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ISRAEL AS AFRICA, AFRICA AS ISRAEL: “DIVINE GEOGRAPHY” IN THE PERSONAL NARRATIVES AND COMMUNITY IDENTITY OF THE BLACK HEBREW ISRAELITES

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A consideration of how identity and knowledge are shaped and played out within the Black Hebrew Israelite Community in Dimona, Israel, this article focuses on the Black Hebrews' redrawn map of Africa as their key legitimating and motivational symbol. It presents the “Divine Geography” of this map as a powerful counter-hegemonic strategy for bringing what Foucault has called “subjugated knowledge” out into the open and converting an idea into practical action. Based on participant-observation, as well as life-history and focused interviews with Community members, the analysis intertwines narratives and observations to show how the Black Hebrews have moved beyond resisting racism and an unsatisfying identity in America to building their own culture in Israel-as-Africa [Black Hebrews, Israel, African-Americans, identity, resistance]

Ask any Israeli on which continent Israel is located and he will tell you, “Asia.” Ask any Israeli to which area of the world Israel belongs, and she will say, “the Middle East.” Search for the State of Israel in any World Atlas, and you will find it snuggled into the southwest bulge on maps of Asia, and as a narrow strip hugging the easternmost part of the Mediterranean Sea on maps of the Middle East. In the mass media Israel’s geopolitical existence as a focal entity in the Middle East is proclaimed and confirmed nightly by CNN and the BBC, and through hundreds of local and national broadcasts. While Israel’s territorial boundaries may be contested and subject to negotiation (as is clear from the maps published in atlases and displayed in news programs that shade Gaza, the West Bank, and the Golan Heights in a different pattern from that of Israel proper), its location in the Middle Eastern portion of the Asian continent is viewed by professionals and lay people throughout the world as an obvious geographic fact.

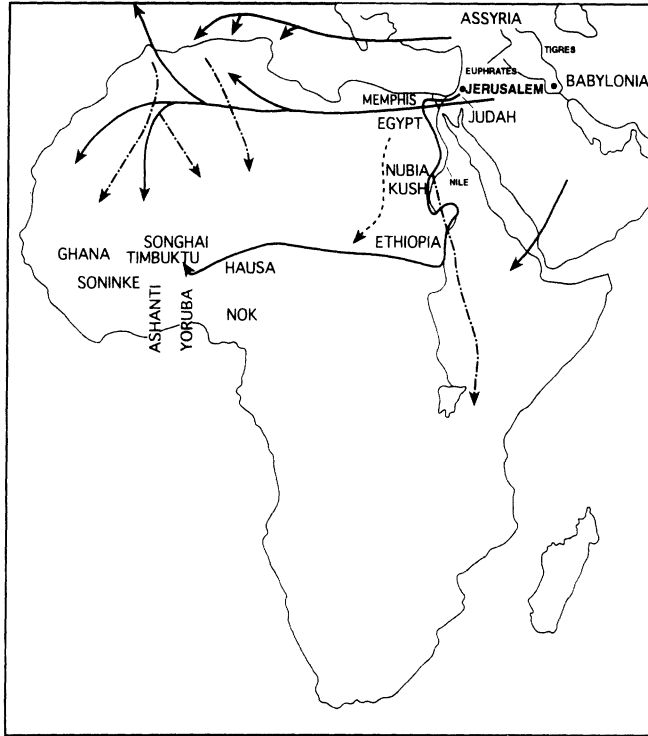
The Black Hebrew Israelite Community, centered in the dusty desert town of Dimona, Israel, challenges this conventional wisdom by providing proof positive that Israel belongs not to Asia but to Africa. They announce through their ceremonies and in books written by their leaders that the term “Middle East” is a capricious geographic label with no historical or Biblical connection to Israel.

Instead, they proclaim that Israel is an African land, originally populated by dark-skinned, African people:

Prior to the excavation of the Suez Canal (1859-69) the entire Arabian Peninsula and what has become known today as the “Middle East” were connected with the African continent. African people lived and moved freely throughout this region of the world.¹

Israel was formerly composed of a Black race, just as the nations of Egypt, Libya and Ethiopia are comprised of Blacks. . . . European historians, Biblical scholars and translators conspired to disassociate Israel and Egypt from Africa. . . .²

Whereas Martin Bernal (1987), Ali Mazrui (1986), and others have made similar claims, the Black Hebrews do not refer to these scholarly works to substantiate their beliefs. They find all the proof they need in the Bible. Invoking “Divine Geography,” or a way of charting the world that “is pleasing to God,”³ the Black Hebrew Israelites have redrawn the map of the eastern hemisphere to include Israel in Africa. Thus, Africa extends west of Egypt, to include Sinai and the Arabian Peninsula, the Levant, and Biblical Babylonia up to the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers—encompassing all the lands in which the ancient Israelites dwelled, according to the Five Books of Moses.



BLACK HEBREWS' MAP OF AFRICA

Source: "The Historical Connection of the Hebrew Israelite Community to the Holy Land," brochure published by the Hebrew Israelite Community Public Relations Department.

This map of Africa, a key statement of the Black Hebrews' identity, is displayed throughout the Community on posters and signboards, as a framed picture in many homes, worn as pressed metal earrings and wooden pendants; it decorates virtually every book, brochure and sheet of paper that comes from the Public Relations Department. Its prominence reflects the fact that the map is a powerful, metonymic symbol of the Community's complex of values, beliefs, and practices. Israel as Africa, Africa as Israel presents a rightful, sacral alternative to the White world; it is concrete evidence that African Americans are the descendants of Biblical Israelites. These noble origins, discovered after centuries of injustice when as slaves their lineage was hidden from them, give to the Black Hebrews a legitimate basis for rejecting Euro-American racial hierarchies, White-Western⁴ views of history and progress, and the lifestyle that derives from these views.

