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# Jews in Sub-Saharan Africa: The case of South Africa, Nigeria, DR Congo and Ethiopia

Dirk Kohnert <sup>1</sup>

*'The kind negroes'*  
*Double racist prejudice against Africans and Jews* <sup>2</sup>



Source: © De Weyer, 2015; [Europe Comics](#), 5 July 2020

**Abstract:** Jews in Africa have a long history. Africans have encountered Jewish myths and traditions in different forms and situations, leading to the development of a new Jewish identity linked to that of the Diaspora. Different groups of black Jews from western, central, eastern and southern Africa used and imagined their oral traditions and traditional practices to construct a distinct Jewish identity. In the early 20th century, two separate diasporas merged into an entirely new arena. Africans and African Americans adopted Judaism as a form of personal emancipation from colonial oppression and the effects of neo-colonialism. The adoption of Judaism by black Africans was a form of liberation from Anglo-Christian authority. Blacks and Jews are the two marginalised and stigmatised minorities in Western culture. Since ancient times they have maintained a complex relationship of identification, cooperation and rivalry. The Igbo of Nigeria, for example, were at the forefront of a normative Jewish movement that included several other ethnic groups. The rhetoric of the Holocaust, Zionism and the external features of Judaism were exploited by the Biafran neo-secessionists for their own ends. Furthermore, from the first mention of Africans in the Hebrew Bible to the contemporary demands of the Black Lives Matter movement, there has been support for the 'Palestinian resistance' but almost nothing that could have provoked a confrontation between blacks and Jews. The majority of African Jews live in South Africa. However, most of them are white. The South African Jewish community numbered more than 120,000 in the mid-1970s. After several large waves of emigration at the end of the apartheid regime, the number fell to just over 50,000. However, the Jewish claim to South African citizenship is controversial. The South African host society distinguishes between the Jewish diaspora and South African citizenship. Since the early 1990s, the second-largest Jewish community in sub-Saharan Africa has developed in Nigeria, which previously did not appear on any map of the Jewish world. Nine out of ten Nigerian Jews are Igbo. Estimates range from 3,000 to 30,000 Jews. Israel, however, refuses to recognise them as a Jewish population. In the DR Congo, a small Jewish community has held a special position since colonial times. Many Jews were among Leopold II's close advisers and agents in his Congo Free State (1885-1908). Jews also played an important role in Katanga Province in the 20th century, when the first mines were opened there and a railway line to South Africa was built. However, Mobutu's Zairisation (1973) and the looting of 1991 forced most Jewish entrepreneurs to leave the country. Ethiopia could be considered the cradle of Judaism, including the ancient kingdom of Sheba, mentioned in the Hebrew Bible and the Koran, and Beta Israel. Today, however, the harsh reality faced by Ethiopian Jewish immigrants in Israel reveals the racism that is deeply rooted in Israeli society.

**Keywords:** [Jewish identity](#), [Jewish mythology](#), [Black Jews](#), [Black Judaism](#), [Jewish diaspora](#), [History of the Jews in Africa](#), [Uganda Scheme](#), [Ethiopian Jews](#), [Beta Israel](#), [Lemba people](#), [Igbo Jews](#), [House of Israel \(Ghana\)](#), [List of Jews from Sub-Saharan Africa](#), [Sub-Saharan Africa](#), [South Africa](#), [Nigeria](#), [DR Congo](#), [Ethiopia](#)

**JEL-Code:** F35, F52, F54, K37, N17, N37, N97, O15, O55, Z12, Z13

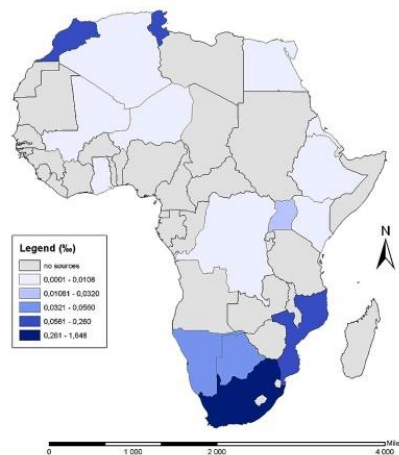
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<sup>2</sup> Cartoon by Belgian comic strip artist [Hergé](#), on [Tintin in the Congo](#). Africans were also often depicted as cannibals, for example in [Tibet's "Chick Bill"](#) (© Le Lombard, 1954).

# 1. Introduction

Jews look back on a long history in [sub-Saharan Africa](#) (SSA). Apart from the [black Ethiopian Jews](#), the [Beta Israel](#), who lived for centuries in the ancient kingdom [Kingdom of Aksum](#) and the [Ethiopian Empire](#) (Loudermilk, 2023), historical communities, such as the [Jews of Bilad el-Sudan](#), who migrated to the [Songhai empire](#) in [West Africa](#) as merchants for trading opportunities, existed even before the [introduction of Islam](#) during the 14th century, although the latter disappeared as a result of assimilation.

**Graph 1:** *Proportion of Jewish population in Africa (2005)*



Source: © Faigl.Ladislav; [History of the Jews in Africa](#), en. Wikipedia

Already long before the creation of [Israel](#), the father of [modern political Zionism](#), the Austrian [Theodor Herzl](#) (1860-1904), the founder of the modern Zionist movement, promoted Jewish immigration to [Palestine](#) to create a Jewish state (1897). Also, he wrote that [Jews](#) and [Black people](#) shared a common point in terms of suffering. In 1903, British Colonial Secretary [Joseph Chamberlain](#) proposed to create a [Jewish homeland](#) in a portion of [British East Africa](#), through the [Uganda Scheme](#). The proposal was based on visions by Herzl and presented at the [Sixth World Zionist Congress](#) in [Basel](#) in [1903](#) as a temporary refuge for Jews to escape rising [antisemitism in Europe](#). Yet, the proposal faced opposition from both the [Zionist movement](#) and [Great Britain](#) (Mitchell, 2013). Many Africans, then still under colonial rule, saw Israel as an example to follow. However, once the Jewish State was created (1948), the [Arab-Israeli conflict](#), in the context of the [Cold War](#), put an end to Herzl's illusory vision of human solidarity at the expense of the strategic interests of nationalist states (Nouhou, 2003). For most Africans, living on a continent lagging in development, Israel's victories over the Arabs could not be the work of a third-world country. Instead, Israel was considered as one of the regional powers and even a coloniser. Once the weak changed sides, the gaze turned to the [Palestinians](#) as a point of reference and as a concept of suffering (Nouhou, 2003).

