



**ISRAELITE SLAVES IN THE
AMERICAN SOUTH PART 2:
*HEBRAIC CULTURAL
TRAITS BROUGHT FROM
AFRICA TO AMERICA***

NEGRO FOLK MUSIC IN EASTERN
SOUTH CAROLINA

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by
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Primitive Negro music may be traced to sources in which can be found points of contact with Judaism and a Jewish type of Christianity, and which help to explain the appeal that the white man's religion, or certain aspects of it, made to him. There may have lingered in the background of the slaves' minds some dim reminiscence of an aboriginal Pygmy belief in: (1) pure monotheism, (2) resurrection of the body from the dead, (3) universal dualism of good and evil spirits, (4) the fall of man, (5) spirits as representative of diety, (6) satan, (7) Heaven, (8) Sheol, (9) God's man among human beings, (10) God's enemies, (11) baptism, (12) the numbers three and seven as sacred numbers. Of a semi-religious character are a few of the African traits which have left their traces in America: the love of the mother and the persistance of the thought of her; the attribution of death, not to natural causes, but to the power of malignant spirits; the holding of a "wake" over the dead body

Blacks Jews : the religious challenge or politics versus religion

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In the first months of 1879 there was a massive migration of some 5000 Blacks to the Northern territories of the United States, mainly Kansas and Oklahoma. This exodus was of despairing Blacks seeking a refuge, a place where their political rights would mean something, where they would be free from economic exploitation and above all from the dangerous activities of the Klu Klux Klan. One of the members of this exodus was Benjamin Pap Singleton, an elderly and colourful man who lead a group of 300 Blacks to Cherokee county in Kansas. There they founded a colony, 'Singleton's colony', Singleton calling himself 'the Moses of the Exodus of coloured people'.

From 1900 onwards North and South Carolina were overrun by black preachers who were propagating a doctrine according to which the lost tribe of the House of Israel was none other than the Negroes. Although this might at first sight seem an odd claim it can be seen as reflecting the beliefs that some black slaves had held during their captivity when they were interrogated on their origins, their destiny. A historical example supports this hypothesis. A slave uprising took place in Richmond, Virginia, at the beginning of the nineteenth century which was led by a slave called Gabriel Prosser, an outstanding personality who had acquired some knowledge of the Bible. He frequently referred to it in order to convince his brothers that they were the descendants of the Israelites and that God would free them from slavery as he had their ancestors. He identified himself with Samson, his favorite Biblical character. Like Samson he wore his hair long, as a sign given by God of the Alliance made with his

people. Gabriel Prosser was convinced that God had chosen him to free his People from the depths of slavery. Like a black Samson he would break the chains of slavery and found a nation of free Blacks in America. His fall was dramatic. During a night raid a violent storm broke. His companions, petrified, fled. Convinced that they were the victims of divine wrath they abandoned him.

What should be emphasized here is the impact of the Old Testament, the sacred book of the Jews, on Negro mentality. As evidence of its importance one has only to look at black popular culture which has become an expression of this. In the history of the Jews the History of Israel written down in what Christians call the Old Testament, the divine being is accessible—God is revealed to man. This contact, this kind of relationship with the Divine being inevitably attracted the black spirit. What more secure than a God who is responsive to his people's suffering, aware of their poverty, helping them in exile, leading them from slavery? The history of the Jewish people—persecuted, dispersed, exiled, reduced to slavery—must have seemed close to that of the Blacks who themselves were reduced to slavery. The ancient Hebrews were saved from slavery and the Blacks would be too.

The hypothesis of the existence of African Jewish communities

We know that the Jewish religion is one which is passed from parents to children and that it is the fundamental ingredient in the cohesion of the group. When one studies the Jewish religion it is clear how much it serves as the armature, the context for society. In the case of Black Judaism, the study of the significance of religious life in social life can help to rediscover traces of a more ancient Judaism that some African groups could have adopted and that could have been conserved by their slave descendants on American soil.

Were there black slaves who were Jewish through religion who maintained the faith of their ancestors after they had been forcibly transported to America? Only through an analysis of the mythology of the Jewish African origins of the Black Hebrews will this become clear. The following are the major sources that need to be considered in such an analysis: (a) witnesses, tales of the explorers who mention the existence of communities of Black Jews on the African continent and particularly in the areas where the slave ships picked up the black slaves; (b) rites and customs, which have more or less explicit analogies with those of Judaism; (c) the semantics and the dialectology of some African societies reveal some features comparable with those of Judaism; (d) the deductions and conclusions of anthropological and sociological work done in Africa.