This article is a consideration of how identity

and knowledge are shaped and played out within the Black Hebrew Israelite Community in Dimona. In accordance with "the natives' point of view," it shall not portray the Community as a millenarian, revitalization, or new religious movement (cf. Linton 1943; Wallace 1956; Barker 1989), but remain faithful to the Black Hebrews' own definition as a "culture, a way of life." My aim here is to show through autobiographical narratives of Community members how knowledge that has been discredited, disguised, or buried can, through powerful symbols such as the Black Hebrews' redrawn map of Africa, emerge to reach surface consciousness and become the catalyst for developing a counter-hegemonic social movement.

I use Foucault's (1980: 82) concept of "subjugated knowledge" as

a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naive knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity . . . a partic-

ular, local, regional knowledge, a differential knowledge incapable of unanimity and which owes its force only to the harshness with which it is opposed by everything surrounding it. . . .

This concept provides a vantage point from which to see how the ideas and beliefs of the Black Hebrews struggle for legitimacy in the face of more powerful cultural systems that deny them veracity. The resonance of this struggle has paved the way for the Black Hebrews to convert long subaltern knowledge into overt truth and practical action. Not simply a culture of resistance (cf. Scott 1985; Comaroff 1985; Williams 1991), the Black Hebrews have established their own didactic orthodoxy that for twenty-five years has both attracted new recruits and succeeded at being a self-reproducing culture.⁵ This article, as it explores how (former) Black Americans transform themselves into Black Hebrew Israelites by forging symbolic and actual links between Israel and Africa, demonstrates the rallying force of this culture, and why these symbolic foundations are vital to its sustenance and growth.

In order to understand the internal meanings of the Community's identity and knowledge and to transmit them to outside readers, I pay close attention to the individual as volitional social actor. I shall therefore present personal narratives of several Community members, formerly African Americans from some of the largest cities of the United States,⁶ who have used their "power to define" (Ben Ammi 1990: 55-76) to extract the subjugated knowledge of their Hebraic origins and effect identity change, a radical alteration of their worldview, and a redirected lifestyle.

I conclude with an analysis of the Black Hebrews' Divine Truth that Israel is Africa, and Africa Israel by considering the consequences of appropriating another people's (the Jews) central origin story to bolster their claims to a proud history. Why did they link Israel with Africa rather than strengthen identification with a precolonial African heritage and resurrect Back-to-Africa movements (see Cronon 1955; Jenkins 1975)? What is particularly compelling about the long written history of the Israelites that could provide the rallying force that Africa alone, and the Black Pride/Black Power movements of the 1960s, could not sustain? In asking these questions I step back and (sadly) note that even as the Black Hebrews build what they consider to be an independent culture of resurrected knowledge, they remain bound

to hegemonic definitions of and by the Eurogentile world.

Field Methods, Fieldwork, and What Am I Doing Here?

Anthro Standard

This article is based on fieldwork conducted first sporadically (1993-94) and then steadily (February-July 1995) over the period of two and a half years. My original aim was to investigate the lines of demarcation—the border zones of particular practices—that delineate the Black Hebrew Israelite Community from other Jewish Israelis. I wanted to know why the State of Israel, and all my Israeli relatives, acquaintances, and friends, refuse to accept the Black Hebrews as Jews. Along the same lines, I wished to understand why the Community calls itself a Hebraic or Judaic—but not Jewish—group, and why they steadfastly refuse to undergo conversion which would make them eligible for citizenship and full Jewish status.

I went on the Community's formal guided tour and was shown the fixtures of its Hebraic communal lifestyle: the Community's sewing room where its head seamstress discussed the group's adherence to Biblical modesty codes and dress regulations while showing its lovely, colorful, African-influenced fashions; the dining room where all children receive two vegan-vegetarian meals daily⁷; and the birth room, where a midwife talked about natural childbirth, and the Biblical laws of purity.⁸ I also attended several of the Community's major holiday celebrations and commemorative events, including New World Passover and Sisters' Day, which have no equivalents in the Jewish calendar. During all these visits I was treated as a guest of honor and had little opportunity to mingle freely with spectators and participants from the Community.

Toward the end of 1994 I called my always friendly host at the Public Relations Department and told her that I was ready to begin a full-blown research project. It was to be aimed at eliciting "life stories" that would explain why individuals decided to leave behind their American lives to embrace a new identity and lifestyle in Israel. Rather than concentrating solely on practice, I wanted to learn from the practitioners themselves why they wished to break with the past to forge new lives with this Community. At the same time, it was my hope to discover through their narratives the key

symbolic foundations of the Community that attract new members and sustain those who joined the group years ago.

The narratives presented in the following sections most poignantly and concisely address the links between the circumstances of Black American urban life and the search for alternatives beyond that scene that led their protagonists to the Black Hebrew Israelite Community. Of the twenty community members I spoke with, the stories of Ezriya, Adiv, Yafa, Yadiel, and Tumaya are most illustrative of the paths travelled and/or of tales of those journeys told. I could just as well have included Rakhamim's reminiscences of his upbringing in the South and his desire to "do right," Abshalom's story of searching through music, Shemaya's nagging reminder that despite her comfortable, bourgeois lifestyle that "something was missing." For the sake of brevity as well as the importance of portraying the key connections between African-Americans, Africa, and Israel, I selected those life history extracts that best embody the major routes that led to this convergence.

The Once and Future Footnote

Before continuing, I take a slight detour that once was and perhaps still ought to be relegated to a footnote. This detour consists of situating me—a White Jewish female American and new Israeli—as an uneasy fieldworker in the Black Hebrew Israelite Community.

Once upon a time, back in 1977 to be precise, I was a beginning masters student in Atlanta, Georgia, contemplating doing ethnographic and/or sociolinguistic research within the Black community. I decided to volunteer at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Social Change to give something of myself to the community I wished to study, and to "test the waters," that is, to see if I could establish rapport. No one was ever hostile or even unfriendly to me—quite the opposite. But just about every time I walked up or down Auburn Avenue, someone, usually an elderly woman, would approach me, assuming that I was lost and point the way out of the neighborhood back into Atlanta's downtown. Recognizing that my presence was noticeable, troubling, and not wanted, I moved on to other endeavors.