However, Jews, especially [black Jews](#), have not always been respected by the society in which they lived and worked. Most of them eked out a living at the bottom of the social hierarchy, subjugated by double racism: the general prejudice of whites against blacks, for example, expressed in South Africa's [apartheid](#) regime, and the additional prejudice of their brothers in faith, because the biblical story of the [curse of Ham](#) in the [Book of Genesis](#), which

has been used for over a thousand years to justify subjugation and degradation<sup>3</sup> (Garang, 2023). In Western culture, [blacks](#) and [Jews](#) are the two archetypal marginalised, stigmatised, and sometimes even lumped together minorities. Since ancient times, they have maintained a complex relationship of identification, cooperation and rivalry (Bruder, 2023).

In more recent history, thousands of Ethiopian Jews, the [Beta Israel](#), had been evacuated to Israel during the 1970s-1990s, drawing parallels to a modern-day [Exodus](#) story. Most of the nearly 58,000 [Ethiopian Jews in Israel](#), were evacuated from [Ethiopia](#) in two widely publicized airlifts, [Operation Moses](#) in 1984-85 during the [Second Sudanese civil war](#) and subsequent famine, and [Operation Solomon](#) in 1991, following the destabilisation of the [Mengistu regime](#) by [Eritrean](#) and [Tigrayan](#) rebels. Since their initial arrival in Israel, Ethiopian Jews went through [culture shock](#), [racism](#), and the development of unique religious practices (Weil, 1996; Loudermilk, 2023).

**Graph 2:** Jewish population in 24 selected countries and HDI, 1980-2000

Country <sup>a</sup>	Human Development Index <sup>b</sup>				Jewish population (thousands)			
	1980	2000	Difference 1980–2000		1980	2000	Difference 1980–2000	
			Number	Percent			Number	Percent
United States	884	939	55	6.2	5,690	5,330	-360	-6.3
Canada	883	940	57	6.5	308	360	52	16.9
France	863	928	65	7.5	530	500	-30	-5.7
Belgium	861	939	78	9.1	33	31.5	-1.5	-4.5
Australia	861	939	78	9.1	70	98	28	40.0
Germany	859	925	66	7.7	34.5	98	63.5	184
UK	848	928	80	9.4	350	300	-50	-14.3
Italy	846	913	67	7.9	32	29.5	-2.5	-7.8
Israel	814	896	82	10.1	3,283	4,952	1,669	50.8
Russia	809	781	-28	-3.5	701	275	-426	-60.8
Argentina	799	844	45	5.6	242	197	-45	-18.6
Belarus	794	788	-6	-0.8	135	25	-110	-81.5
Hungary	793	835	42	5.3	65	51.5	-13.5	-20.8
Romania	788	775	-13	-1.6	33	11	-22	-66.7
Ukraine	780	748	-32	-4.1	634	112	-522	-82.3
Uruguay	777	831	54	6.9	32	22.5	-9.5	-29.7
Azerbaijan	760	741	-19	-2.5	35	7.5	-27.5	-78.6
Mexico	734	796	62	8.4	35	40.5	5.5	15.7
Uzbekistan	726	727	1	0.1	100	7	-93	-93.0
Moldova	720	701	-19	-2.6	80	6	-74	-92.5
Brazil	679	757	78	11.5	110	97.5	-12.5	-11.4
South Africa	663	695	32	4.8	120	79	-41	-34.2
Iran	563	721	158	28.1	32	11.5	-20.5	-64.1
Ethiopia	250	327	77	30.8	32	0.1	-31.9	-99.7

Source: DellaPergola, Sergio & Uzi Rebhun & Mark Tolts (2005)

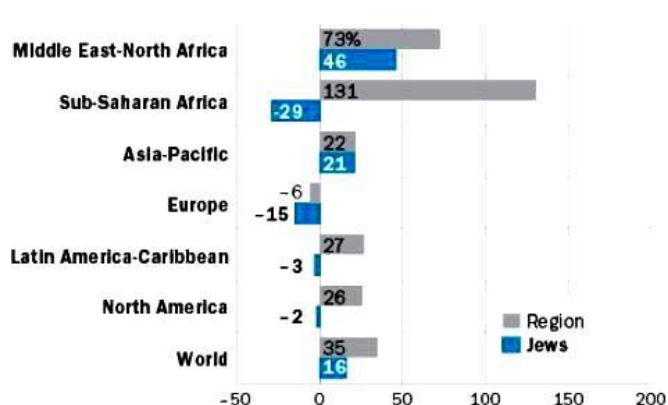
In recent decades, however, [black Jewish](#) communities in [sub-Saharan Africa](#) have experienced an amazing rebirth, often linked to overseas [jewish diasporas](#) and interacting with ancient mythological substrata of both [Afro-American](#) and African visions of Jews, seeking [Judaism](#) as a form of [emancipation](#) from [colonial subordination](#) by [Christianisation](#) and the effects of [neo-colonialism](#) (Bruder, 2008; Glasgow, 2009). The painstaking research of French ethnologist [Edith Bruder](#) and others into how Africans have identified ethnically or religiously with Jews has challenged existing Western racial notions of what constitutes [Jewish identity](#) and [ethnicity](#) (Glasgow, 2009). At least with [Cameroonian Jews](#), conversion

<sup>3</sup> Officially, the association of the [curse of Ham](#) with 'black skin' was first made by Jewish interpreters of their oral tradition in the 15th century (Garang, 2023). The curse of Ham's son Canaan was used to justify the enslavement of the African population by Europeans (Haynes, 2002)

isn't an issue, they believe they already have Jewish souls, and they aren't worried about meeting someone else's standards (Fox, 2016). Others of the African 'frontier Jews' (to borrow a term used in a different context by Berezin & Levin, 2023) are seeking recognition of their Jewish identity at one level or another. Yet, Israeli rabbinical authorities have not recognised any of the groups as Jewish under *Halakha*, or Jewish law (Bassist, 2012). The largest SSA Jewish communities are to be found in [South Africa](#) and [Ethiopia](#).

