *A New General Collection of Voyages and Travels digested by John Pinkerton* (Longman: Hurst, Reese and Orme, 1811).

[8] Ibid.

[9] Littel, *The Religious Magazine; Or, Spirit of the Foreign Theological Journals and Reviews*, (Philadelphia: E. Littel, 1830); see also: Edith Bruder, *The Black Jews of Africa: History, Religion, Identity,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Tudor Parfitt, *The Lost Tribes of Israel: the History of a Myth,* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2002); Tudor Parfitt, *Black Jews in Africa and the Americas* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).

of the Niger. A more sober note with respect to the coast of Loango, just north of Angola, was struck by the missionary John Clarke who wrote a very informative little book on what was known at the time of the languages and dialects of Africa as well as the people and customs of the interior. He mentioned the town of Bonali in Loango which

> contains 15,000 inhabitants. Many slaves from Majomba and Quibangua, pass through this country to be sent to Cuba and the Brazils. Oldendorp speaks of black Jews being in this part of Africa; but no confirmation of this has been met with. The practices common in many parts of Africa, are those of sacrificing goats and sheep, making cuttings for the dead, circumcision, and the trial drink; and these do not particularly belong to the customs of the Jews.[10]

Jews along the coast like Portuguese Christians had close relationships with Africans living near their trading posts and, as we have seen, they took African wives and concubines. One of the Jews we know to have had initiated relations with a Wolof woman on the west coast was Manuel, the son of the spiritual head of the community of Porto d'Ale, Jacob Peregrino, who was accused of sleeping with one of the daughters of the Wolof king.[11]

Not only did Portuguese take local women, they also sometimes adopted local dress. In 1619 there was a case where inquisitorial authority was brought to bear on a man born in Malacca and now living in Caccheu, Guinea-Bissau by the name of Manoel da Silva. He was arrested and taken to the Cape Verde Islands and thrown into jail. The charge against him was that he had been seen in Bichangor today's Ziguinchor in Senegal dressed like a local black–*como negra da terra*–wearing rings through his nose and a boubou. Da Silva claimed to be a Christian, and he may well have been, in any event there was no other evidence against him other than he had 'gone native'. Reading between the lines it might suggest that Jews and New Christians were even by this time prone to adopt the garb and habits of the local population and this in itself was sufficient to attract the unwanted attentions of the Holy Office should they fall into its clutches.[12] As they adopted local dress they also in time, in some cases, embraced local beliefs. In this way, the religious practices of Jews and Africans interacted symbiotically in the creation of religious practices analogous to those created by the fusion of Christianity and African religions elsewhere

[10] John Clarke, *Specimen of Dialects: Short Vocabularies of Languages: and notes of countries & customs in Africa* (London: B.L. Green, 1849).
[11] Mark Peter and J. da Silva Horta, *The Forgotten Diaspora*.
[12] Tobias Green, "Further Considerations on the Sephardim of the Petite Côte."

in Africa. Not very much is known of these new religious movements – indeed Judaic religious movements of this sort worldwide require more research. These dislocated people with such traumatic histories on the contested frontier between Africa and colonial interventions eventually in many cases lost contact with the Jews of the world and sought cultural reassurance in the religious and social landscape, which surrounded them. Little is understood of this process.

Perhaps a further glimpse of sorts may be afforded from a source describing New Christians and the Capuchins' struggle against an elitist black secret order called the Kimpasi even further south in Angola. The Kimpasi used a cross-like sign in their rituals. Girolamo da Montesarchio, Capuchin missionary to the Kongo between 1648 and 1668, observed, in puzzlement, that "the members of the [Kimpasi] society had at the entrance of their meeting place a great portico with the sacred sign of the cross painted in diverse colors." Montesarchio's colleague and contemporary Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi also observed the cross and noted: "The devil had taught [the Kimpasi initiates] that to entice New Christians, . . . they should paint on their idols the venerable sign of the cross . . . so as to hide their pernicious sentiments and their sacrilegious impiety." "One would not believe," he lamented, "how many people were seduced by this ruse."[13] Is this an indication of *anusim*, in the spiritual dislocation of having been forced to give up one religion in favour of an another, and through acculturation groping in the alienating circumstances of West Africa towards a religious manifestation which was spiritually familiar– the cross-yet thoroughly African?