These memories were piqued when I began visiting the Black Hebrews in Dimona. Well aware of their "power to define," I told this story to

Crown Sister Yafa, giving her the opportunity to turn down my request to interview Community members. She did not. Yafa and others offered friendly cooperation with everything I have ever asked for, although sometimes I waited weeks for phone calls to be returned and began to doubt that my requests would be granted. Sometimes I felt that my efforts at individual interviews were being thwarted, sometimes I felt like I was doing research in the People's Republic of China with an official nearby at all times (see Wolf 1985), and sometimes I reprimanded myself for being paranoid.

One balmy night during fieldwork I awoke with a start from a disturbing dream. In the dream I was sitting in the Black Hebrews' Guest House when I walked Crown Sister Yada, the head of the Public Relations Department, dressed in the same striking emerald green outfit I had last seen her in during New World Passover⁹ when she had affirmed our friendship, embraced me, and wished me well with my research. In my dream she entered the room with her winning smile, sat down by my side, and announced that my presence was no longer wanted in the Community. I asked why, had I done anything wrong? "No," she replied, "We hold the power to define."

Consciously and sub-consciously fieldwork in the Black Hebrew Israelite Community brings me face to face with the postmodern dilemma in anthropology. Intrigued with the establishment of a culture that resists minority status and invents—or, as they would prefer to say, resurrects—a culture and tradition built on the laws of the Bible and "the power to define," my goal as an anthropologist is to understand how it is that these individuals have gathered together to fight against an ideology, social structure, and economic hierarchy that has demeaned and debilitated them. "I'm on your side!" I want to shout, but I dare not. My only vehicle for demonstrating sympathy and solidarity is to be a keen and committed ethnographer. Or perhaps, ultimately, to duck out from the research project altogether. But not yet.

Knowledge, Counter-Knowledge, Self-Knowledge

The Black Hebrew Israelite Community began in Chicago during the middle 1960s, at the height of the Civil Rights movement, under the charismatic leadership of Ben Ammi. Inspired by a dream or a vision, he organized a Back-to-Africa movement in

1966, ultimately taking 300 men, women, and children to Liberia to build a community of righteousness (Ha-Gadol 1993). In 1969 he had another vision, that the group's original homeland was not western Africa, but eastern Africa, more specifically, Israel. Small groups entered Israel from Liberia, claiming the right to settle there according to the Law of Return.¹⁰ The State of Israel, however, did not agree, and ever since, Black Hebrews, whether from Liberia in the late 1960s, or later on directly from the U.S.A., have entered Israel on tourist visas that they simply allowed to lapse.¹¹ In 1986 a group of fifty were arrested and thirty-seven deported, bringing to a climax the uneasy relationship between the Black Hebrews and the Jewish State.

Since 1992, however, after the intercession of the Black Congressional Caucus of the U.S. Congress, the two sides have made an uneasy truce; the State of Israel has granted the Black Hebrews temporary residence status, and the Community has promised to accept no new members until their status is resolved.

The Black Hebrews have also amended their self-definition over the years. During the 1970s they proclaimed in brochures and to all who were willing to listen that they were the only legitimate heirs to the Land of Israel and that therefore it was part of their mission first to ignore and then to destroy the Jewish state. Since the late 1980s this rhetoric has softened, and the Black Hebrews now acknowledge that Biblical Israel was a multiracial society from which, after the destruction of the Second Temple in the year 70, its inhabitants fled to Europe and Asia as well as to Africa. Now their hope is to obtain Israeli citizenship and to participate fully in the life of the country (see Chertok 1991).¹² At the 1995 New World Passover games and parade the Israeli flag was flying along with the Community's colors.

Whether or not Ben Ammi originally intended that a permanent home for his followers be in Liberia and only happened upon the Israeli option after realizing the hardships of life in the African bush is irrelevant to the Community. Prince Rakhmim [Rockameem], echoed by Agriculture Minister Yadiel, averred that Ben Ammi all along planned to take the group to Israel but only after a stint in Liberia so that "[w]e could return to the Land¹³ the same way we left" (see also Ha-Gadol 1993; Smallwood 1991). In addition, many informants drew an analogy for me between this sojourn

in Liberia and the Biblical Hebrews' wandering in Sinai before their return to Israel. Rakhmim explained,

We chose to stay there about three and a half years in order to get rid of the foolishness of America. To make a person born again. To die from the hell we came out of, to get rid of it—to learn, to get rid of the hate . . . to get rid of your bitterness. . . . Liberia was always conceived as the place where we would learn to be righteous. Those of us who wanted to do right shedded off the hate and came home to Israel.

Well over half of the original 300 who made the trek to Liberia returned to the United States. Today the Black Hebrew Israelite community is composed of more than 2,000 persons,¹⁴ most of whom came directly from the United States without the benefit of a cooling-off period in Liberia. What then drove them from their homes in American cities into the spartan, communal lifestyle of Dimona, Israel?

Below I present several individuals' autobiographical narratives to illustrate how they came to accept the meaning and message of the Black Hebrew Israelite Community. The stories recounted to me focused on three related themes: 1) the danger and evil of everyday life for Blacks in America; 2) the desire for a positive identity linked to a[n African] land, history, and language; and 3) religious, spiritual, or mystical coincidences. Their confrontations with these issues shook the protagonists out of complacency and pushed them to consider an alternate knowledge base which they then used to reinterpret the past, challenge the present, embrace a radically new identity, and plan for the future within the Black Hebrew Israelite Community.

Several parents, in mulling over what inspired them to leave behind the lifestyle, the "piece of the pie," that they had worked hard to obtain—steady jobs, homes, cars, and plentiful wardrobes—mentioned their fears of escalating crime, and the desire to find a peaceful, gang-free, drug-free environment for their children. Even as they begin to discuss their lives in the United States, the elders, especially, shake their heads and say, like Rakhmim,

America—what a nightmare! That was a nightmare to be in America. I was jumpy the whole time I was there. Every time a door slammed. . . . That's a horrible place! You walk on the street, everybody got a gun, all calling names, and they saying they gonna shoot somebody, and they mean that. You can't speak to nobody hardly. You speak to somebody and they say, "You know me?" What are you talking about? And you better not open your

mouth. They just shoot you for nothing and just walk away. And nobody gonna lock them up. That's just the way they live. And who want to live like that?