On the other hand, white Jewish communities contracted in [SSA](#). In 2010, white Jews in SSA were estimated at about 100,000, to shrink to 70,000 in 2050. This negative growth rate of 29 % contrasts sharply with [SSA](#) as a whole, where the population is expected to grow by 131 % over the coming decades (PRC, 2015). Their centre shifted from long-established South African (estimated between 52,000 and 88,000 Jews)<sup>4</sup> and [Ethiopian communities](#), known as [Beta Israel](#), from the area of the former [Kingdom of Aksum](#) and the [Ethiopian Empire](#), with an estimated number of 8,000 Jews in 2019<sup>5</sup> (Dolsten, 2019), to emerging ones in [West](#) and [Central Africa](#)<sup>6</sup>. An outer circle included African ethnic groups that claimed ancient [Hebrew](#) lineage but still adhered to institutionalized [Christianity](#) (Protestant or Catholic) indigenous [African belief systems](#), or a combination of these. A middle circle encompassed groups that modified their practices and beliefs to resemble Jewish or Israelite religion, but mostly in non-Jewish ways, for example, by practising priestly sacrifice or retaining Jesus Christ as a messianic criterion. The core ring represented those African communities that adopted normative [Judaism](#), albeit with Africanized accretions (Miles, 2019).

**Graph 3: Jewish population growth in SSA compared with overall growth by world region, 2010 to 2050 (% increase in population size)**



Source: The future of world religions: population growth projections, 2010-2050; PRC, 2015

In what follows, the [history and contemporary life of Jews](#) in [sub-Saharan Africa](#) (SSA) will be traced, based on available literature and online sources, with a particular focus on [black African Jews](#) in comparison to their white brethren, using case studies from the presumably largest centres of SSA Jewish communities in [South Africa](#), [Nigeria](#), [DR Congo](#) and [Ethiopia](#).

<sup>4</sup> The number of [South African Jews](#) peaked during the apartheid era with an estimated 125,000. At the end of the [apartheid regime](#), many Jews immigrated to the [USA](#).

<sup>5</sup> Since 1975 tens of thousands of Ethiopian [Beta Israel Jews](#) were air-lifted to Israel. Significant immigration to Israel continued into the 21st century, producing an Ethiopian Jewish community of around 81,000 immigrants, who with their 39,000 children born in Israel itself, numbered around 120,000 by early 2009 ([History of the Jews in Africa](#), Wikipedia). Most of the community made [aliyah](#) from [Ethiopia](#) to [Israel](#) in two waves of mass immigration assisted by the Israeli government: [Operation Moses](#) (1984), and [Operation Solomon](#) (1991) (Weil, 2011); see also [Ethiopian Jews in Israel](#), Wikipedia.

<sup>6</sup> For renowned Jewish personalities in SSA see the [List of Jews from Sub-Saharan Africa](#), Wikipedia.

## 2. Case studies from Sub-Saharan Africa: South Africa, Nigeria, DR Congo and Ethiopia

**Cartoon 2:** *The heavy baggage of being a black Jewish convert*



Source: © Foye, 2019

Because the focus of this study is on African Jewish communities in [sub-Saharan Africa](#) (SSA), it does not include [North African Jews](#), who make up a large proportion of African Jews, such as the [Sephardic](#) and [Mizrahi Jews](#), who live mainly in the [Maghreb](#), and the [Berber Jews](#). Most Jews living in SSA are white and privileged in many ways compared to their black counterparts, as will be shown below.

**Graph 4:** *Map of Sub-Saharan African Jews*



Source: BBEG, 2024

[Black Jews](#) do not share the privilege that white [Ashkenazi Jews](#) have over [Jews of colour](#) and, arguably, other people of colour. The prejudice that black Jews cannot be ‘true’ Jews has caused much debate and hostility because of the [racial tensions](#) and divisions in the Jewish community (Foye, 2019). Both non-Jews and white Jews often ask [converts](#) to prove their Jewishness to them, even though [Jewish law](#) strongly discourages asking people if they are converts or if they're in the process of converting. However, many white Jews not only ask black Jews if they are converts, but also want to know why they converted (Foye, 2019). In their minds, Jews look a certain way, and seeing black Jews in Jewish spaces goes against what they've been taught. Sometimes non-Jews go so far as to claim that because someone is a convert, he or she would not face [anti-Semitism](#) (Foye, 2019).

## 2.1 On the History of Jews in South Africa

### 2.1.1 White South African Jews

**Cartoon 3:** ‘Miss SA cartoon shows the ugly face of antisemitism’<sup>7</sup>



Source: © Feinberg, 2021

The [history of Jews in South Africa](#) began during the period of [Portuguese maritime exploration](#) in the late 15th century. However, a permanent presence was not established until the beginning of [Dutch colonisation](#) in the region in 1652. During the period of [British colonial rule](#) in the 19th century, the Jewish community in South Africa expanded greatly, thanks in part to encouragement from Britain (JVL, 2024).

**Graph 5:** Map of South Africa’s largest Jewish communities



Source: Maltz, 2019

The first organised [Jewish communities](#) in what is now the [Republic of South Africa](#) were established in the [Cape Colony](#), first in [Cape Town](#) and other places along the coast, and later in the [Kimberley](#) diamond fields (BIPA, 1978). The once peripheral Jewish population

<sup>7</sup> Amidst the virulent reaction from the South African government and media to the [Miss South Africa](#) choosing to compete in [Miss Universe in Israel](#), one cartoon, published by the weekly [Daily Maverick](#), took the criticism a step too far, dipping into classic [Antisemitic tropes](#) (Feinberg, 2021). The cartoon depicts the Miss Universe organisation. Israeli Prime Minister [Naftali Bennett](#), and a man representing the ‘Zionist lobby’ turned up at a beauty pageant. In the drawing, the Miss Universe organisation is awarded ‘Miss Anthropropic’ (misanthropic), possibly saying that the organisation ‘hates people’ by holding the contest in Israel. The Israeli Prime Minister, [Benjamin Netanyahu](#), is crowned ‘Miss Appropriate’. The anti-Semitic overtones were accentuated by giving Bennett an opulent jewelled crown and an oversized hooked nose. Not to be outdone, the ‘Zionist Lobby’ proudly wears a sash awarding him ‘Miss Information’. Daily Maverick later pulled the cartoon from its website (Feinberg, 2021).

became the central architects of a new global exchange of [diamonds](#), linking African sources, European manufacturing centres, American retailers and Western consumers. At every stage of the diamond's journey through the [British Empire](#) and beyond, from [Cape Town](#) to [London](#), from [Amsterdam](#) to [New York City](#), the gems were primarily traded, appraised, manufactured and sold by Jews (Coenen Snyder, 2022). Apart from the British and [Afrikaners](#), Jews were the most prominent white ethnic group. As in the United States, white Jewish immigrants to South Africa enjoyed rapid upward social mobility as they successfully integrated into the economic, cultural and political fabric of the host society (Shimoni, 1996).