The descendants of these Jews and other Portuguese *émigrés*, of Cape Verde islanders, and of West Africans "developed a culture that was itself a synthesis of African and European elements," which was despised by the Portuguese.[14] The Jewish element of this mixed population–which in some places remained a discrete and visible element-seems in others possibly to have been absorbed by the host society.

There are then numerous references after the seventeenth century to black Jews in various places in West Africa. One of these communities, while being little-known or not at all known today, even by specialists in the field of African Judaic studies, was to exercise a profound fascination on western thinkers and travelers for hundreds of years. This strangely unremarked group was influential not so much for what we know about it, because, in truth, we know little about it, but for what it represented for

[13] Cécile Fromont, *The art of conversion: Christian Visual Culture in the Kingdom of Kongo* (Williamsburg: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014).
[14] Ibid.

western thinkers for a very considerable time and what it continued to signify in Europe until present times. There is evidence that there were black Jews along the coast of what is today the Republic of Congo, perhaps of Iberian origin, concentrated on the Vili Kingdom of Loango, between the Equator and the mouth of the Congo. The Kingdom of Loango was a powerful, trading centralized pre-colonial African state which survived until the nineteenth century. The Kingdom of Loango had a number of well-constructed towns, including the important walled trading town of Loango itself. The Maloango, Loango's ruler, played the competing trading nations (specifically the Portuguese and Dutch) against each other and Vili middlemen operated as brokers between local traders and European ship captains. This led to great fortunes being made much of which was in the hands of African nobles.[15]

As we have seen there was a sense in mediaeval Europe that the interior of Africa was peopled in part by Jews in the form of the Lost Tribes of Israel and this was particularly the case in the West African hinterland. It appears however that a specific connection had also existed for many centuries between the Loango coastline and Jews. Some fifteenth century European maps designated the coast near Loango "the Gulf of the Jews" (*golfo do judeus* or *golfos dos judeos*). Speaking of the great voyages of the explorer Diogo Cão (c.1452-c.1486), the Anglo-German geographer Ernst Georg Ravenstein (1834-1913) speculated: "It may be presumed that Cão, in the course of this second voyage, gained a fuller knowledge of the coast first discovered by him to the north of the Congo. He may thus have visited and named the bay called *Golfo do Judeus*, the Jews' Bay of old maps, either because there was a Jew on board his vessel, or, what is less likely, because he was struck with the Jewish physiognomy of some of the natives." In addition, Martin Behaim's 1492 Globe, the famous Erdapfel (Earth Apple) now in Nuremberg, calls the bay the *Golfo de Judeo* and there is some speculation that Jews might have been exiled here following the persecutions of Jews in Portugal in 1487.[16] The first reference to a black Jewish community in Loango is much later and comes from the pen of Christian Georg Andreas Oldendorp (1721–1787) the

[15] Phyllis M. Martin, *The External Trade of the Loango Coast 1576-1870* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972).

[16] Ernest George Ravenstein, *The Voyages of Diogo Cão and Bartholomeu Dias, 1482-88* (London: W. Clowes and Sons, Limited, 1900); Barry L. Stiefel, *Jewish Sanctuary in the Atlantic World: A Social and Architectural History*, (Williamsburg: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014); Heinz Edgar Kiewe, "Nigerian Sculpture of a Jewish Trader," *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, 44/2 (1953): 162-68.

evangelical German theologian who in 1767 was sent to the Danish colonial possessions in the West Indies to write a report on the results of the mission of the Moravian Brethren in the islands. He worked hard and meticulously and produced a lengthy manuscript only a third of which was initially published. The resulting work was published in 1777.