Esriya, a registered nurse from Chicago, blending a matter of fact tone with a sense of higher-power coincidence, narrated a series of events that led her to follow her husband's lead and move the family from the U.S. to Israel:

I came to visit [the Community in Israel] in 1979. I was impressed by the love people were showing for each other, and the peacefulness [but] I wasn't ready to move here yet. . . . [Then there was all this] Black on Black crime, and things were hitting home. I was a public health nurse, as I had told you. I was making a visit [in Chicago], and I was trying to get in a house but I couldn't cause the door was locked. And as I was standing there I saw these three men knock down a woman, grab her bag—and another man was sitting in his car. He came out to me and asked, "Did you see these men? They were watching you. And they were probably going to get you." Well, I was kind of shaken up. . . .

Then another thing that had happened to me. I told you I had a white Lincoln. One evening I was stopped at a red light, and a young teenager came up along, took a crowbar and knocked in the window to get my purse—which wasn't on the seat beside me but down below between my legs. I called the police, but naturally nothing ever happened. Next day I had to take my car to get another window put in—sixty dollars from my pocket for that. I was beginning to think, This is getting too close to home.

Then another incident: someone was trying to burglarize our apartment! I lived in a three-flat in the upstairs apartment and two aunts lived in the downstairs ones. My son was down at his aunt's, and probably left the door to our apartment open. The tv was out there on the landing, and a pillow case was gone with some jewelry. I called the police and they came and dusted for prints. My aunt had told me that the calculator was still on the table after the burglar had run, but when the police left, the calculator was gone! They took that calculator, but I never got any justice. That's the third incident.

The fourth: My son, he was a teenager at that time, when drugs and gangs came into the black community. My son went to a dance, a social occasion, place to meet friends. As he's leaving a group of boys came over saying, "Buy this brown bag," forcing him to take it. My son related to me that he knew that it was drugs. He didn't want the drugs, he didn't want to give them money, and he said to himself, "I don't want to die." My son was saved by using his head, by lying down on the street, acting like he was having a fit, throwing his arms, mumbling and moaning, and foaming at the mouth. The other boys said, pardon the expression, "The nigger's crazy," and walked away leaving him alone. When he told us we were laughing so hard, but we were all scared too; he could have been shot dead.

This was the fourth incident in a period of about two years. I was thinking: There's got to be something better than this. And then on the news, all the time: children molested, drive-by shootings, gangs, violence.

By this time I was in my late 30s. My son was 17, my daughter 10, and I got pregnant. Never in my wildest dreams did I expect this, to be pregnant at 40. Abortion's not the way to go—I was a staunch Catholic!—but I was struggling. In this day and age I didn't want to bring a child into this world. And then my husband asked if I wanted to go to Israel.

Esriya, and all the people I conversed with or interviewed about their decisions to come to Israel, concurred that the way of life they knew in America was not about to change for the better. They had theoretical knowledge and practical experience that crime, drugs, and materialism define the American urban experience, especially for Blacks. But unlike Esriya, whose husband was the initiator of their family's *aliya*,¹⁸ most of the others focused their narratives not on fear of city streets, but on their search for identity and the answers provided by the Hebrews.

Yafa, Adiv, Yadiel, and Tumaya were upwardly mobile college students when, in the 1970s, they first made contact with the Black Hebrews. Yafa, in her succinct, no-nonsense style, told me that after one class she knew that she would be on her way to Israel:

They just answered questions no one else would or could. Not just rhetoric but real answers about returning to God, to our roots. . . . Once I was shown that in Deuteronomy it is explained if you sin and turn away from God you will be punished, I could understand why Black Americans were in this [terrible] position. I didn't want to be a nothing Black American, Afro-American, Negro American, and the Community answered my questions by providing an order, a solution, a righteous path to life.

At another meeting several weeks later she expanded on this theme:

I had always been looking for an identity. An identity as a people, not just to be second-class, groping in the darkness. I was always asking these questions, challenging things when I was a kid, a teenager. I got to college—and I was tired. I wanted to do just like everyone else, follow the path. I went to this class just because of my sister. I was very much interested in what was being taught in the class.

FM: Which was?

Yafa: Basic history that connected African-Americans to the Holy Land. It was like a spiritual awakening. Things I had always felt but never heard. I could relate to this as truth. I thought, "This is it," and I was ready then to join the community. I was looking for an identity as a people, not just to be second-class, groping in the darkness in a country that we didn't have a chance to make it in. I was very excited. . . . For me, for each of us, it was a spiritual awakening.

Adiv, the vice-principal of the new school, came to Dimona in 1973 from Chicago. His explanation for how he found his way to the Black Hebrew Community begins not with a new revelation but with the “bits and pieces” of wisdom his parents had brought with them from the South:

My father was illiterate, but he used to always say little sayings, like “A small Black nation will rise out of the East to rule the world.” I grew up listening to sayings like this, like Black people in America were direct descendants of the Israelites. Bits and pieces of things were said to me that created the spirit of the search for truth.

In college, years later, his Black roommate wore a Star of David, grew his beard, and ate only vegetarian foods. Adiv asked him about these practices, and his roommate explained the connections between Black Americans, the Bible, and Israel. They were compelling.

Two years later he and me—nine of us, six brothers and three sisters—all came in '73. We dropped everything. We studied and kept our grades up while we were there, but then we put all our ideas of “getting over”¹⁶ aside—they just died. Our goal was: come to Israel and serve the God of Israel.

While Yafa and Adiv were attracted to the Black Hebrew Community for similar reasons—it filled an intellectual, identificational, and spiritual void that participation in political movements and standard churches did not—Yafa’s discovery of the Truth of her (and all Black Americans’) origins in Israel represents a dramatic break with the knowledge of her past. Her parents did not take kindly to her decision and interpreted it as a rejection of the life they had built, their understanding of how to get ahead, and their plans for her future. Adiv’s narrative, by contrast, stresses continuity between his decision to join the Community and his father’s remnant knowledge about Blacks’ origins and destiny. Unlike Yafa, when Adiv told his parents he was leaving for Israel, his mother replied, “You would be the one.”¹⁷ Despite Yafa and Adiv’s different backgrounds and the different reactions their families had to their declarations of being Hebrews, they both relate that their first meetings with Hebrews confirmed something that they had known all along in their hearts but were never before able to articulate—a subjugated, alternate knowledge of Black Americans’ origins as Biblical Israelites.

