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## Review of Bruder, Edith, ed. *The Black Jews of Africa: History, Religion, Identity*. Oxford: University Press, 2011, xii + 283 pp.

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The past couple of decades have seen a rising interest in scholarly discourses on Jewish Diasporas although the wider global trend is yet to be adequately covered in mainstream African studies and African Diaspora studies. Much of this lacuna may be attributed to the eminent Nigerian historian, Adiele E. Afigbo, who on the strength of his works on the Igbo, authoritatively branded related studies connecting Igbo origins to Jewish descent as a desperate search for “noble ancestry.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, in spite of Afigbo, Edith Bruder’s *The Black Jews of Africa* is a courageous adventure in migration history, cultural crossbreeding, and identity formation. Africans have come upon Jewish tradition and legends in diverse circumstances and contexts. Gradually, some African groups have used these to articulate a new Jewish identity joined with that of the Diaspora. Bruder’s book is therefore a timely rebirth of this field of scholarship; it presents readers with a solid narrative situated in a transnational context. The author perceptively reflects on the complex strands of evidence tending to connect both the sub-Saharan “African Jews” and their “cousins” in China, India, Middle East, Europe, and North America with their supposed motherland in Palestine.

Being one of the very few recent studies to track the dispersion of Jews continent-wide, the vast scope of coverage and methodological approach is one of the distinguishing markers of Bruder’s work. The ten chapters of the book are chronologically and thematically organized in three parts with an absorbing “Epilogue.” I consider Part One (Chapters 1-4), which explores the prehistory of the Jewish settlements on the continent, an outstanding coverage of migration, ethnicity, and political identity formation. Evidently, Bruder struggled to winnow through Biblical prophecies, hearsays, myths, and legends that have followed the trail of the globetrotting Jews across diverse times and geographical spaces. Among the most popular myths linked with the so-called “Lost Tribe of Israel” are the Solomon and Queen of Sheba love fest, the Biblical children of Kush, and the Western-fabled depiction of Ethiopia and Africa as the homeland of a ghostly noble man identified by fifteenth century Portuguese fortune hunters as Prester John. As the author points out, “Biblical narratives and prophecies that mentioned the putative existence of Jews in the land of Kush (i.e. Africa) provided the scriptural foundations for subsequent complex connections between Jews and Africa” (17).

Part two (chapters 5-7) details the variety of connections between Judaism

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<sup>3</sup> See Adiele E. Afigbo, *Igbo History and Society: The Essays of Adiele Afigbo*, ed. Toyin Falola (Trenton, NJ: African World Press, 2005), 8-9.

and blackness. The foci of discussion in chapters 5 and 6 is the development, in Western accounts, of Jews and blacks as the archetypal “Other” whose “discovery and invention reinforced and perhaps established the notion of Europe by focusing on it and surrounding it with a strange periphery” (37). This construction of otherness gained popular acclaim in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as Europeans in Africa tried to force their thoughts and ways of life into the heads and minds of Africans. Bruder methodically runs a reality check on the role played by the early European missionaries, soldiers, and scholars—particularly the anthropologists such as M. D. Jeffreys, and Thomas Basden and others—who in the idiom of now discredited Hamitic hypothesis, saw the vision of outside influences, particularly Jewish ones, in every significant cultural element existing in Africa. Bruder provides the reader with a very rare insight into the motives behind such colonial inventions and how these ideological interjections interacted with their local African sub-strata to create new projections that were appropriated and popularized by black thinkers like Edward W. Blyden, James Africanus Horton, W. E. B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, to mention but four, whose writings and speeches were primarily aimed to dismiss the European-held notion that people of African descent were inferior (39-77).

Part three (chapters 8-10) articulates a historical account of Jewish influences in sub-Saharan Africa. As Bruder stated in chapter 8, the penchant for “genealogical dreams” have seen several African societies “stage their arrival in Africa through elements of an original “otherness” (97). Chapters 9 and 10 detail a number of African groups that have self-identified as Jews. These communities range from the widely known Ethiopians and Igbos, to the lesser known Zakhor of Mali, Balula Jews of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Lembe found in South Africa and Zimbabwe, the Jews of Rusape found in Zambia, the Tutsi of Rwanda and Burundi, the Kasuku of Kenya, and the Abayudaya of Uganda. Of particular interest are the motivations that led these ethnic groups in western, eastern, central, and southern regions of the continent to assert Jewish genealogy. Among other things, these groups wanted to connect kinships with the Patriarch Abraham, identified in the Holy Bible as the chosen friend of God Almighty (161-185).

The epilogue “Ancient Myths and Modern Phenomenon” is a summary of the various catalysts broadly explaining the political, economic, and sociocultural magnets that prompted the rise of these mythical-genealogical connects and their interjections with the Judo-Christian ideology. The pertinent question remains: why is it that this particular period of African history should witness a rebirth of Judaizing movements and which factors should be taken into consideration to understand their dynamics? In answer, the author concludes that critical “social

and technological developments” have given the various groups self-identifying as “African Jews” new opportunities and encouragement in forms of websites and access to rare books and periodicals now helping researchers to chase further this rather romantic idea of godly ancestry (188).

Overall, Bruder’s new book has reopened an interesting topic that both students of transnational studies and ethnic politics will want to explore further. Although it did not break the bank in answering most of the lingering questions on the authenticity of Afro-Jewish kinship, I strongly urge those interested in Diaspora studies in general and African and Jewish studies in particular to read *The Black Jews of Africa*.

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