In his book he gave a good deal of detailed and credible information about Africa based on the testimony of the slaves he interviewed. His was the first written account, for instance, of the Igbo people. Among other things he mentioned the existence of a black Jewish community in Loango. According to him Jews had been expelled from São Tomé and it was from these banished Jews that "the black Portuguese and the black Jews of Loango, who were despised even by the local black population, were descended."[17] Oldendorp's informant gave further detail. The Jews were so despised by the Negroes

> that they will not eat with them. They have their own burial ground, which is located far from the dwellings of the Negroes. Their graves are of masonry, and figures of snakes, lizards and the like are painted on them by those who bury the body. This appears ridiculous to the Negroes. Since such paintings are so dissimilar to Jewish practices, the assumption is, perhaps not improbably, that the writing, or letters, on the Jewish graves appeared to the 'Negroes' to be pictures of snakes, lizards, and so forth.[18]

Of course the fact that these Jews did not eat with the local population is open to other interpretations than the refusal of "the Negroes" to eat with them. Was there any connection between these curious Jews mentioned by Oldendorp's observant slave and the Jewish connections along the Loango coast suggested by some cartographers and geographers some three centuries before?

After Oldendorp's revelation the Jewish community did not exactly explode with joy at the discovery of a new branch of the people of Israel. No Jew to my knowledge went to discover the inner secrets of this remote community. A hundred years after Oldendorp's book, during the 1873 German expedition to the Loango coast, Adolf Bastian (1826 – 1905), the polymath best known for his contributions to the development of ethnography, and a member of the expedition, seems to have considered

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[17] Christian Georg Andreas Oldendorp, *Geschichte der Mission der evangelischen Brüder auf den caraibischen Inseln S. Thomas, S. Croix und S. Jan. Herausgegeben Durch Johann Jakob Bossart. Mit Sieben Kupfertafeln* (Barby: Bey C. F. Laux, und in Leipzig in Commission bey Weidmanns Erben und Reich, 1777).

[18] Ibid.

that there was indeed some connection between the ancient rumours of a Jewish population on the Loango coast and Oldendorp's community. He noted that in the "land of the Bramas" on the Loango coast was to be found the place referred to by earlier geographers as the "Golfo de Judeos." This is where, as he put it "the villages of the Mavumbu or so-called Judeos" were still to be found in his day.[19] So had a Jewish community persisted for some three hundred years without any description of it reaching the Jewish world and without any known communication between the community and Jews elsewhere? After Bastian's visit to the Loango coast- although the community was frequently mentioned by nineteenth and early twentieth century scholars-no-one else, to my knowledge, went to visit the community and its later fate is unrecorded. Further north in Senegal and elsewhere the ancient Jewish communities seem to have disappeared almost without a trace. Is it fanciful to imagine that the Bani Israil community of eastern Senegal, now practicing Muslims, referred to in an article by Cnaan Liphshiz reported in the Jewish Telegraphic Agency on May 23, 2013 refers to the descendants of these people?

What traces are left of the black Jews of Loango? Today there are Judaising movements in neighboring Gabon. If there are any connections between these movements and the black Jews of Loango is currently unknown and is a question that requires further research.

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[19] Adolf Bastian, *Die deutsche Expedition an der Loango-Küste: nebst älteren Nachrichten über die zu erforschenenden Länder* (Jena: Hermann Costenoble, 1874-1875).