However, in the 1930s and 1940s, a significant [antisemitism](#) erupted in South Africa that was attributed largely to the importation of [Nazi propaganda](#), at a time of social and economic travail and heightened Afrikaner nationalist frustrations and assertiveness. Quite apart from the fundamental racism of South Africa's traditional [colour bar](#), these intra-white racist assumptions were incorporated into the South African context. In particular, East European immigrants (equalled with 'Jews') were accused of posing a dismal threat to the Nordic character of (white) South African society (Shain, 1994; Shimoni, 1996). Yet, antisemitism had been an important element in South African society long before 1930. Even early [Boer](#) perceptions of the Jewish immigrants to South Africa were tainted by negative images. South African imageries were further compounded during [World War I](#), firstly with accusations that Jews were evading military service, thereafter by associating them with subversive [Bolshevism](#) (Shain, 1994; Shimoni, 1996).

There existed a sense of unease in the South African Jewish community, which coincided with the cohesive community's comparatively higher ethnocultural and religious forms of engagement giving rise to the conjecture that 'faith is an antidote to fear' (Bankier-Karp, 2023). As in Europe, the Jews were not fully accepted by the empire they helped to build. They were 'white, but not quite'. They weren't colonisers, but they weren't the colonised either (Shor, 2023). The Jewish individual's claim to [South African](#) belonging was often contested, or [diasporic Jewishness](#) and South African belonging were pitted against each other by the South African host society (Denk, 2023b). [Charitable](#) interactions of well-to-do South African Jews were as much manifestations of [inequalities](#) as they were expressions of the giving individual's desire to alleviate them. They were structured by [class](#), [race](#), [economics](#) and [post-apartheid politics](#). At the same time, however, it was the individual agency that reproduces inequalities and makes sense of the ambiguity of charitable interaction (Denk, 2023b).

At the beginning of the 20th century, more than half of the Jewish population of the nine [provinces of South Africa](#) still lived in the [Cape](#). With the [Witwatersrand Gold Rush](#) towards the end of the 19th century, the white population of the [Transvaal colony](#) increased rapidly in relation to that of the [Cape](#), [Natal](#) and the [Orange Free State](#) (BIPA, 1978). This trend was even more pronounced among the Jewish population since most of the large immigration that took place at that time was concentrated in the gold-mining centres. In 1911, one year after the two British colonies and the two [Boer republics](#) became the four provinces of the Union of South Africa, over 55 % of the Jewish population lived in the [Transvaal](#) and almost 36 % in the [Cape Province](#) (BIPA, 1978). Over the next sixty years, the Jewish and total white population of the Transvaal continued to grow at the expense of the other provinces, just as [Johannesburg](#) grew at the expense of other cities. By 1970, about 65 % of the Jewish population lived in the [Transvaal](#), while about 28 % lived in the [Cape Province](#) (BIPA, 1978).

Over 80 % of South African Jews can trace their ancestry back to rural [Lithuania](#), and apart from a small number of immigrants who arrived in 1936 from central Europe, there has been almost no wide-scale immigration from as far back as 1930, the year of the Quota Act introduced by [D. F. Malan](#), effectively restricted Jewish immigration (Beider & Fachler,



2023). Social [homogeneity](#) coupled with the emphasis on [ethnicity](#) as an organizing principle of society led to dense [social networks](#) within the community that, in turn, facilitated the spread of new ideas and trends (Beider & Fachler, 2023). Today, the Jewish population of South Africa is approximately 51,000, the eleventh-largest Jewish community in the world (JVL, 2024).

In the past decades, South African Jews emigrated in four major waves, mainly to [Israel](#) but also to other countries in the English-speaking world, such as the [United States](#), [Canada](#), the [United Kingdom](#), [Australia](#), and [New Zealand](#) (Wright, 1977; Maltz, 2019). The first was after the [Six-Day War](#) in 1967, with over 2,100 arrivals between 1969 and 1971. The second was during the [Soweto uprising](#) in 1976, resulting in over 1,000 immigrants in both 1977 and 1978 (Raijman, 2024). The third wave came in the wake of [South Africa's 1985 State of Emergency in July 1985](#). As a result, there were approximately 1,800 immigrants between 1986 and 1988. Finally, there was another major wave of immigration in the early [1990s elections](#) after [Nelson Mandela](#) won the elections 1994 (Raijman, 2024). Until then, most South African Jews had profited from the [apartheid system](#), including Jewish women, who benefited from the privileges of whiteness in the intimate arena of their homes by relying on the invisible labour of black women to work in their homes and kitchens (Beinart-Smollan, 2023).