It is well known that 1500 years before Islam, Judaism was present in Africa. Travellers' tales and the stories of journeys across North Africa, the Sahara and the Sudan provide considerable evidence of the existence of Jewish communities on the African continent. We know that from the time of saint Jerome (340-420) a chain of Jewish commercial towns stretched almost uninterrupted from Mauritania to India. St. Augustin learnt Hebrew in Tazem where there was a Judaeo-Syrian colony which came from Cyrenicia. These groups went as far as Aoukar in the southern Sahara and, according to the chronicles of the Sudan, the dynasty of the kings of Ghana originated in this group. Jewish contacts and influences with Black Africa were also noted by the Arab geographers Ibn Khordadeb and El Bekri who stated that the routes of the trans-saharan trade, in which Jewish caravans and interpreters were involved, culminated in Ghana and

in the lower valley of the Senegal river. In the twelfth century El Edrisi, the Andalusian geographer, also cited the Hebrew colony of Lam lam located 200 miles from Timbuctu, and the existence of two Jewish towns on the Niger. Then one century later Hadji and Aghwaati added this: 'there is a race of people in Touggurt called Madjehariah, who are converted Jews. Their women speak Hebrew in order not to be understood'. From this period onwards there was a very significant Jewish influence throughout North Africa to such an extent that Dominican missionaries had to learn Hebrew and Arabic.

But what about the south of this margin of Saharan contacts? In the reign of Jean II of Portugal nearly 700 Jews were taken from their kin and deported to the island of Sao Thome on the west coast of Africa. This island is close to Nigeria, Cameroon and Gabon. Escaping from Sao Thome the Jews emigrated to the coast of Angola between 1484 and 1499. They must have settled in several Portuguese colonies and over the centuries mixed with the indigenous black population. Near the Congo in Gabon in 1776 Black Jews, called Bavumbu (or even Mavambo, Mayomba, May or Mavumbu), lived on the coast of Luango by the river named the Rio Muni. It would seem that they adopted Christianity at the same time as maintaining their Judaism.

By 1847 David Livingstone discovered a group of educated Blacks living in the interior some 200 miles from the coast of Luando. These Blacks were called the Jews of Angola. They were good merchants, learnt easily and had a knowledge of Portugese law and history. They were often employed as clerks and writers. For Livingstone there was no doubt but that these people were the descendants of those who had been deported from Portugal in the fifteenth century. Other evidence supports his intuition. In *Savage Africa* Winwoode Reade writes of having met in Guinea Blacks claiming to be Portugese around 1864. Closer to our time Dr. J. Krepel noted some time after the First World War, that a large community of Black Jews existed in the interior of Dahomey. These Jews had the five books of Moses written on old parchment in Hebrew.

All these disparate elements are evidence of the permanent presence of a Jewish tradition within African ethnic groups which had at one time been in contact with the Jews who came from the Mediterranean, were converted and had kept their faith and their way of life.

History rescues myth

With the contemporary period, a totally different attitude is evident among explorers, sociologists and anthropologists. They do not merely state the existence of Black Jewish communities but they attempt to analyse the customs, moral, rites and languages of African societies, to draw conclusions and advance hypotheses.

J. Leighton Wilson was a missionary for eighteen years in Africa. In his work *Western Africa: its history, condition and prospects* (London 1856), he states that in Senegambia, religion was a mixture of paganism, Judaism and Islam and that it is difficult to define the areas of influence of each of the three religions. In northern Guinea paganism and Judaism were closely intertwined and in the south there were more traces of Christianity. He based his conclusions on the existence of some customs which seemed to him to be remnants of Judaism: circumcision, the division of the tribes into twelve large families, the strict prohibition on marriage between families that were too closely linked, sacrifices which involved smearing blood on the altars and the lintels of the doorways, periods of mourning which involved shaving the head and wearing dirty clothes, possession by demons, and purifications. He was unable to get any references or precise explanations from the natives as to the origin of these traditional practices and it is thus possible to see here Jewish influences. It is also possible that in West Africa the Ashanti of the Gold Coast had also been influenced by Judaism and there are traces of this in some of their beliefs and customs.

