Judaism’s deep roots and new offshoots in Africa

Practices drawn from the Hebrew Bible are not new to the continent. Seeking full conversion to rabbinic Judaism is.

by Philip Jenkins in the May 9, 2018 issue

Rabbi Gershom Sizomu leads music during a service at the Stern Synagogue of the Abayudaya, who practice Conservative Judaism, in Mbale, Uganda, in November 2018. Religion News Service photo by Tonny Onyulo.

Observers of Global South Christianity regularly note parallels between modern churches and the world of the early church. Now as then, some Christians are exploring the borderlands between their own faith and Judaism in ways that can be uncomfortable for both faiths.

The idea of an ancient Jewish presence in black Africa long fascinated Western colonial observers, who tended to credit King Solomon with any signs of advanced civilization that they discovered below the Sahara. More seriously, modern scholars have studied very Jewish-looking customs and rituals among African peoples. In one

spectacular instance—that of the Lemba of South Africa—a powerful case can be made for a genetic linkage. The Ethiopian Orthodox famously retain many Jewish customs, including strong legends concerning Solomon and the Ark of the Covenant.

Quite apart from these archaic parallels, many African churches demonstrate Judaizing tendencies. The rapidly growing AICs (African Instituted Churches) have always been fascinated by the Old Testament world, all the more so when Old Testament precedents seem to justify contemporary practices. Many such churches practice circumcision and forbid the eating of pork. One West African AIC, the Musama Disco Christo Church, has its sacred temple, where only the high priest is permitted to enter the Holy of Holies on one day each year.

In Uganda, heavily Old Testament–tinged Protestant missions stimulated the growth of a Judaizing AIC, the Abayudaya (People of Yehuda), which American rabbis have now integrated into the (Conservative) Jewish mainstream. That example suggests how difficult it will be for future scholars to differentiate between authentic vestiges of ancient Hebrew peoples and more recent recipients of Christian evangelism.

Across the ecclesiastical spectrum, Christians passionately explore the Old Testament and draw analogies between their own ethnic groups and the Hebrews of old. The idea of a Hebrew connection is particularly strong among Nigeria’s (heavily Christian) Igbo people, who are some 30 million strong. Although such claims are usually metaphorical, they sometimes become surprisingly literal. Some biblical scholars are so struck by the traditional African resonances of many Old Testament narratives that they speculate boldly about the possible influence of Lost Tribes across the continent. Their efforts are supported by some Israeli and U.S. rabbis, who believe no less optimistically in finding and gathering the historically lost sheep of the Hebrew people.

Christians normally acquire Judaizing ideas through literary channels rather than by direct contact with modern-day Jewish communities. (Apart from South Africa’s substantial community, Jews are scarce on the continent.) But increasingly some Christians have gone beyond a general identification with a biblically defined Hebrew identity and sought full conversion to rabbinic Judaism. Across the continent, some congregations now identify as synagogues, complete with rabbis and all the accoutrements of a contemporary Jewish community. In virtually every case, converts are former Christians, drawn from a wide variety of denominations.

Although African media have reported this neo-Jewish move as a significant religious trend, it must be seen in proportion. When set alongside the overwhelming presence of Christians or Muslims, the numerical phenomenon is microscopic, representing at most 50,000 people in all Africa. (The Abayudaya are just 2,000 strong.) In an African context, a Christian church or sect with even a million or so members would scarcely register on the radar of most religious commentators. But matters may change, and the Jewish presence might boom.

For Judaism, these new groups raise challenging questions. Just how should Jewish communities react to nontraditional believers who declare themselves to be faithfully Jewish? That question has acquired a whole new dimension since the establishment of the state of Israel, because acknowledging Jewish identity also conveys rights of citizenship and, potentially, of residence.

One famous story in modern Israel concerns the Beta Israel, the so-called Falashas, a community long resident in Ethiopia that was recognized as having authentic Jewish roots (although more recent genetic studies have not substantiated those claims). Most of the community was duly extracted to the Jewish homeland, where today 125,000 Israelis claim Ethiopian roots.

Such openness does not extend to other African groups who identify as Jewish, unless they follow approved conversion procedures. Israeli unwillingness to accept religious self-identification puzzles and angers Africans who consider themselves Jews and who cannot comprehend why any faith should insist on racial qualifications for membership. Established Jewish communities obviously frame the question differently.

Presently, the small numbers involved mean that any tensions can be contained easily. But African religious movements have a habit of growing very quickly. It does not take much imagination to envisage a world with millions of newly identified African Jews, unrecognized by the Jewish homeland. And what might happen if Jews ever decided to proselytize in Africa?

FOLLOWING UP (Updated February 26, 2019): Ethiopian Jewish families were reunited at the Ben Gurion Airport near Tel Aviv, Israel, in February 2019 as nearly 100 Ethiopian Jews arrived as the first wave of new immigration since the government said in 2018 that it would let some of the 8,000 remaining community members join relatives in Israel.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Becoming Jewish in Africa.”