

Contemporary Philosemitism in Africa

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GSRL-CNRS

Paris, France

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Course level: under graduate, graduate

Type of course: seminar

Department: Contemporary Judaism

Office:

Office hours:

Course description

From the colonial era African Christians have expressed a general feeling of admiration for and spiritual relation to the Jews. Some took this relation a bit farther than just a spiritual brotherhood and in the course of the twentieth century more than a dozen of disparate ethno-religious groups throughout Africa have started identifying themselves as descendants of Jews. They have developed versions of their tribal history that place them as part of the Jewish Diaspora. African philosemitism is the outcome of a long historical-anthropological process intertwining religious, cultural, and political strands that led, in some African societies to a contemporary symbiosis with Judaism and Jews.

My intention is to examine the multiple sources and reasons for this shaping of modern African philosemitism in a world marked by globalization, political upheaval, economic uncertainty, ecological crises and ethnic and religious conflicts. The seminar—in equal measures chronological and thematic—proposes a tripartite framework through which to characterize the phases of African philosemitism: the meaning and the adaptation of Judaism within African religion, the salient role of Western projections on African identity, the religious, intellectual and political dimensions of the affiliation to Judaism in Africa. All these issues should obviously be examined in the context of processes associated with globalization. At a time when anti-Zionist views and anti-Semitism are on the upsurge in Europe and elsewhere, hundreds of thousands of individuals have chosen to embrace Judaism in geographical areas where it hadn't traditionally been present – in Africa but also in India and even as far as Papua New Guinea. It is obvious that these diverse phenomena are going to impact on antisemitism stereotypes and prejudices.

Course objectives

The aim of this seminar is to present my research and to establish an open-ended debate on the development of philosemitism in a global context where all the indicators seem to show

a general tendency of being in the opposite direction. It would seem evident to me that the existence of African Jewish communities on such an unexpected scale would provide scope for a whole new field of study into important developments that touch on the evolution of Judaism, notably the elaboration of the concept of a 'Black Judaism', just as much as it concerns the religious history of Africa. How does this phenomenon impacts on the anti-Semitic rhetoric?? Will a new black anti-Semitism come into place to aggregate with basic antisemitism? Which concrete political form will take this global trend -- including the political dimension of the absorption of new minorities by Israeli government?

Required reading

Edith Bruder, *The Blacks Jews of Africa: History, Identity, Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008, 2012); *Les Juifs noirs d'Afrique et le mythe des Tribus perdues d'Israël* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2014); "Philosemitism and Affiliation to Judaism in Africa," in *Common Knowledge*, Duke University Press, Forthcoming September 2017. "Noirs et juifs: Les Black Jews aux Etats Unis," *Diasporas* 9 (2006): 207-21.

David Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996).

Yvonne Chireau and Nathaniel Deutsch, "Black Culture and Black Zion," *Black Zion: African American Religious Encounters with Judaism*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003);

Jonathan Karp, "Philosemitism in African American Culture," in *Philosemitism in History*, ed. Karp and Adam Sutcliffe (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

David Lehmann, "Religion and Globalization," in *Religions in the Modern World: Traditions and Transformations*, ed. Linda Woodhead, Paul Fletcher, Hiroko Kawanami, and David Smith (London: Routledge, 2002): 346-47;

John S. Mbiti, "The Role of the Jewish Bible in African Independent Churches," *International Review of Mission* 93, no. 369.

J. S. Upkong, "Rereading the Bible with African Eyes," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 91 (1995):

Gerald O. West and Musa W. Dube, *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories, and Trends*, (Leiden: Brill, 2000).

Recommended Reading/ Viewing/Listening

D. T. Adamo, *Africa and the Africans in the Old Testament* (San Francisco: Christian Universities Press, 1998).

Emmanuel A. Ayandele, *The Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria, 1824–1914: A Political and Social Analysis* (London: Longmans, 1966);

C. H. Baëta, *Prophetism in Ghana: A Study of Some "Spiritual Churches"* (London: SCM, 1962);

Edith Bruder, "The Proto-History of Igbo Jewish Identity from the Colonial Period to the Biafra War, 1890–1970," in *African Zion: Studies in Black Judaism*, ed. Bruder and Tudor Parfitt (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2012), 31–64; "Tracing the Hebraic-Judaic Origins of the Beit Avraham of Kechene (Ethiopia)," *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 65 (2014), no. 2; "Jewish Communities in sub-Saharan Africa", in *The History of Relations between Jews and Muslims: From its Origins to the Present Days*, ed. Abdelwahab Medeb and Benjamin Stora (Albin Michel, University of Princeton, 2014); "'The Descendants of David' of Madagascar: Crypto-Judaism in Twentieth Century Africa" in *Race, Color, Identity: Rethinking Discourses about "Jews" in the 21st Century*, edited by Efraim Sicher, New York: Berghahn Books (2013).

E. B. Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longmans, 1962).

Samuel G. Kibicho, "The Interaction of the Traditional Kikuyu Concept of God with the Biblical Concept," *Cahiers des Religions Africaines* 2 (1968): 223–38.

Magdel Le Roux, "Teaching and Interpreting the Old Testament in Africa: Written Word, Archaeology, and Oral World," *Old Testament Essays* 25, no. 3 (2012): 559–82;

John S. Mbiti, "African Christians' Religious Heritage" in *Christian-Jewish Relations in Ecumenical Perspective: A Report on the WCC Consultation on the Church and the Jewish People, Jerusalem, June 16–26, 1977* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1978).

Abraham Melamed, *The Image of the Black in Jewish Culture: A History of the Other*, trans. Betty Sigler Rozen (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003).

John David Peel, *Aladura: A Religious Movement among the Yoruba* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968).

Joseph J. Williams, *Hebrewisms of West Africa: From Nile to Niger with the Jews* (New York: Biblo and Tannen, 1930).

Re-emerging, the Jews of Nigeria, film by Jeff L. Lieberman <http://re-emergingfilm.com/>

The Commandment Keepers, film by Marlaine Glicksman;
<http://thecommandmentkeeper.com/trailer.htm>

Weekly Topics /Themes

WEEK 1

Affiliation to Judaism in Africa

WEEK 2

"African Texts" of the Old Testament

WEEK3

Correspondences between African traditions and the Old Testament

WEEK 4

Africans as Hebrews: The salient role of Western projections on African identity

WEEK 5

The political aspects of the absorption of African (and other minorities) in Israel