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Rhizomic and Mycorrhizal Networks of African Jewry: A Study of Continuity and Change the Beta Israel of Qechene and North Shewa Ethiopia

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Thus, I present here a proposed research agenda on continuity and change. To do so, I share ideas on the methods we might best use in undertaking such a study. I name a problem with a common approach that I and colleagues from the global north tend to utilize in our research on global southern Jewish communities newly in contact with global north communities.

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RHIZOMICANDMYCORRHIZALNETWORKSOFAFRICANJEWRYASTUDYOFCONTINUITYANDCHANGETHEBETAISRAELOFQECHENEANDNORTHSHEWAETHIOPIA

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Rhizomic and Mycorrhizal Networks of African Jewry: A Study of Continuity and Change the Beta Israel of Qechene and North Shewa Ethiopia

Marla Brettschneider

I. Introduction[1]

In 2022, partnering with Beta Israel members in Ethiopia, Dr. Malka Shabtay, and Nina Judith Katz, I published *The Hidden Jews of Ethiopia*[2] on the Beta Israel of Qechene (in Addis Ababa) and North Shewa, Ethiopia. In this article, I examine a dynamic over which I puzzled while working on the book: the flow of continuity and change. While exploring this subject, I found that at times, I hit a wall. Global northern colleagues of mine who studied such communities could not assist me in thinking about the dynamic interplay of continuity and change as I was seeing it. I came to realize that we need new frameworks to help outside scholars check our assumptions and avoid imposing them on locals. Moreover, perhaps community members might also find new frameworks helpful in considering how they operate and think about their experience.[3]

Thus, I present here a proposed research agenda on continuity and change. To do so, I share ideas on the methods we might best use in undertaking such a study. I name a problem with a common approach that I and colleagues from the global north tend to utilize in our research on global southern Jewish communities newly in contact with global north communities. This mode relates to what is termed arborescence, i.e. a tree-like structure. I then introduce an alternative rhizomic or mycorrhizal approach used in humanities theories. Using this methodology, I propose a research agenda for studying continuity and change in the Beta Israel communities of Qechene and North Shewa as the community currently seeks significant shifts in their communal life.

First, however, I provide a general overview of Ethiopia in order to understand the national context in which the community operates, its opportunities, and constraints. Next, I offer an introduction to the Beta Israel community. I then introduce two methodological approaches, arborescent and rhizomic/mycorrhizal, to enable us to explore the mutual dependence of continuity and change in this community. I hope that a conscious rhizomic/mycorrhizal approach will help researchers avoid common pitfalls of Jewish essentialism and make dynamics of continuity and change intelligible in their vibrancy to outsiders. Finally, I present a seven-point agenda for future research that can consider continuity and change simultaneously.

II. Ethiopian Context[4]

The second most populous country in sub-Saharan Africa, Ethiopia has a population of over 111 million, nearly five million of whom live in the capital, Addis Ababa. The geologically diverse and rugged nation covers 1.1 million square kilometers. Located in the Horn of Africa, near Eritrea, Somalia, Sudan, and South Sudan, Ethiopia is well-positioned for international trade. The community studied here relies on, an actively engages with, both the benefits and difficulties of life in Addis Ababa and hidden locales in the countryside as they create communal life.

a) *Politics, Economics, Human Rights and Vulnerable Populations*

Ethiopia was never formally colonized by a European empire. Italy occupied the country between 1936 and 1941 but failed to establish official control. Emperor Haile Selassie ruled from 1930 until 1974, when the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front overthrew him. The next twenty years saw more bloodshed and political suppression under Colonel Haile Mariam's socialist junta. In 1995, the government became a federal republic with executive and judicial

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[1] Thank yous to the UNH Center for the Humanities, Marina Cardoso-Vianna-Van, Elizabeth Shearman and the UNH Global Research and Social Inequities Lab for research support as well as Nina Judith Katz for editorial support and content engagement. I presented this article as an invited paper at the Institute for the Study of Global Antisemitism and Policy Conference (much gratitude to Edith Bruder), the Jewish Africa Conference in Rabat sponsored by the American Sephardi Association and the Moroccan Association Mimouna, and also at Temple Beth Israel, in Massachusetts.