#### Cartoon 4: *Apartheid and the Holocaust?*<sup>8</sup>



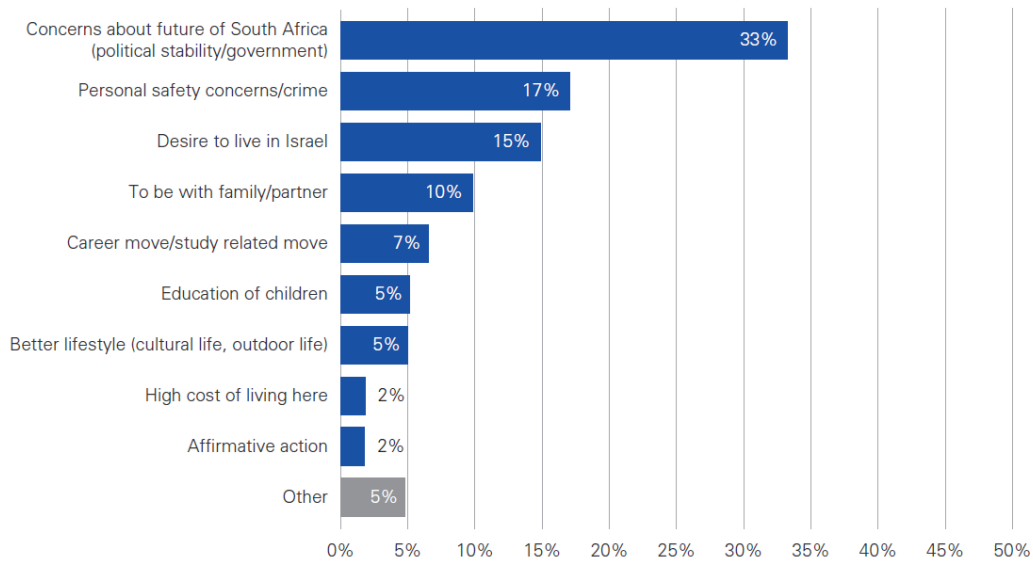
Source: © Khumalo, 2023

In 2021, waves of anti-Semitism erupted when Jewish South Africans were accused by (ANC) Secretary General [Jessie Duarte](#) of sending their children to serve in the [Israeli Defence Forces](#) (Miltz, 2021). Duarte claimed that they were part of the problem in the [Israeli–Palestinian conflict](#) and demanded that the practice be stopped immediately. She even went so far as to claim that if South Africa would not stop Israel's imperialism, it would one day move into Africa and start dispossessing African's land (Miltz, 2021), thus apparently referring to [Israel's land-grabbing in Palestine](#) and developments, similar to China's land-grabbing in [sub-Saharan Africa](#) (Ndhlovu, 2023).

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<sup>8</sup> *They and us*. This cartoon is one of the exhibits at the [House of the Wannsee Conference Holocaust Memorial](#). It highlights the fact that some [Germans](#), like some [white South Africans](#), were in denial about the horrors perpetrated on those deemed 'different' from them (Khumalo, 2023). As in late [Nazi Germany](#), [apartheid](#) officials moved quickly to burn official documents that would incriminate them in criminal investigations into how the [apartheid regime](#) had dealt with its 'enemies' (Khumalo, 2023).

**Graph 6:** *The main reason given by South African Jews in 2019 for wishing to emigrate from South Africa (N=555)*

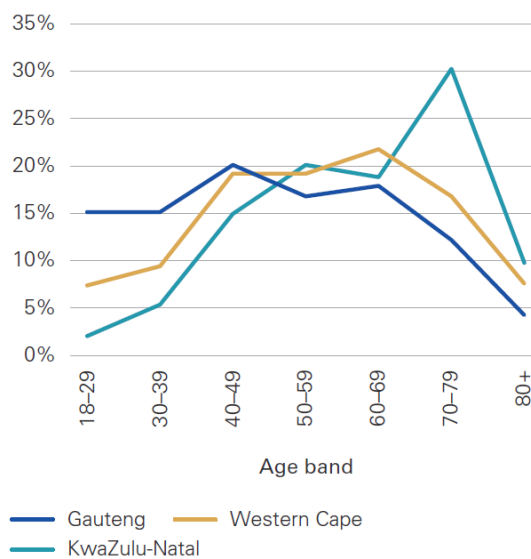


Q: Why would you consider leaving South Africa?

Source: Graham, 2020

Like many [diaspora Jewish](#) communities, also South African Jews have been divided over the [Israeli–Palestinian conflict](#). The majority, however, remain strongly [Zionist](#) and opposed to allegedly self-hating Jewish criticism of Israeli government policies and actions (Gilbert & Posel 2021). Many of these Jews reject the direct analogy between [apartheid and Israel's Palestine policy](#), but find the perceived associations deeply disturbing, with those who lived through apartheid typically more disturbed by the analogy than younger Jews (Gilbert & Posel 2021).

**Graph 7:** *Age structure of South African Jews by location<sup>9</sup> (population aged 18 and over) (N=4,193)*



Source: Graham, 2020

<sup>9</sup> The vast majority of Jews in [Gauteng](#) (92%) live in [Johannesburg](#); the vast majority in [Western Cape](#) (92%) live in [Cape Town](#); and the vast majority in [KwaZulu-Natal](#) live in [Durban](#) (90%) (Graham, 2020).

The [2019 Jewish Community Survey of South Africa](#), the largest and most extensive study of its kind ever undertaken (N = 4,193; Graham, 2020), found that the community has become polarised, with the traditional centre ground collapsing. However, unlike many other Jewish communities today, in South Africa people are more likely to move towards religious subgroups other than the one in which they were raised than away from them. This trend was most pronounced among those born in the 1960s and 1970s. A similar trend characterises South African non-Jews. Apparently, coming of age during a period of profound political and social instability can explain the increased likelihood of religious transition. The effect, however, is more pronounced among Jews because of the particular communal characteristics and history that created the optimal conditions for switching to a more religious lifestyle (Beider & Fachler, 2023).

With the dawn of the [apartheid regime](#) and the [1994 South African general election](#), the first in which citizens of all ‘[races](#)’ were allowed to take part, the sting of accusations directed towards [Israel](#) in Africa due to its prior cooperation with the apartheid regime weakened (Tal, 2012; Kohnert, 2023). Relations remained cordial under [Nelson Mandela](#), South Africa's first black president (1994-1999). Since then, however, they have deteriorated sharply, with South Africa's position tipping in favour of the [Palestinians](#), thanks in part to the historic alliance between the [African National Congress](#) (ANC) and the [Palestine Liberation Organisation](#) (PLO), concerning its common enemy, the ‘Apartheid regime’ in South Africa and Israel (Polakow-Suransky, 2010; Tal, 2012).