Yadiel, also from the south side of Chicago, arrived in Israel in 1980. Since 1987 he has been in

charge of the Community’s organic farming project and is the Community’s Minister of Agriculture. I had met him a few times in the course of my visits, but in early June we spent the better part of a day together. First I came to Dimona and then we drove about an hour together to the fields the Community leases from a moshav.¹⁸ During the drive I asked Yadiel how he had found his way to discover that he was a Hebrew. “You must have asked this question hundreds of times.” “No, about a dozen,” I replied. “Then I am honored and blessed, and I will try to answer your question from two points of view: the historical point of view, and the personal. These both come together in my personal story.” He began with the historical point of view, citing chapter and verse from Genesis to prove that the Garden of Eden had been in Africa, and from Deuteronomy and Leviticus in support of the prophecies for the double captivity of the Hebrews which he then connected to Africans’ enslavement in America,

Now I’m not saying that all Black people in the US are Israelites or even that all of them will find their way back to this identity. What I am saying is that it is a fact backed up by Biblical prophecy.

I interrupted Yadiel in the midst of his narrative. Something about it seemed too neat, too prepared, and, since Jews throughout the world carried the written as well as the oral tradition of their history (the Bible) with them, I wanted him to explain how the original Black Hebrews lost theirs. Yadiel side-stepped my question by emphasizing the oral traditions of Africa and Black Americans. He continued to give me a history lesson, emphasizing that, “Throughout all our history, in Africa, as slaves, and as Negroes, Black Americans, Afro-Americans, a handful of elders kept this identity alive through oral tradition,” maintaining “Israelite camps” throughout the South and in the cities of the North.

I did not accept his clear-cut linear progression and asked him why these “Israelite camps” were such a small minority of the Black population. “Surely,” I said, “the Baptist and other churches were much more popular among Blacks, both up north and in the south, and then later in the ’60s, the Black Muslim movement took off. Hardly anyone in the US, Black or White, knows anything about Black Hebrews.” Yadiel countered with the Biblical prophecy of captivity ending only when the Children of Israel live once again in righteousness.

He continued to trace Black American history to support his points, concluding with the civil rights movement and the assassination of Martin Luther King. Finally, he posed the critical question of identity:

We can go through and see these different movements among Black people in America, their transformation from Africans to slaves, to Negroes, to Blacks, to African Americans. Every people in America has an identity: Polish Americans, Italian Americans: they have a land, a language, and a culture. What are Negroes? Blacks? African Americans? Africa itself is composed of 50 nations, and within each of these, hundreds of ethnic groups with their land, language, and culture. African-Americans are the only group of Americans without an identity. It is only when we start to read the Bible as a record of our history that we can discover who we truly are. These Israelite camps kept it alive all these years, waiting for the moment. This is where my personal story joins the hermeneutic.

Yadiel then described for me how he grew up in Chicago, attending church every Sunday. But while that church filled his spiritual needs, it did not answer the question, "Who am I?"

I started asking this question when I was about 15, when Martin Luther King, Junior, was killed. Why is it that every time a leader arises among the Blacks, he is shot down? We can't rise up on our own. And I started looking for answers. I was very attracted to the teachings of Martin Luther King, but I got more radical and militant after his assassination. . . .

I had gotten radical, confrontational, and still I had no answers to that question, "Who am I?" I dropped out of society so I could find answers to that question. I spent my time reading; I dropped out of college for self-education. I read history, African history. Eventually I got my own apartment, I got a job: I worked down at the steel mill. I was moving out of being an American Black to looking at Africa, preparing myself with skills for going into a self-sufficient African community. I studied plumbing and electrician skills. I learned how to read architectural blueprints. A friend from high school introduced me to the, as we were calling them, Israelite camp. He took me to a meeting. And I didn't stop. By the end of the 1970s I was on my way to Africa . . . and in 1978, I think it was, we went. . . . And there in Africa I met with our community there. It was there I learned that our place as a people is not in West Africa, in Liberia or Nigeria, but in northeast Africa. Israel. Following the prophecy, we returned to Israel the way we had come out. After three years in West Africa I came on to Israel in 1981.

Yadiel's story, like Adiv's, stresses continuity but this continuity is not in the story of his specific family. Yadiel portrays himself at first as yet another groping Black soul, lost as a result of Biblical prophecy and the African diaspora.¹⁹ Like Yafa

and Adiv, he had felt an identity void since adolescence and strove to close it, but unlike them, he began with Africa.

With the publication of Alex Haley's *Roots* and its serialization on television, thousands of Black Americans did the same thing. Batya, by the beginning of the 1970s was a divorcee in her 30s, and a veteran of just about every civil rights, Black Power, and Black cultural organization. In Detroit she moved from eye-opening discussions with Black Muslims to working in the Frederick Douglass Gun Club, to joining the Republic of New Africa; her autobiography stresses active involvement in forging a better future for American Blacks. In fact, she recalls that, "During this process my husband and I separated. He was deeply involved in materialism, and my commitment was to my people." But after a decade of this activity and some strong disappointments, she had decided to forego the struggle in America and move "back to Africa." She was ready to go in the summer of 1973 but at the suggestion of a friend, attended a meeting of the Black Hebrew Israelites, "I went to that meeting in July, and I left America for Israel in December."

Prior to studying with the Black Hebrews, Batya revealed,

I had been impressed with the Bible as history, but ME? I didn't see any connection [between Blacks and Israel]. Israel? Isn't that the Middle East? Africa was our homeland. I was impressed with the Bible as [perhaps being] our history but I didn't see a connection. Until they told us about the Suez Canal. Prior to the building of the Suez Canal, Israel was landlocked with Africa. What it went along with is the way that Africa was carved up by European powers, partitioned during the Berlin conference. Between July and December 1973, everything I had been searching for came together. This tied all previous experiences together.