[2] Marla Brettschneider, Malka Shabtay, and Nina Judith Katz, ed., *The Hidden Jews of Ethiopia: The Beta Israel of Kechene and North Shewa* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2022). See also Malka Shabtay's film *Nafkot,* directed/performed by Malka Shabtay (2022).

[3] This work is part of the relatively new field of research exploring Jewish communities indigenous to sub-Saharan Africa. There are numerous Jewish and Jewishly-related communities across the region.

[4] Thanks to William Chang and Caroline Hall for research support in this section.

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branches and a bicameral parliament. The country has a president and prime minister. In 2020, the independent research organization Freedom House labeled Ethiopia "Not Free" in terms of both political rights and civil liberties. In 2021, women held 38.8 percent of seats in parliament.[5] These facets of the national context, particularly the years of war, political turmoil, and lack of rights, all impact the communities studied in this article. This situation contributes to the country's precarity and inability to eradicate the violence and repression the community faces, both in common with others in the country and also as a despised minority.

Although Ethiopia's economy is growing rapidly, the country has a high poverty rate compared to the rest of Africa.[6] Still, the diversity of the economy—including agriculture, manufacturing, extractive industries, and a growing financial sector—bodes well for the future.[7]

In 2019, women comprised 46.6 percent of the paid workforce.[8] The Covid pandemic began after these data were collected, and Ethiopia has been off course from its pre-Covid growth trajectory. These economic difficulties have a disproportionate effect on smaller and poorer communities, such as the Beta Israel.

Human rights in Ethiopia have improved since the government elected in 2018 assumed power,[9] but arbitrary arrests and the impunity of government forces remain major issues, especially in Tigray, where violent conflict between rebel groups and government forces erupts frequently. The Beta Israel community faces extreme discrimination and has not traditionally been able to rely on government support. The larger context of violence with Tigrayan groups at times lands literally on the doorsteps of community members. At the same time, a sense that human rights have generally improved in recent years leads some Beta Israel members to assess that the threat against them is shifting and provides encouragement to come out of hiding.

Same-sex activity is criminalized and punishable by three to fifteen years of incarceration. Discrimination against LGTBQ+ individuals is not criminalized; many report violence but are apprehensive about going to the police. Some report being subject to government surveillance as LGTBQ+ persons. These extreme circumstances, and the views that make them possible, currently prevent investigation of LGBTQ+ issues among the Beta Israel.

Ethiopia's abortion laws are more flexible than those in surrounding countries. Abortion is permitted for a range of social and economic reasons, including to preserve the life or health of the mother, in pregnancies arising from rape or incest, and in cases of fetal impairment. The country is committed to increasing the safety of legal abortions.[10]

Ethiopian law criminalizes rape; the penalty is five to twenty years in prison. Spousal rape is not criminalized; only certain judges consider it a crime. Domestic violence is a criminal offense; penalties can include fines and up to fifteen years in prison. However, this law is not usually enforced, and domestic violence remains a significant problem. In 2019, women comprised 46.6 percent of the workforce.[11] While the Beta Israel have their own historic understanding of gender and gender relations, the national context can reinforce difficulties that community women may face.

b) Literacy, Health, and Religion

The overall literacy rate for Ethiopians aged fifteen and up is estimated at 51.8 percent, 44.4 percent for females, and 59.2 percent for males. Among Ethiopians aged sixty-five and over, approximately 15.2 percent are literate, including 7.75 percent of females, and 23.9 percent of males.[12]

In 2019, life expectancy was 66.5 years,[13] 68.5 years for females, and 64.6 years for males. Infant mortality was measured at 36.5 deaths per 1,000 births, 31.4 for females and 46.5 for males. In 2017, maternal mortality was approximately 401 deaths per 100,000 births. Additionally, the contraceptive prevalence rate for

[5] Ethiopia was graded at 24/100. Political rights scored 10/40, and civil liberties 14/60. "Freedom in the World 2020," Freedom House, 2020, accessed September 5, 2021, https://freedomhouse.org/country/ethiopia/freedom-world/2020. "Country Fact Sheet: Ethiopia," United Nations Women, 2021, accessed September 5, 2021, https://data.unwomen.org/country/ethiopia.