The deterioration of Israeli-South African relations culminated on 18 February 2023 at the opening ceremony of the [African Union](#) (AU) in [Addis Ababa](#), when the Israeli ambassador, [Sharon Bar-Li](#) and her delegation who had an unofficial observer status<sup>10</sup>, were escorted out of the opening. In a matter of seconds, twenty years of Israeli diplomacy courting SSA countries were exposed as a failure in Africa. [Tel Aviv](#) was furious, accusing a ‘small number of extremist states such as [South Africa](#) and [Algeria](#)’ of spearheading a campaign to block Israel's observer status. It claimed that [Iran](#) had masterminded the move by African governments ‘driven by hatred’ of Israel (Baroud, 2023).

But in fact, already the [OAU](#), the forerunner to the AU, had identified Israel's founding ideology, [Zionism](#), as a form of [racism](#) at its 12th ordinary session in [Kampala](#) in 1975. Three weeks after the AU's 2023 decision, the South African parliament voted in favour of a motion to downgrade the country's embassy in [Tel Aviv](#) to a mere liaison office. This, too, was described as a ‘first step’ aimed at compelling Israel to ‘respect human rights, recognise the rights of the Palestinian people (and) their right to exist’ (Baroud, 2023; Kohnert, 2023).

The earliest uses of the [apartheid analogy](#) have long been placed in the 1970s, however, evidence of its use can already be found before the [United Nations General Assembly](#) declared [apartheid a crime](#) in 1973 and its confirmation by the 2002 Rome [Statute of the International Criminal Court](#). The first instances happened simultaneously with the development of the organized [Palestinian national movement](#) in the 1960s. Such historical analogies should be read as a tactic of [non-violent resistance](#) within the Palestinian struggle (Fischer, 2020).

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<sup>10</sup> Israel's observer status at the AU had been discussed controversially by African member states. It has caused a rift among AU members. Approval was given unilaterally by the Chair of the AU Commission, the Chadian [Moussa Faki Mahamat](#), in July 2021. Because of the sharp protest of other members, the observer status was suspended. Later on, Mahamat even came up with the claim that ‘we did not invite Israeli officials to our summit.’ (Baroud, 2023).

**Cartoon 5: 'Apartheid' in South Africa and Palestine**



Source: © [Carlos Latuff](#), [wikimedia](#), 2008

On 15 May 2023, South Africa's Foreign Minister [Naledi Pandor](#) called for the [UN](#) to classify Israel as an apartheid state and urged the [International Criminal Court](#) to issue arrest warrants for Israeli leaders (MEMO 2023; Lubotzky, 2023). In January 2024, in another move that attracted much international attention, lawyers for South Africa argued before the [International Court of Justice](#) that Israel's actions, including its bombing and siege of the [Gaza Strip](#), showed its intent to commit [genocide](#) against the [Palestinians](#) (Rauhala & Fahim, 2024).

**Cartoon 6: OK Philemon, as soon as you've got that up, get the hell out of here**



Source: © South African cartoonists, [Dov Fedler](#), 28 February 2017; Abrahamson, 2009

One year before, in January 2022, the [Constitutional Court of South Africa](#) had ordered the former head of international relations for the Congress of South African Trade Unions ([COSATU](#)) leader Bongani Masuku to apologize to the Jewish community for hate speech in 2009 during a lecture at the [University of Witwatersrand](#) in which he targeted Jews. Anger over the [Israel-Gaza conflict](#) was then at its height, and in this context, Masuku made numerous abusive and threatening statements, both written and verbal, against Jews who expressed support for Israel. Legal experts and the [South African Jewish Board of Deputies](#) (SAJBD) characterized the case as ground-breaking and a significant victory for the Jewish community because the court found that Masuku had crossed the line between legitimate criticism of a political ideology and racist hate speech against Jews (US Dept. of State on South Africa, 2023). In September 2022, the [Anglican Church of South Africa](#) passed a resolution including statements that 'Christian and Jewish [Zionism](#) are both undergirded by notions of supremacy and are forms of [racism](#) which have no place in the Christian faith' and

that ‘support for Palestinian people and advocacy for their human dignity is in no way synonymous with antisemitism’ (US Dept. of State on South Africa, 2023)

**Cartoon 7:** *Well, that takes care of that lot of squatters* <sup>11</sup>



Source: © South African cartoonists, [Dov Fedler](#), 1978; Abrahamson, 2009

In another unprecedented move in June 2022, the [South African Press Council](#) expelled the nation’s leading Jewish newspaper, the [South African Jewish Report](#), for describing a cartoon promoted by the [BDS movement to boycott Israel](#) as anti-Semitic, setting off a heated debate over what constitutes [antisemitism](#). The [weekly](#) was kicked out after attempting to withdraw from the council, an independent regulator the media industry created to ward off government scrutiny. The council had ordered the newspaper to apologize for the description, but it refused (Rosenfeld, 2022).

**Cartoon 8:** *antisemitic cartoon in South African Jewish Report?*<sup>12</sup>



Source: © Rosenfeld, 2022; Krost, 2022

<sup>11</sup> Referring to [township](#) redevelopment, Cape Town was 1978 labelled the ‘Apartheid city’ because of its spatial [racial segregation](#).

<sup>12</sup> The BDS cartoon that the [South African Jewish Report](#) was ordered to apologize for describing as “antisemitic.” Photo by SA BDS Coalition. (Rosenfeld, 2022). The cartoon was used to turn people against [Clover Industries](#), which had been bought out by a predominantly Israeli-owned consortium (Krost, 2022).

## 2.12 Black South African Jews

**Cartoon 9:** *J is for [Juneteenth](#) – we are finally free!*  
(or so we hoped in this moment of glee)



Source: © Lauren Semmer: from 'The ABCs of Black History'; Asim, 2021

Native to [South Africa](#), [Malawi](#), [Mozambique](#) and [Zimbabwe](#), the Jewish [Lemba people](#), known as 'black Jews', are of mixed [Bantu](#), [Ethiopian](#) and [Yemeni](#) descent. Tens of thousands of them claim descent from lost Biblical ethnic groups, for example originating about AD 600 in the region which now is known as Yemen. Others trace to ancient [Sanaa](#), then migrating over the [Strait of Hormuz](#) to [Ethiopia](#), trekking around the [Horn of Africa](#) down the Indian Ocean to settle between [Mozambique](#) and [Northern Transvaal](#) (Buijs, 1998). Within South Africa, they are concentrated in the northeast of the country, in the [Limpopo](#) and [Mpumalanga](#) provinces. They assert their connections to Judaism and South Africa equally and simultaneously (Gilbert, 2023). The Lemba claim Jewish ancestry and observe many Semitic traditions such as kosher-like dietary restrictions and slaughter practices, male circumcision rites, strict rules against intermarriage, and Semitic-sounding clan names (PBS / Nova, 2024).