Yadiel and Batya, among others, began their search for origins quite logically in West Africa. The addition of the historical-spiritual element of the Bible, and further geographic proof that Israel had always been part of the African landmass, shifted their identificational focus from Liberia and Ghana in the West to Israel in Africa's northeast.

Unlike any of the other people I interviewed, Tumaya, who had spent most of her childhood in Louisiana, came from a family filled with Afrocentric culture. She did not move from a Black Baptist church or the array of civil rights organizations to the Black Hebrews. Tumaya grew up knowing who she was; she knew that she was the descendant of once proud African people who had been kid-

napped and forcibly sent to America to be the slaves of White colonialists there. Her mother, who had been an adherent of Marcus Garveyism in her youth, taught her children at home

all about our ancestry, and the different traditions, and rituals and things that our people practiced, the dress, the history of the great empires, and the kings, and all of those things, she taught us all of those things. And our surroundings looked like my surroundings look right now, she collected a lot of [African] arts and crafts. . . . She had us dressing like this when we were young. I was in long clothing when I was young, into the different African hairstyles and things. I just grew up with that.

Despite her exposure and attachment to a rich cultural heritage, Tumaya relates that she was troubled about the contradictions she discovered in African history:

It was during the time that I was at Howard [University], that I began to just feel that there was something else I didn't know about myself, about our people . . . some things didn't match, and some things didn't make sense. It didn't seem, it didn't make sense to me, that a people that was so great had gotten taken as slaves. It wasn't making sense to me. A lot of things weren't making sense to me.

And then at Howard I also decided to take a course that dealt with the Bible. And hearing in there about a people that was going to be enslaved and the things that happened to them, and how they turned their backs on God, and those kind of things, it also aroused something in me, but I couldn't make a connection anywhere.

Tumaya found this connection in the middle 1970s when her mother

discovered that Ben Ammi had gotten to Israel . . . so she wrote him a letter all the way here. And in response, someone from the community travelled to, she was living in Mississippi at the time, to see her. And she was very elated about all that she had found out. And she called me and told me and asked for me to come, you know, to hear it.

In 1978 her mother and one younger sister joined the Community in Dimona; Tumaya, however, wanted to see more of the African continent first and went to Liberia—"we have a community there"—for a three-year stint, which turned into six. Before settling in Israel, she felt compelled to see through the love and attachment she had always had for [West] Africa. Although she had come to the realization that Black Americans are the descendants of the Biblical Hebrews and that their original roots were in Israel, it took some getting used to:

So I spent those years there and then I came here. It was somewhat of a mind transition that I had to go through because I had grown up so much hearing that my connections only went as far back as the African, and not knowing that the African had a root in the Bible, that it was a whole mind transition that I had to go through in seeing myself as a Jew, as a Hebrew, as a, what did that mean? But the more that I heard and understood about our people, and how we came to be in the different slaveries that we were in, what was the reason for it, and how we were dispersed throughout Africa, and the building of the Suez Canal, and the separation of Africa from Israel, all of those different things began to make all of that clear for me. I just had to just transfer my mind (laughs).

[At the end of six years] I was ready. I was ready to come. And it was like, as soon as my feet touched the soil here I felt something. I felt like I was home, and that I had finally made that final connection, and I was where I was going to find out all I needed to know about myself, and all that I needed to do and be, and make all the changes I needed to make, and all the transitions, and everything. That feeling, it just came over me when my feet touched the soil here.

Beginning with the knowledge that her origins were in Africa, as well as strong cultural connections to the continent, Tumaya found her ultimate place in Israel-in-Africa. Like the others whose stories were presented above, working out the connection between the Bible, the peoples of West Africa, the indignity of slavery, and then minority "no-identity" status in the United States, revealed to Tumaya an entirely different worldview from that based on the knowledge she had originally possessed. With this revelation came, concomitantly, an enhanced identity and inner sense of security. A dancer, musician, and educator, she actively works to make manifest the connection between West Africa, where the ancestors of American Blacks lost their freedom, and Northeast Africa, their Biblical homeland, in her job as the director of the Community's Academy of Fine Arts. During the summer of 1994 Tumaya guided a group of young people from the Community on their first Cultural Heritage Trip to Ghana, to visit the slave camps from which their ancestors had been forcibly transported to America,²⁰ and to learn indigenous African crafts, dances, and melodies. Tumaya concluded her narrative by stressing the importance that the Israel-Africa links have for the next generation, especially for those who were born and spent their whole lives in Israel:

The links they have to Africa—they have to understand that—and the link that Africa has to Israel—they have to understand that whole connection in order to really know who they are. Because that's the main thing that we lost in the whole chastisement we went through: we

lost our identity, and we lost connection with our God, the God of Israel. So that's what we have to get back: our identity. We have to know who we are.

Documented history, as well as an oral tradition passed from one generation to the next, solidified in these African Americans the knowledge that they were the descendants of African slaves, who after the Civil War became second-class citizens under the weight of Jim Crow laws. Their identity then changed from a racial term, Negroes, to a political term, Black-Americans, and most lately to an ethnic label, African-Americans, as small groups gathered increasing strength to challenge racism and the laws that made it a social fact.

Despite changes in African Americans' legal status and group identity, discrimination and minority status have as yet to disappear. This knowledge laid the groundwork for members of the Black Hebrew Israelite Community, while still young American men and women in Chicago, Detroit, New Orleans, to search for explanations for their, and their people's, tragic history. While thousands of Black Americans found these answers in long-standing European racism and the discriminatory legal code of the United States, and then addressed these problems by battling to bring about political change, Yafa, Adiv, Yadiel, Batya, and others in the Community were unconvinced that "legislated equality" or "a piece of the pie" was the answer to Black America's plight. With the knowledge they had at their disposal, they looked outward and sought further than the United States and Europe for explanations and alternatives: they explored the implications of their acknowledged roots in Western Africa, and the messages of the Bible. In striving to counter the inadequate Negro-Black-African American identity foisted on them and its attached demeaning minority status, they became receptive to a different knowledge scheme that could provide an explanation for their people's noble but fallen history and, as well, give to them and their people a sense of mission, a purpose in life. In embracing the Black Hebrew Israelite Community, the discontent that stemmed from accepting the knowledge of the Eurogentile world, a knowledge they had had little choice but to espouse, was reversed. In forging a group based on the long-suppressed tie between West Africa and Israel, subjugated knowledge connected to the troublesome question of Black-American identity, came to the fore and became the *doxa* upon which a new, self-defined culture and community could flourish.