[6] "Overview: Ethiopia," World Bank, accessed September 5, 2021, https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/ethiopia/overview.

[7] In 2019, the GDP for Ethiopia was estimated at 95.913 billion USD; its GNI was estimated at 94.972 billion. "Data: Ethiopia," Data, World Bank, 2019, accessed September 2, 2021. https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=ET. Primary exports are coffee and gold, with primary export partners including China, the United States, and the United Arab Emirates. "Ethiopia (ETH) Exports, Imports, and Trade Partners," Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC), 2019, accessed October 3, 2021, https://oec.world/en/profile/country/eth.

[8] "Labor Force, Female (% of Total Labor Force)—Ethiopia," Data, World Bank, 2019, accessed September 5, 2021, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.TOTL.FE.ZS?locations=ET.

[9] Unless otherwise noted, information on human rights is from "Ethiopia: Country Report on Human Rights Practices," U.S. Department of State, March 30, 2021, accessed August 30, 2021, https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/ethiopia/.

[10] "Ethiopia," the World's Abortion Laws, Center for Reproductive Rights, 2021, accessed October 3, 2021, https://maps.reproductiverights.org/worldabortionlaws?country=ETH.

[11] "Labor Force, Female (% of Total Labor Force)—Ethiopia," Data, World Bank, 2019. accessed September 5, 2021, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.TOTL.FE.ZS?locations=ET.

[12] "Ethiopia," Institute for Statistics, UNESCO, April 12, 2017, accessed September 5, 2021, http://uis.unesco.org/en/country/et.

[13] "Life Expectancy at Birth, Total (Years)—Ethiopia," Data, World Bank, 2019, accessed September 5, 2021, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.LE00.IN?locations=ET.

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females aged fifteen to forty-nine was 41.4 percent.[14] This national context gives us parameters for potential future studies of the well-being of, and potential for, the Beta Israel. We did not look at literacy and health matters for this community specifically, but it likely would be worthwhile to do so.

The constitution of Ethiopia prohibits religious discrimination and government control of religion. According to the 2007 census, forty-four percent of the population identified as Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Christian and another thirty-four percent as Sunni Muslim. Nineteen percent of Ethiopians identified with other denominations of Christianity, and five percent labelled themselves "other" (including Latter-Day Saints, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, Roman Catholics, and adherents to indigenous faiths).[15] We now take a closer look at the conditions of one of these communities, the Beta Israel.

The Beta Israel is an ancient Jewish community in Ethiopia.[16] Some sources date its origins to 500 CE. Some in the Beta Israel community understand themselves as the lost Israelite tribe of Dan. The community experienced persecution and violence across centuries under many regimes, including the Solomonic empire in the thirteenth century, Italian occupiers in the early twentieth century, and Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam's junta in the late twentieth century.

Current estimates suggest that approximately 100,000 Jews live in the Qechene area of Addis Ababa, and more in the North Shewa region. They follow ancient Jewish practices and are comparatively poor. Publicly, many have felt forced to identify as Christian while living clandestinely as Jews. In the past two decades, a small number from this community have come out publicly as Jews and synagogue members.

III. Jewish Country Summary[17]

The Biblical story of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba is taken to place the origins of the Ethiopian Jewish community close to 3000 years ago. Others estimate that the Beta Israel (literally, "house of Israel") arrived in Ethiopia later. These communities are thought to have lost contact with the global Jewish world in antiquity. A noteworthy mention of them by a non-Ethiopian Jew came from David ben Solomon ibn Abi Zimra, the chief rabbi of Egypt, in the sixteenth century. He commented that the Ethiopian Jewish communities followed pre-rabbinic Jewish law and traditions as it is thought that this community left the larger body of the Jewish people before rabbinic Judaism developed.

In the late nineteenth century, foreigners began to pay a new kind of attention to this community. Often cited in this context, Dr. Jaques Faitlovitch, after studying Ethiopian languages at the Sorbonne, spent years researching the community and giving lectures about it in Israel and the global North. He set up a Jewish school for Beta Israel children in Addis Ababa.