**Graph 8:** *Map of migration of Lemba ethnic groups in ancient Africa*



Source: The Lemba, [Haruth Communications](#), 2012

Non-Lemba men cannot convert to the Jewish faith if they join the ethnic group. Girls who marry into the community have to undergo rigorous formation and finally a ritual bath. Some Lemba leaders discussed closer relations with Israel, but others rather preferred to migrate back to [Zimbabwe](#) to reunite with their families (Buijs, 1998). Early white missionaries and colonial officials promoted a [Semitic](#) identity for the Lemba. They emphasised the differences

between the Lemba and their African neighbours by comparing Lemba customs to those of [Jewish communities in Europe](#). This contributed to an ethos of a distinct identity through which middle-class Lemba intellectuals, who had emigrated from Mount Belengwe in [Rhodesia](#), sought to promote Lemba culture. They established the [Lemba Cultural Association](#) (LCA) in 1947, later on, complemented by the [affiliate](#), the Lemba Business Council (LBC). Jewish connections were emphasized, despite the adherence of many Lembas, especially the educated, to Christian denominations. LCA branches reach as far as [Soweto](#), a township of [Johannesburg](#). This was facilitated by the South African apartheid regime's policy of divide and rule, which allowed the [Bantustans](#) to discriminate against ethnic minorities under their control (Buijs, 1998).

However, the contemporary insistence of Lemba leaders and intellectuals on their Jewish heritage could also be the result of a struggle for resources. First, the struggle for land, and later for public service jobs in the [Northern Transvaal](#) and [Venda](#). The struggle began after the arrival of white colonists and missionaries in the late nineteenth century and continued under the Nationalist regime of South Africa with the creation of the Venda homeland. Nevertheless, many Lemba earned their living rather by itinerant trade and peddling than by subsistence farming. They traded in diamonds, gold, silver, iron, copper, clay and cotton and they were renowned in building of boats. Also, they had special skills in medical care, pottery and metallurgy, e.g. for making copper wire used in bracelets and ornaments.

Ethnic identification and mobilisation were then strategies for achieving collectively what could not be achieved individually. The growing demand for land in the Northern Transvaal exacerbated conflicts between white farmers and black landholders. The [Lemba Cultural Association](#) has been interpreted as a direct reaction to the European encroachment of African resources. The Lembas' demand for a separate Lemba homeland was fiercely resisted by the Venda government, so even in the 1980s people were careful not to admit officially they were Lemba (Buijs, 1998).

While the Lemba were proud of their distinct cultural heritage before colonisation, it was only when ethnic identity became important in the [apartheid](#) regime that the construction of a contemporary Jewish heritage was built up through the medium of the LCA. The main aim of the association appears to have been to promote the economic success of the Lembas in South Africa by appealing to a distant non-African past that could be equated with other particularly successful white communities in South Africa, an aim which was also associated with resistance to apartheid (Buijs, 1998).

## 2.2 On the History of Jews in Nigeria

**Cartoon 10:** *'Jews in Nigeria survived the Holocaust just as African slaves survived the slave masters'*



Source: © User, 2019

[Christianity](#) and especially [Islam](#) have been dominant in [Nigeria](#), the largest country in [sub-Saharan Africa](#), for centuries, but [Judaism](#) has no such prominent history or heritage. In 2011, Nigeria had the largest Christian population of any country in Africa, with more than 80 million people (nearly 50 % of the population (PRC, 2011)) belonging to various denominations, as well as the largest Muslim population with arguably more than 50 %. Nigerian censuses, including the orientation of faith, have always been highly contested and unreliable. This is all the more so as the deep-rooted belief in [African traditional religions](#), including [vodun](#) and occult beliefs like [witchcraft](#), often makes it advisable from the believer's point of view to belong to more than one religion (Kohnert, 2007).

Before the 1990s, [Nigeria](#) didn't even appear on the periphery of any map of the Jewish world (Subramanian, 2022). There is no ancient text establishing Jewish ancestry for Nigerians, as the [Kebra Nagast](#), the 14th-century epic, claimed for the kings of [Ethiopia](#). No [Sephardic Jews](#) migrated here from Spain and Portugal, as they did to territories in [North Africa](#) in the 15th century. No Jewish communities immigrated during [colonialism](#) and stayed after its end, as in [South Africa](#), as shown above. Since the 1990s, however, several people in [southern](#) and [eastern Nigeria](#) have become practising Jews. They imported the rites of this hitherto unfamiliar faith and its foreign language on a considerable scale.

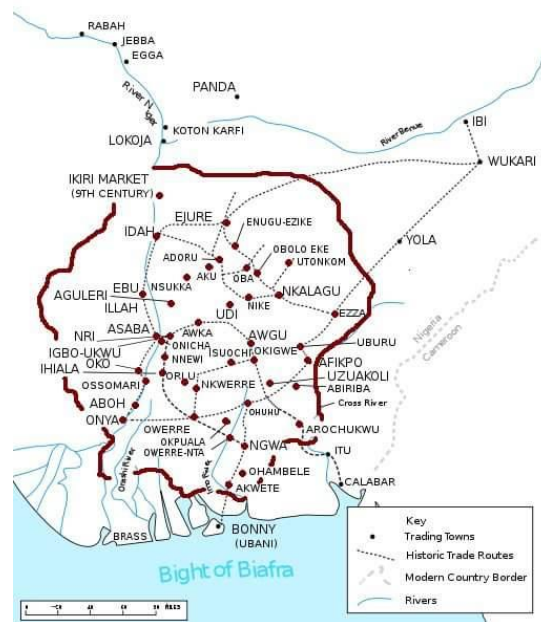
Possibly, this turn was spontaneous (Subramanian, 2022), but there are indicators that also other non-religious reasons might have triggered this development as will be shown below. The [Messianic Jews](#), members of a movement that spun out of [Jews for Jesus](#) in the [US](#) in the 1970s, were among the first. The movement was facilitated by the growth of [African Pentecostalism](#) since the early 1960s, supported by its well-funded American sponsors. The Pentecostal imagination became a factor of social change with the emergence of new salvation schemes, closely linked to [African occult belief systems](#) about the importance of witchcraft as an explanation for misfortune and, in particular, social, political and economic blockages, leading to a witch territory where suspicions of occultism affect social actors, elites and the postcolonial state (Demart, 2017; Mokoko Gampiot, 2019; Kohnert, 2007).