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CHAPTER TWO

ERMIAS ESSAYAS: A 'FORGOTTEN' ETHIOPIAN JEW IN JERUSALEM

SHALVA WEIL

Crossroads

My association with Emanuela Trevisan Semi has spanned over thirty years. It is confined to her work on Ethiopian Jewry, in general, and focuses on Dr. Jacques Faitlovitch's pupils, in particular. Dr. Jacques Faitlovitch (1881-1955), a student of Semitic languages at the Sorbonne under Prof. Joseph Halevy, left Paris under the sponsorship of Baron Edmond de Rothschild for his first expedition to Ethiopia in 1904.[1] During this visit, he surveyed the situation of the Beta Israel in Ethiopia and was perturbed by the Christian missionary influence on the group then known as the *Falashas*.[2] In order to counter this activity, he decided upon a plan of action. Over the course of thirty years, Dr. Faitlovich brought out of Ethiopia twenty-five young men,[3] whom he 'planted' in different Jewish

[1] Jacques Faitlovich, *Notes d'un Voyage Chez les Falachas (Juifs d'Abyssinie)* (Paris: Leroux, 1905).

[2] The Jews of Ethiopia also called themselves "Beta Israel." I use the designation "Falasha" advisedly in the knowledge that today the term is stigmatic. However, in a historical context, and when I quote from letters from the era, I do not wish to change what people said and wrote.

[3] Faitlovich, *Notes d'un Voyage Chez les Falachas*. In 1962, Richard Pankhurst published a seminal work on the foundations of education, printing, books, and literacy in Ethiopia, in which he mentioned for the first time a relatively large group of 22 Beta Israel pupils who had studied abroad [Richard Pankhurst, "The Foundations of Education, Printing, Newspapers, Book Production, Libraries and Literacy in Ethiopia," *Ethiopian Observer* 6, no. 3 (1962): 241–90.] When I first met Taddesse Yaacov in Addis Abeba in 1986 [for his biography, see Shalva Weil,

communities in Palestine, Europe and Egypt: the first two visits are documented by Faitlovitch himself.[4] Due to the Italian Fascist occupation of Ethiopia, Faitlovich was prevented from travelling to Ethiopia in 1935, and this brought an end to his visits. Faitlovitch's aim was to promote and implement educational projects among the Beta Israel, a 'lost' tribe, and bring them in line with world Jewry. He succeeded in establishing a school for the Beta Israel in Dembea in 1913, which shut down and was transformed into the Addis Abeba school for the *Falashas* in 1923.[5] He appointed Taamrat Emmanuel as the principal of the school[6] until the school was closed by Fascist forces.[7] In practice, only few, if any, of the boys whom Faitlovitch brought to Europe fulfilled his dream.

After Operation Moses in 1984-1985, both Emanuela and I independently embarked upon personal courses of study to document the trajectories of Dr. Faitlovitch and his pupils. Our paths crossed at the conferences of the Society for the Study of Ethiopian Jewry (SOSTEJE), at which we (and others) presented on different Beta Israel students, who had lived outside Ethiopia. In 1993, Emanuela was elected President of SOSTEJE.[8] I attended my first international congress on Ethiopian Jews organised by Emanuela in Venice, and quickly became involved with this organisation. When she resigned in 2004 at the SOSTEJE conference in Addis Abeba, I took over as President.[9]

In the mid-1990s, Emanuela and I discussed the division of labour of the research into Dr. Faitlovitch and his pupils. I had published an ode that

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"The Life and Death of Solomon Isaac," in *The Beta Israel in Ethiopia and Israel* edited by Tudor Parfitt and Emanuela Trevisan Semi (Surrey: Curzon, 1999), 40–9] we managed to compile an exhaustive list of 25 pupils.

[4]Jacques Faitlovich, *Quer durch Abessinien: Meine zweite Reise zu den Falaschas* (Berlin: Poppelauer, 1910).

[5] Emanuela Trevisan Semi, "The Educational Activity of Jacques Faitlovich in Ethiopia (1904-1924)," *Pe'amim* 58 (1994): 98–103 [Hebrew].

[6] Emanuela Trevisan Semi, *L'Epistolario di Taamrat Emmanuel: Un Intellettuale Ebreo d''Ethiopia Nella Prima Meta del XX Secolo* (Torino: L'Harmattan Italia, 2000).