By the mid-twentieth century, the plight of Ethiopian Jews became better known to global Jewry and some made aliyah to Israel. Over decades, a movement to help them slowly gathered steam. In the 1980s, as Ethiopia devolved into civil war, many Jews from Gondar fled to Sudan in hope of reaching Israel, which eventually supported their aliyah. As the situation of these refugees became more perilous, Israel carried out a series of secret rescue operations, bringing tens of thousands of Ethiopian Jews to Israel.

Over the centuries, many Ethiopian Jews converted to Christianity to escape acute, often deadly, persecution. We cannot know how many blended into Christian society and lost touch with their Jewish origins. Some descendants of these converts have relatives who emigrated to Israel during the initial wave of relocations. Some in this group were then accepted for aliyah. They explain that they see themselves as Jews and subscribe to Jewish, not Christian, beliefs. Today, a few thousand of these Beta Israel, also originally from the Gondar region, await permission to make aliyah.

IV. The Beta Israel of Qechene and North Shewa: Dynamics of Continuity and Change

Many of the largely still hidden Beta Israel communities of Qechene and North Shewa share this history of forced conversion, but they also persevered and built on their rich traditions. Jews in Ethiopia have experienced scorn and hatred from members of the Ethiopian Orthodox Christian Church, who consider them Christ-killers. In addition, the neighboring Christian farming families revile them as craftspeople, consider them "buda," having the evil eye and able to turn into hyenas at night to scare, injure, and kill non-Beta Israel. Other Ethiopians regard them as impure.

As a result, the Beta Israel face murder, burning of their fields and homes, and kidnapping. They experience harsh discrimination and indignities. Their neighbors often refuse to engage in commerce or

[14] "Contraceptive Prevalence, Any Methods (% of Women Ages 15-49)— Ethiopia," Data, World Bank, 2021, accessed October 3, 2021, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.CONU.ZS?locations=ET.
[15] "Ethiopia: Report on International Religious Freedom," U.S. Department of State, December 1 2020, accessed August 20, 2021, https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/ethiopia/.
[16] "Ethiopia Virtual Jewish Tour," the Virtual Jewish World, Jewish Virtual Library, 2021, accessed October 3, 2021, https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/ethiopia-virtual-jewish-tour.
[17] Material for this section draws on Ari Greenspan's research support for the forthcoming Mellen Press book edited by Marla Brettschneider and Bonita Nathan Sussman.

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cultural exchanges with them and commonly avoid looking them in the eyes or touching them.

In response to this persecution, the North Shewa Beta Israel developed secluded synagogue communities known as *gedamoch,* where they keep practices described in the Torah, which they call *Orayta* (the Aramaic word for "Torah"). Many in this community spend their wage-earning years in cities, particularly in Addis Ababa. To lessen danger and to earn a living, many live publicly as Christians and only secretly as Beta Israel. Others live in or near the secret settlements housing their synagogues.

This group is experiencing a fundamental shift in their community. In the last twenty or so years, some of this portion of the Beta Israel community have begun identifying as Jews and practicing Judaism more openly; for example, they have built two synagogues, with a community center, in Addis Ababa. Increasingly, we find that some members seek publicity in their identity as Beta Israel, are connecting to global Jewry, and no longer feel the need to live in hiding. They are experiencing significant growth and trials that can come when a community seeks both change and continuity.

Dynamics of continuity and change may, at times, move along relatively smoothly. Sometimes this situation creates tensions within a community. In looking at issues of continuity and change in the Beta Israel community, we must also address some problems that outsiders have, starting with basic binary assumptions that prohibit the study of these dynamics of simultaneous continuity and change.

V. Who has Issues with Beta Israel's Continuity & Change?

I can attest that these communities are in a dynamic moment of transformation, providing an opportunity to study how different Jewish communities across the globe navigate the challenging processes of continuity and change.

Beta Israel members are increasingly engaging in work that is more public than previous community activity. With this increase in visibility, more people in Ethiopia are learning about the communities and some are newly discovering their own roots in these Jewish communities. Members, especially younger ones, are challenging some old wisdom and building new Beta Israel institutions in Ethiopia. As they do so, they and their communities face challenges of continuity and change in their personal and collective lives.