Practical Action, Counter-Hegemony, and the Doxa of Righteousness

Pierre Bourdieu (1977) has shown how culture develops, becomes institutionalized, self-replicates, and even changes as the result of practical action repeated over time. The Black Hebrews, proclaiming themselves "a culture, a way of life," have built a community imbued with a sense of history, even timelessness, despite its mere twenty-six years of existence.

Each time I took the official Community tour I was struck by the frequent use of the word "tradition" to explain social patterns (such as "Divine Marriage") or items of material culture that were recently invented or accepted into the community. In describing the "Messianic suit," the Community's "signature garments"—a dashiki-like overblouse embroidered around the neck and on the sleeves, and fringed trousers for the men, or a long fringed skirt for the women—Bat-El, the Community's head seamstress said:

This is the suit that is to exemplify a tradition that will set us aside from any others, from Nigeria, from Ethiopia. You know an Ethiopian or a Nigerian from their clothes; we want to be known by ours. We've developed this concept that will set us aside. . . . This is the garment used to represent the community.

I was told in more or less the same words about "ecos," or the cotton-crocheted, rubber soled shoes widely worn in the Community. Invented a matter of years ago as an alternative to store-bought leather shoes, Yafa, Shemaya, Tumaya, and others described them to me as "part of our traditional dress."

Prince Rakhimim and I also had a lively discussion on the issue of tradition versus invention. He was telling me about the Community's early years in Liberia, how they set up rules and regulations for communal living in the camp. His description sounded to me like the group's leaders were creating rules on the spot, but when I asked him about it he defined this code of behavior as simply the implementation of Biblical injunctions to "do right." I kept pushing, but he maintained his stance:

FM: So what you're saying is that at this point you decided to establish a new law, or reinvent an old law?

Rakhimim: Reinvent an old law. And live it. This time, not break it.

In reconnecting the legacy of the Bible with the heritage of Africa, both of which had been torn from them over centuries of dispersal and captivity, formerly Black American men and women found the “power to define” and built a community, a culture, and traditions that have a tangible presence in Israel-as-Africa. Living out this connection through their communal lifestyle, Afrocentric dress, vegan diet, polygynous families, iconoclastic worship services, and festivals, the Black Hebrew Israelite Community not only continues to convince its members that they are living out God’s commandments to “do right” but also forces the issue of wider acceptance.

Every day, outside the boundaries of their *kfar*,²¹ the Black Hebrews are confronted with another much more widely accepted and powerful knowledge system than their own, that of the State of Israel backed by Eurogentile interpretations of the Bible and world history. Indeed, according to Gramsci (1971: 416, 447), western culture possesses hegemony over the whole world culture, and therefore its disapproval, denial, and negation of the Black Hebrews’ claims are just about absolute. The Black Hebrews, nonetheless, have rallied subjugated knowledge about Africa to counter Eurocentrism when they redrew the map of the world. But, at the same time, by underscoring the primacy of the Judeo-Christian tradition and corroborating its uncontested position of holiness and truth, they confirm the hegemony of European culture. Their placement of Israel in Africa, while debunking the geographic centrality of Europe in world history, does not contest the ideological base of its dominance. The hegemony of the Bible is so compelling that the Black Hebrews’ way of challenging Eurogentile culture and its implicit racial hierarchy is not to reject the Holy Book, but to deny that the cradle of civilization that it represents was located in the Eurasian “Middle East.” Instead, they shifted it to Africa, substituted Biblical figures’ White faces with Black, and claim The Book as their own.²²

This strategy serves to answer the critical question of (formerly) Black American men and women who grapple(d) with the question “Who are we as a people?” and legitimizes their claims to the great tradition of the Bible. It serves too as a compelling rallying cry for the recruitment and maintenance of hundreds of people to conform to the Black Hebrew Israelite Community’s strict rules for communal life. However, as they proclaim the Bible as the source of Truth, the Black Hebrews confirm too its essentialism, and thereby fail in the wider world, where everyone knows that the Bible is the story of the Jewish people, to expropriate it. Thus, professing the Bible to be their group history does not afford them much opportunity, especially in the Jewish State, to be granted “an alternative symbolic universe with an ‘official’ tradition whose taken-for-granted objectivity is equal to one’s own” (Berger and Luckmann 1967: 109). Indeed, if not ridicule, the Black Hebrews’ claims arouse skepticism and suspicion on the part of Israelis, whose territory, if not legacy, is under dispute from the Palestinians, who are tougher, more powerful rivals with a much stronger historical base to their demands.

The Black Hebrew Israelites are not the first African Americans to identify with the Hebrews of the Old Testament (Adelfila 1975; Baer and Singer 1992; Brotz 1964; Fishkoff 1995; Hurston 1984; Katz 1964; Levine 1977; Santamaria 1987). They are, however, the first group to have rallied together the force of their beliefs to make an exodus out of America, resettle in Israel, and build a community there that in deed, as well as word, links Africa to Israel, Israel to Africa. In so doing, they have altered, if just a bit, a taken-for-granted world history that places Europe at the center and Africa in its shadow, giving to Black Americans the power, and a mission, to resurrect long-lost, subjugated knowledge and rebuild themselves as a proud people with a law, a language, a land, and an identity.

NOTES

¹This quotation is taken from a brochure entitled “The Historical Connection of the Hebrew Israelite Community to the Holy Land,” published by the Hebrew Israelite Community Public Relations Department.

²This quotation is taken from Ben Ammi (1990: 116-117).

³The Black Hebrew Israelite Community defines the word “divine” as “that which is pleasing to God.” Prior to the Ministry of Education of the State of Israel’s provision of a standard curriculum for their children in 1993, the Black Hebrews

taught them Divine Geography and Divine Mathematics, their interpretation of these subjects. By the same token, Divine Marriage is the term they use for polygyny, and Divine Agriculture is their gloss for organic farming.