[7] Yitzchak Grinfeld, "The Hebrew School in Addis Abeba at the Beginning of the Italian Occupation (1936-7)," *Dor Le'Dor* 5 (1992): 51–84 [Hebrew].

[8] SOSTEJE was founded at Yarnton, Oxford University in 1991 by Mr. David Kessler and Prof. Alan Crown.

[9] I acted as President of SOSTEJE from 2004-2009, and organized several international conferences on Ethiopian Jews. In 2009, Gadi Ben Ezer was elected Chair of the Israeli branch of SOSTEJE, and the international organization of SOSTEJE was effectively disbanded. There has never been an international conference on Ethiopian Jews outside Israel since that date.

the Ethiopian Jews had written and sung on the death of Dr. Faitlovitch in Tel Aviv in 1955 in the village of Ambober,[10] but it was Emanuela who later provided insights into the complex personality of Jacques Faitlovitch and his universal contacts that nobody before or after her has succeeded in doing.[11] By a 'ladies' agreement,' we divided up the study of Dr. Faitlovitch's pupils, which we had begun in the 1980s, carefully pointing out that there had been and were several other players in the arena. Ullendorff, for example, had published two letters from Taamrat Emmanuel to "Al'Azar Desta" (sic).[12] This was none other than Hailu Desta, who had spent many days in my house in Jerusalem prior to his death in the late 1980s.[13] Each Beta Israel pupil educated in Europe had an individual personality and unique story; all experienced a complete metamorphosis as a result of their contact with a new non-Ethiopian culture. Some died in Europe; others died on their way back or upon their return to Ethiopia. Most who stayed alive played out the conflict for the rest of their lives between their Ethiopian and Jewish identities.

Emanuela often concentrated on the students who had studied in Italy, such as Hizkiyahu Finas,[14] while I focused on students who studied in Palestine, England, or even in Egypt.[15] Notwithstanding, Emanuela also touched upon the biography of Makonnen Levi, who studied in England

[10] Shalva Weil, "An Elegy in Amharic on Dr Faitlovich," *Pe'amim* 33 (1987): 125–127 [Hebrew].

[11] Emanuela Trevisan Semi, "Conversion and Judaisation: The 'Lost Tribes'Committees at the Birth of the Jewish State," in *Judaising Movements: Studies at the Margins of Judaism*, edited by Tudor Parfitt and Emanuela Trevisan Semi (London and New York: Routledge, 2002); Ead., *Jacques Faitlovich and the Jews of Ethiopia* (London and Portland, OR: Vallentine Mitchell, 2007) and Ead., "East and West through the Conversations between Jacques Faitlovitch and Farid Kassab," in *Beta Israel: The Jews of Ethiopia and Beyond*, edited by Emanuela Trevisan Semi and Shalva Weil, 45–56, (Venice: Cafoscarina, 2011).

[12] Edward Ullendorff, "Two Amharic Letters by the Falasha Leader Taamrat Emmanuel," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 35 (1986/7): 192–200.

[13] Taamrat Emmanuel, in his writings, and in turn Ullendorff, utilized the Hebrew name Elazar that Dr. Faitlovitch had bestowed upon Hailu Desta in Germany.

[14] Trevisan Semi, "From Wolleqa to Florence," 15–39.

[15] Shalva Weil, "In Memoriam: Yona Bogale: One of the Leaders of the Beta Israel," *Pe'amim* 33 (1987): 125–27 [Hebrew]; Ead., "The Life and Death of Solomon Isaac." See Ead., "Abraham Adgeh: The Perfect English Gentleman," in *Ethiopian Jewry in Historical and Contemporary Times*, ed. Tudor Parfitt and Emanuela Trevisan Semi (London: Curzon, 2005), 101–11; see also Ead., "Taddesse Yaqob of Cairo and Addis Abeba," *International Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 2, no. 1–2 (2006): 233–43.