In recent decades, questions of continuity and change, or continuity and rupture (as a 2022 American Sephardi Federation series named it),[18] have been at the center of much debate in many Jewish communities across the globe. Yet, some North African and global northern Jewish community leaders and scholars get stuck when considering this dynamic in sub-Saharan Africa.

Amid fierce debate regarding continuity and change in Ashkenazi, Sephardi, and Mizrachi communities, some, particularly Western and sometimes Sephardi, scholars have fixated on a paradigm they created of eternal primitive cultures in the global south. This strain can be found at times when global northerners learn of sub-Saharan communities and what community members understand as their Israelite rites. Some foreigners imagine these communities as presenting a more authentic or original Judaism, monolithic and frozen in time, offering global northern Jews a window into some mythic, monolithic, ancient practice and thinking.[19] When these commentators notice change, they question the legitimacy of these groups as Jewish altogether. They regard change as natural to and the privilege of Ashkenazi, Mizrachi, and Sephardi Jewry, but as somehow delegitimizing sub-Saharan Jewry. Yet, as the communities in Ethiopia wrestle with the excitement and tensions created in the simultaneous movements of new ideas and commitment to their community's history, we find numerous matters of continuity and change worthy of scholarly inquiry.

To study those previously excluded, we often need new methods. What if Beta Israel community members and foreigners begin to take the dynamics of continuity and change seriously as a subject of curiosity and generous, rather than judgmental, exploration? Is it possible to see that continuity and change are not always opposites? Might this become a productive approach to grappling with the Beta Israel's current conditions? What new methods and theoretical modes might yield new perspectives that avoid ossified approaches to the global south? How might studying these dynamics in communities newer to global Jewry change the vista of possibility across the Jewish world?

VI. Methodology: Rhizomic and Mycorrhizal Networks[20]

Northerners frequently approach Jewish activity throughout sub-Saharan Africa as suspect. Continuity and change are often seen in a binary, zero-sum way as detracting from each other. Instead, I suggest a new modality of rhizomic and mycorrhizal networks to offer a

[18] American Sephardi Federation, Lecture Series, April 2022.

[19] Noah Tamarkin, Genetic Afterlives: Black Jewish Indigeneity in South Africa. Duke University Press, 2020.

[20] I thank Alexander Kaye, working in the field of Jewish though at Brandeis University, for our conversations, which spurred my considering this model for use in exploring of continuity and change in the Beta Israel communities in Ethiopia today. Nina Judith Katz helped me hone the concepts.

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way to appreciate these communities and recognize their legitimacy and integrity as central to global Jewry, as much as any Jewish community historically or today.

Taking off from the work of Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972–1980),[21] I propose an amended model to explain such interesting trends as indigenous Ethiopians who never considered whether they had Jewish heritage learning about the hidden Beta Israel communities from the publicity of activists and discovering that they, too, are descendants of this group.[22]

a) Arborescence

Rhizomic and mycorrhizal modes, similar in structure to certain root structures, the internet, and neural webs, are usually contrasted with arboresence. I will first explain the latter.

Arborescence, or the tree model, considers all life connected to a foundation, in this metaphor, the tree trunk. As a foundation, the trunk is the source from which all developments branch out and the locus where they connect without necessarily connecting to each other directly. Thus, this model is hierarchical, tends to presume hegemonies and devalue difference and multiplicity. From this perspective, change is easily suspect, particularly if less recognizable to the hegemon(s) constituting the tree trunk.

When non-Ethiopian Jews consider Ethiopian Jewry, especially these less familiar Beta Israel communities, they implicitly rely on this tree model. Imagine a group that exists, goes about its business, and is clear on its own identity and import. At some point "we" (outsiders) "discover" what we consider potentially a new branch of "our" community. It seems so different from us and others that we already know that "we" debate its connection to the trunk, the hegemon of world Jewry. We consider ourselves core, essentially the trunk itself, but we can be less familiar with other branches and leaves in their diversity.