⁴In the writings of Ben-Ammi, the Black Hebrew Israelites’ spiritual leader, the term “Eurogentiles” refers to White Christian Euro-Americans. I shall use the same term in the remainder of the article.

⁵This is not to say that some members of the community

have not dropped out over the years. They have. No one could or would provide me with exact numbers or statistics, but my hosts were eager to give me explanations. I was told several times, "Our lifestyle is not for everyone. It demands dedication and sacrifice." On a more personal note, one of my hosts has a sister who lived for several years in the community but returned to America. Why?

Who can say exactly? We have very strong and strict rules in this community. No smoking. And sometimes people, they just want to smoke. Everybody has their weaknesses. I like sweets, and sometimes I just want to put too much sugar in my mouth. Not everyone can live by our rules. This community is not for everybody. . . .

Another's mother returned to America. Some men left, searching (foolishly, my hosts added) for personal fulfillment; one wished to become a basketball player (at age 37!), another was lured by promises of riches. The Community acknowledges that people join and others leave, and stresses that all are free to come and go as they wish. What is most important for the leaders, spokespeople, and members is that the Community not only maintains itself but grows every year; despite drop-outs, they say, it has been gaining in numbers, prestige, and legitimacy in Israel and abroad, further evidence of its rectitude.

*Primarily Chicago, Detroit, Atlanta, and Washington DC.

⁷This vegan-vegetarian diet eliminates the necessity of adhering to the Biblical code of *kashrut* since no meat, fowl, fish, or dairy products are ever served.

*Black Hebrew Israelite women follow the Biblical laws of *niddah* which forbid sexual relations during the menstrual period and for a specific number of days after the birth of each child (40 for boys, 80 for girls). In addition, women are excused from performing normal household tasks during the time of their confinement, although they do not live outside their households.

⁸This is a Community-specific holiday marking the return of the first group of Hebrews to Israel.

⁹The Law of Return of the State of Israel stipulates that all Jews from throughout the world have the right to automatic Israeli citizenship upon return to Israel. The Law defines a Jew more broadly than the traditional matriline definition of *halakha* [religious law]; the Law of Return provides for individuals with at least one Jewish parent or grandparent. Since the Black Hebrews had none—most had been baptized in Christian churches—they did not qualify.

¹⁰There is no space here to recount the group's history, either from their point of view or from that of the Israeli government. See Ben-Ammi 1990, 1991a, 1991b; Ben-Yehuda 1975; and Ha-Gadol 1993 for "inside" stories; Gerber 1977, and Singer 1979 for outsiders' reports. David Glass (1980) published a report [in Hebrew] of the State of Israel's decision regarding the non-immigrant status of the Black Hebrews.

¹¹On June 1, 1995, one of the Community's *kohanim* (priests), told me, as two school buses were loading up to take first and second graders for their "Discover the Land" class trip:

We have much to learn about Israeli history and to learn from it. It is not our history; ours went in another direction. We are learning how to integrate into Israel. Discover the land—so much to know. We don't have full citizenship rights yet, but they are on the way. I keep telling the children, "Get ready for the army." You're gonna serve in the army. No, not in a combat unit, but in com-

munications, maintenance, something. Get ready. We want to integrate into Israel but also maintain our own traditions and lifestyle because we have our own way of interpreting the Torah. We never want our children to smoke cigarettes and eat meat like Israeli Jews. And if the day comes when our children tell parents what to do, then we know we have failed in our job.

¹²That is, Israel.

¹³The Black Hebrews, citing the Bible, do not "count heads." I believe that in addition to this injunction, their imprecise numbers are a political tactic that blurs the true extent of their population and protects them from the threat of deportation.

¹⁴This word means "ascent," or immigration, specifically to Israel. This Hebrew word is used by the Black Hebrews in everyday conversation.

¹⁵The expression used among Blacks for making it economically and socially. The term "getting over" derives from the Biblical episode of the Israelites crossing, or getting over, the River Jordan. In "getting over," they left behind the forty years of wandering in the wilderness that followed their exodus from slavery in Egypt, to begin life anew in a land of their own, the land of milk and honey promised them by God.

¹⁶Subsequently, two and a half years later when he went home for a visit, four of his sisters accompanied him back to Dimona and joined the Community. Both his mother and his other sister have come to visit. His "brother was going to come, but he got a good job—Amtrak—and couldn't or wouldn't leave. My father? He wouldn't get on a plane or a boat if his life depended on it!"

¹⁷A *moshav* is a cooperative farming settlement in which each family has its own personal property and pools some of its resources to support capital equipment and large scale projects (for example, greenhouses or orchards). It differs from the *kibbutz*, which is a communal farm in which (until recently) all property belongs to and all income is contributed to the *kibbutz's* general fund. Redistribution of resources occurs on a by-need basis determined by the by-laws of the *kibbutz*.

¹⁸Others, of course, might interpret his sense of alienation quite differently. Albert Memmi (1967: 105) ponders the position of the colonized in the colonizer's schools, "The memory which is assigned him is certainly not that of his people. . . . [For h]e and his land are nonentities or only exist in reference. . . to what he is not. . . ."

¹⁹In our interview I could not help but draw an analogy with tours that the State of Israel arranges for teenagers to Poland in which they view the death camps of World War Two. Tumaya concurred with the parallel.

²⁰*Kfar* is the Hebrew word for village. The Black Hebrews apply this word, usually pronounced as two syllables, *ki-far*, in reference to the land and complex of apartments in Dimona that they lease from the Israeli government. This complex was built in the late 1950s to be an absorption center for Russian Jews who never came.

²¹The Nation of Islam (Black Muslims) does indeed challenge the primacy of the Judeo-Christian tradition and embraces instead Islam, the third Great Religion of the Middle East, as the "true" tradition of the Black-African people. It is worthy of note that neither the Black Hebrews nor the Black Muslims have ever tried to resurrect or redefine native belief systems of tribal Africa; one way or the other, they have stuck with hegemonic cultures.

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