In moving on to consider the semantic and dialectic domain among the Ashanti we discover that there are clear similarities between some words used by them and other terms used in Hebrew. The Hebrew word *tahorrah* means purification and refers to the rite of expiation which washes away all dirt (cf. Leviticus III, 18-20). Homophonically the word is close to the Ashanti word *odwira* which means purification and refers to the ritual ceremony of the smearing of ram's blood on the sword which is the symbol of the clan. The Hebrew rite of the feast of the tabernacle is close to the Ashanti ritual of the presentation of the Stool. These stools can be compared to thrones since they are the sculpted seats of the chiefs and each is thought to be the home of the ancestral spirits, above all that of the chief who had used it. Festivities last for seven days and the blood of the sacrificed rams is smeared over the stools. Leviticus XXIII, 33-36: 'Speak unto the children of Israel, saying: The fifteenth day of this seventh month shall be the feast of tabernacles for seven days unto the Lord. On the first day shall be an holy convocation; ye shall do no servile work therein. Seven days ye shall offer an offering made by fire unto the Lord [...] it is a solemn assembly; and ye shall do no servile work therein'.

So what of the Ashanti concept of god, of divinity? They believe in a supreme being, a god, the creator, Onyame, but their concept of the divine is not theorised, there are only indications in some proverbs. Captain R. Sutherland Rattray who lived for twenty years in West Africa collected some of these proverbs which contain the Ashanti image of God and these appear in his book *Ashanti Proverbs* (Oxford 1916). 'Of all the land Onyame is the first', in other words God is prior to everything. Genesis 1: 'In the beginning was God'. 'All men are the children of Onyame, no one is a child of the earth'. God created man, Genesis 1, 27: 'So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them'. These two Ashanti proverbs seem to us more an expression of popular wisdom than of religious belief although they do

transmit the preception, the ideas that the Ashanti have of the supreme being, their confidence in his Order which is a naturally good order. But what seems to be lacking is a sacred dimension through which they can be seen as more than the maxims dictated by everyday experience.

If we now turn to the domain of the semantic, in the word Onyame, the supreme being of the Ashanti, the O is often omitted and the word Nyame is used to designate God. For the Hebrews Yahve is the Revealed God and this word has an extraordinary vocal similarity with Nyame, which is also Nyankopon: the one and only, the almighty. Saturday is their sacred day. What is said for the lord of the Sabbath? One of the attributes of Nyame is Bore Bore which signifies the Creator. The Hebrew verb *Bara* (to create) is similar not so much for its consonance as for its meaning.

Among West African tribes the terminal *ti* or *tie* signifies the race of, the men of, the children of. If we deconstruct the term Ashanti we have the children of Ashan, the race of Ashan. Book I of Chronicles IV, 32: 'And their villages were Etam and Ain, Rimmon, and Tochen and Ashan, five cities'. Book of Joshua XXI, 13-16: 'Thus they gave to the children of Aaron the priest [...] Ashan'. Are the Ashanti then the children of the town of Ashan and the descendants of the tribe of Simeon?

In Southern Nigeria the natives call Black Jews the strange people on the Emo Yo Quaim. They are called the B'nai Ephraim the sons of Ephraim. They claim that their ancestors came from Morocco and this is supported by Godbey who noted that their language is a mixture of Maghrebian Arab, ancient Hebrew and local patois: for example *abu* meaning father became *yaba*, *umm* for mother is close to the Hebrew word. These Emo Yo Quaim Jews live in the ondo district and have a copy of the *Torah*.

The study of customs and rites and the analysis of the semantics of these African tribes have led many of their observers to propose some hypotheses and even to draw some conclusions. Doctor Allen H. Godbey reached the following conclusion: "These factors have a very specific significance if we consider the presence of Judaism among the American Negroes. Hundreds of thousands of slaves were transported to America from West Africa during the trade which started some 400 years ago. What traces of Judaism still remained among the Negroes of West Africa at that period? To the extent that they were persecuted they were more likely than other Negroes to be seized during wars and sold as slaves. It is virtually certain that many part Jewish Negroes were among those sent as slaves to