Our vision extends to those whose connections to us we recognize. Considering ourselves the trunk, we claim the right to assess what constitutes a branch or leaf of "our" tree. It can be difficult for us to see how some groups connect to each other or to the tree. In the case of communities of the global south that claim relation to world Jewry, hegemon leaders sometimes conclude that the new branch, or community, is so different that it must be from another tree entirely (i.e., not even Jewish). This can be contrasted with a rhizomic or mycorrhizal model.

b) Rhizomic and Mycorrhizal Models

A rhizome is an underground stem with multiple nodes from which roots descend and plants grow. The mycorrhizal web is a network of plant roots interwoven with fungal mycelia in a symbiotic relationship. With either metaphor, this model is neither foundational nor hierarchical; the nodes, roots, and hyphae all connect to each other without an intermediary trunk. They thus offer a more democratic vista for horizontal relationships that do not center hegemons. In this way, we can also account for change without negating historic ties and continuity.

These largely still hidden Ethiopian Beta Israel communities of Qechene and North Shewa are a set of unique Jewish communities surviving intense and violent persecution against the odds and continuing to participate in pre-Talmudic Jewish traditions that they have managed to keep alive, as they understand it, from the days of the First Temple in Jerusalem. Clusters of adults live in Ethiopia's cities during their salary-earning years while privately supporting and maintaining clandestine ties to their hidden, rural homelands. There is concerted effort to continue ancient practices, specifically pre-Talmudic Jewish traditions as understood by these communities. How does a rhizomic or mycorrhizal model help us understand struggles with simultaneous continuity and change that a hegemonic view generally renders obscures?

VII. Rhizomic Nodal Points of Continuity and Change: Suggesting a Research Agenda

I would suggest undertaking new studies of many sub-Saharan African Jewish communities, especially, but not only, the Beta Israel of Qechene and North Shewa, using the rhizomic or mycorrhizal paradigms to explore the following cluster within a dynamic of continuity and change. Of course, this list is

[21] Developed from Deluze's earlier work on "image of thought" in *Difference and Repetition* 1968, scholars are examining the methodological benefit of models introduced in Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972–1980), This model, drawn from the natural sciences, has been applied often in diaspora studies, making it helpful for Jewish studies. While the rhizomic applies to some examples noted in the Beta Israel community, the mycorrhizal web is a more apt concept, similar to neural networks and the internet.

[22] Other interesting examples that apply the rhizomic model to Jewish studies include Daniel Boyarin's "Notes," in *A Traveling Homeland, The Babylonian Talmud as Diaspora,* University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015, 125–54, http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt15hvz45.8; Bruneau, Michel's "Diasporas, Transnational Spaces and Communities," in *Diaspora and Transnationalism: Concepts, Theories and Methods* by Bauboeck, Rainer and Thomas Faist (eds), Amsterdam, NE: Amsterdam University Press, 2010; Danyte, Milda. 2019. "Re-thinking the Concept of Diaspora: The Example of Lithuanian Migration History." *OIKOS*, 1(27): 61-77; Mehta, Sandhya Rao. 2017. "Diasporas Reimagined: Spaces, Practices and Belonging." *Diaspora Studies*. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Sandhya-Mehta-2/publication/320959793_Diasporas_reimagined_spaces_practices_and_belonging/links/5b97666692851c78c41babf2/Diasporas-reimagined-spaces-practices-and-belonging.pdf; Schorsch, Jonathan. 2000. "American Jewish Historians, Colonial Jews and Blacks, and the Limits of *Wissenschaft*: A Critical Review." *Jewish Social Studies* 6(2): 102-132.

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merely a start, based on the work I considered in the process of producing the new book.

a) Persistence amid Tremendous Loss

This community has suffered tremendous loss of continuity due to harsh demands that they not merely change but abandon their collective endeavors altogether. Currently, only approximately fifteen out of forty-four of their ancient secret synagogues remain. Every family has experienced murder. For those able to carry on, this condition of incredible loss also includes basic knowledge, such as who is in their community. Loss complicates living and practicing together as a network of communities across complex geographical terrain. Their persistence despite loss may sound impossible. This community, however, meets devastating losses with a commitment to carry on against the odds.

b) Survival in a War Zone: Anti-Jewish Context, Civil Wars, Famine, and Poverty

We must also understand that these communities are living in a war zone.The current bloody conflict between the government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) has spilled into some secret synagogues and community members' homes. This community has lived through periods of violence before, both particular to Jews and in Ethiopia as a whole. In recent history, the violence and precarity of the early 1980s included a famine, particularly in the north, and violent government practices against rebel forces in Tigray, Wollo, and Eritrea. This was the setting for the historic airlifts of thousands of Gondar Jews to Israel. The North Shewa and Qechene communities, however, were not included in those airlifts, nor have they yet received international support.

c) Community Structure

Persisting in a hostile environment, these communities developed amazing survival strategies that rely on innovative community structures. These have shifted between, and melded, methods of continuity and of change in order not only to survive, but also to flourish as robust communities when possible. Through these structures, community members support themselves and each other in their daily needs. They retain and build their multiple forms of cultural expression over time, as they also practice their religious rites in hidden synagogues in remote locales that are extremely challenging for outsiders to reach. They have long-established webs of relations of local, in-person communities connecting members in Qechene with those in the hidden communities and nearby cities, although their lives differ profoundly across these different locations. This structure, in itself, entails a negotiation with emphasis on both continuity and change. The community structures in all of these environments emerged from conscious assessments of circumstances requiring significant changes to enable survival.

d) Publicity

As I studied this dynamic, the new book itself led me to identify this research agenda on continuity and change. *The Hidden Jews of Ethiopia* is unique in presenting history and various matters of import in the life of these communities from the perspectives of key leaders and lay people in the communities themselves. Never before have multiple members of these communities spoken of their traditions so directly in print, let alone in print in English, i.e. anticipating a transnational audience. The reach of their contributions is unprecedented. The very act of this publication is another example of their contending with both continuity and change.

While there is scant extant research published on these communities, many members of the community feel strongly that they no longer need to remain hidden in the way that they have been historically. Another major publicity development demonstrating an delicate negotiation of continuity and change is that some urban members of the community have built two new synagogues and a cultural association. The development of these new public institutions in an urban setting is another experiment in using the new to preserve the old. The dynamics of how this will play out over time will be interesting for community members and scholars to study.

Community members have remained committed to this project even when their country faced intense fighting and they and their communities were under siege, sometimes in their own homes. During the years when we worked together on the book, I was witness to some of the difficulties of meeting the needs of quotidian life and basic communal functioning and I glimpsed the incredible tenacity and courage of these communities. Seeking continuity and survival, those in these communities once again chose change, adopting publicity even as they faced, organized violence and threats to their lives and ways of life.

e) Spiritual Leaders: Interpreting and Practicing Ancient Wisdoms

In the surviving hidden gedamoch, spiritual leaders continue to guide members in age-old customs. Elderly members of the communities, many of whom spent their professionally productive years in the cities, return to their spiritual homes. They return to be able to live Jewishly in their sunset years after decades in hiding in the more populated urban centers, where extreme prejudice has long made it basically impossible to be openly Jewish. More specific examination of how different spiritual leaders interpret and practice ancient wisdom requires a closer look than I can offer at this

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time. I hope that future scholarly research, especially from within the community, will explore this matter. At the same time, for a community fighting for its survival and simultaneously seeking legitimacy by demonstrating a direct relation to ancient communities, it can be difficult to acknowledge and examine changes developed by specific spiritual leaders. When outsiders view change in a zero-sum relation to continuity, community members may hesitate to highlight differences among spiritual leaders. Some may fear that attention to difference and change could interfere with their quest for recognition by world Jewry, instead of highlighting the vitality and strength inherent in developing multiple approaches to their traditions.

f) Youth and Generations

Clusters of young children live in the hidden communities with their elders and religious leaders. When a child who lives with family in a city is orphaned, fellow community members see the child safely back to these oases be raised by elders in a Beta Israel environment. Additionally, over the past two decades, more community members in Qechene have begun disclosing their hidden heritage to their children at younger ages and sometimes bringing them to visit the gedamoch.

How do groups of new people, such as children growing up within the settlements and urban children growing up with this new knowledge of their heritage, impact the grappling with continuity and change, and how does this dynamic impact the youth? It will be interesting to note how these dynamics of continuity and change develop over time among the youth of today. In future years it will also be interesting to attend to the relations between these two sets of current youth growing up knowing their heritage.

g) Challenging Invisibility, Discrimination, and Violence

With a few exceptions, these communities have been largely unacknowledged by outsiders throughout most of the Christian history of Ethiopia. In the survival mode of hiding, the community has few options to resist discrimination and violence. Today, some members of the Ethiopian Beta Israel are directly challenging such invisibility and demanding their human rights and dignities at the local and national levels as well as within the context of global Jewry.

Although invisibility risks contributing to an ideology viewing the groups as alien and frightening, visibility posed a greater risk. Thus, over time, the communities engaged in processes that rendered them unintelligible to their non-Jewish neighbors. While discrimination and violence against the group persists, some in the community consider the current threat less than what their ancestors encountered and believe that they may be able to face such threats successfully. Contemporary modes of technology, communications, and human rights discourse contribute to this view.

There has always been resistance to threats, and today some members and segments of the community feel emboldened to push back against local forms of anti-Jewish sentiment and violence. Such challenges require visibility, despite ongoing threats. Making public demands in a local context is new, as is the visibility this requires. These bold moves are intended to safeguard members and communities today and to keep their history moving forward.

Additionally, moving toward new relationships on a national scale, the communities seek cooperation in their struggles for human and religious rights. Working with the central government was historically not possible for these communities. Now, some members hope that the government may become a source of support in ending the pervasive discrimination against them. As in more local contexts, such developments, and the ensuing visibility for advocates and their communities, require a nuanced balance of continuity and change. It is a vibrant time for these communities, a historical moment when some members both assess that they are on more solid ground and recognize their ongoing liminality and fragility.

The groups are also working to attain international Jewish recognition and acknowledgement of their status as Jews by the modern state of Israel. Building new relationships with global diaspora Jewry can be both an end in itself and a strategy toward strengthening the community as well as building relationships with the Israeli government. There is much to learn from the experience of the Gondar Beta Israel, whom Israeli authorities eventually recognized as Jews and supported in making aliyah. This recognition and relocation occurred thanks to contemporary forms of communication, transit, and both overt and covert international relations never before possible. The context for this included the new, independent state of Israel, which advocates lobbied until it ultimately organized the airlifts and admitted the communities. These desperate acts of survival required the protection of other Jewish communities. In Israel, these Beta Israel communities face pressure to change to expressions of Jewishness more intelligible to Ashkenazi and Mizrachi authorities, and they experience new forms of discrimination and violence. It is unclear how the Beta Israel communities remaining in Ethiopia and seeking relationships with global Jewry may replicate the fraught history of those who resettled in Israel and elsewhere. It is also uncertain how the difficult history of the Gondar Beta Israel community may help Beta Israel communities in Ethiopia in their aims at recognition by, and relationships with, global Jewry, or help those community members seeking aliyah. While many spokespersons for the

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communities in Ethiopia are expressly Zionist, in that they promote the option of aliyah, the community also seeks to change conditions within Ethiopia to enable a viable future for the community there.

VIII. Conclusion

Although largely still hidden, the Beta Israel community of Qechene and North Shewa is currently in a period of dynamic transformations. This is an exceptional group worth studying to learn how different Jewish communities navigate the challenging processes of continuity and change.[23] I hope that members of these communities take up this research agenda, as they have much to offer global Jewry in our collective time of rapid transitions.

Studying the Beta Israel as they negotiate continuity and change, I find it helpful to conceptualize the communities as rhizomic and mycorrhizal networks within the larger web of global Jewry. The arborescent presumption is more common among global northerners. in which hegemons of global Jewry expect communities new to them to prove their Jewish legitimacy, often by demonstrating their similarity with ancient Israelite culture; in that case, the hegemons see change as suspect and precluding, rather than integral to, continuity. Relying on rhizomic and mycorrhizal models allows us to appreciate their legitimacy, integrity, and centrality to global Jewry as equal to that of any other Jewish community.

[23] In earlier versions of this project presented as conference papers, I included indigeneity in this study. While beyond the scope of this article, it is important. Anti-Jewish tropes continue to exclude Jews from the field by casting Jews as universally non-indigenous, ever the rootless cosmopolitans, especially in the diaspora, and even in the land of Israel. We find in a mycorrhizal study of this community a helpful alternative to binary modes which set indigeneity and diaspora as opposites. The Beta Israel of Ethiopia is a robust example of African Jewish indigeneity and the diasporic.

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