[Messianic Jews](#) consider themselves to be a Jewish community that nonetheless exalts [Jesus as the Messiah](#). In reality, they are rather part of the Christian movement of [evangelicalism](#) (Subramanian, 2022). In any case, there has been no formal guidance from [Israel](#), which refuses to recognise them as a Jewish population. Unreliable estimates of the Jewish population in Nigeria range from 30,000 to 3,000. But even the lower estimate would surpass the other major group in [sub-Saharan Africa](#) to adopt [Judaism](#) in the last century, the



[Abayudaya](#) of eastern [Uganda](#) (Subramanian, 2022). The [Jewish Fellowship Initiative](#), an umbrella body in Nigeria, maintains a list of about 80 synagogues, for example, the Gihon Hebrew Synagogue in the capital [Abuja](#), founded by three Jewish Messianic families, as well as further synagogues in [Lagos](#), [Port Harcourt](#), [Aba](#) and [Owerri](#). Most of these synagogues are small, but sometimes there are three or more in a town, with congregations ranging from a meagre single digit to an impressive few dozen. Most are in [Igboland](#), populated by members of Nigeria's third largest ethnic group. Nine out of ten Nigerian Jews are [Igbo](#) (Subramanian, 2022).

**Graph 9: Precolonial Igbo kingdom and trade routes**



Source: [Juifs igbos](#), fr.wikipédia

The practice of [Judaism](#) in [Nigeria](#) has been characterised by controversies over the legitimacy of ancestral links between the [Igbo](#) and the [Jews](#). A major point of contention has been the [racial versus religious conceptualisations of being Jewish](#), given the claims of non-ethnic Jews to Jewish legitimacy (Olayoku, 2024). There are three broad indicators for the [Jewish identity](#), and these include [religion](#), the [Jewish state](#), and [culture](#). The ultra-Orthodox [Haredi Jews](#), for instance, neither accept the [messianic Judaism](#) as practised by some [Igbo](#) nor the establishment of a Jewish State by [Zionists](#) or [Biafrans](#). However, the secular [Jewish diaspora](#) is more accepting of other Jewish relationships because of shared historical experiences and cultural ties. It has therefore been more willing to accept [Nigerian Jews](#) (Olayoku, 2024).

Perhaps the earliest documented reference to the cultural similarities between the [Igbo](#) and [Jews](#) dates back to the colonial era of the 18th century (Olayoku, 2024). The Igboland-born abolitionist [Olaudah Equiano](#) (1745-1797) drew comparisons between the cultural and religious practices of the Igbo and those of the Jews. According to him, certain customs such as circumcision, naming and purification rites among the Igbo resonated with the [Book of Genesis](#), the experiences of Jewish ancestors. Equiano used these similarities to argue for better treatment of Africans by Europeans at a time plagued by [racism](#) and the dehumanisation of Africans through [slavery](#) and [colonialism](#) (Olayoku, 2024).

The geographical consideration of the quest of Nigerian Jews for freedom was influenced by the different conceptualisations of [Zionism](#) and [Territorialism](#). While Zionists maintained that a return to the homeland was central to Jewish resettlement, Territorialists proposed the creation of [Jewish settlements](#) in various locations around the world. The latter position fits into certain propositions about the need to maintain traditional Igbo religious practices, which are Judaic remnants brought by exiled Jewish ancestors within a [Biafran state](#) with the symbolism of the [Star of David](#), while there are other [Igbo Jews](#) who wish to be accepted as ethnic Jews to facilitate their return to [Israel](#) (Olayoku, 2024).

Notwithstanding these controversies, the practice of [Judaism](#) among the [Igbo](#) does not inhibit the practice of [Christianity](#) (Olayoku, 2024). At least not from the perspective of Nigerian Jews, a perspective not necessarily shared by [Igbo Christians](#), especially those disillusioned by the militant activities of the separatist group [Indigenous People of Biafra \(IPOB\)](#) that aims to restore the defunct [Republic of Biafra](#). IPOB instrumentalised ancient biblical Israel's God-given war victories and their perception of *Elohim's* (God's) support for armed insurrection, war gains and eventual political freedom. This discourse also showed how religious beliefs legitimized the struggle for political independence in post-colonial settings through IPOB's armed struggle against the Nigerian state for the independence of Biafra (Agbo, 2024).

While some Nigerian Judaic adherents maintain that the Jews belong to the lost tribes of Israel as evidenced in the claim that about 80 % of Igbo cultural practices are encapsulated within the Torah, others propose that Judaism spread from North Africa to Nigeria and other West African countries. The similarities often alluded to in terms of ritual practices include male circumcision, seven days of mourning for the dead, the new moon festival, and marriage rituals (Olayoku, 2024).

Since [Equiano's](#) claims in the 18th century (see above), there have been more scientific attempts by Igbo nationalist and academic elites to further explain their Jewish origins, including [DNA testing](#). However, although the [E1B1a gene](#) has been shown to link [ancient Egyptians](#) to [sub-Saharan Africans](#), this gene is not limited to those of Igbo extraction (Olayoku, 2024).

The racial categorization of blackness with the biblical [curse of Ham](#) (see above) has been documented in the [Babylonian Talmud](#) and was well-suited to the colonial vision when invoked to justify slavery and colonialism. Christianity also contributed to the internalisation of [Hamitic](#) hypotheses among Igbo Jews, with the shared assumption that they were the new Jews under attack in the Nigerian state controlled by northern Muslims. But this contrasts with other scholars' suggestion that Igbo Jewish identity is a construct of [Igbo nationalism](#) to assume the position of 'God's chosen people' in an attempt to justify relations of power, legitimacy and prestige within a diverse ethno-religious national context (Olayoku, 2024).

Since the [Biafran War](#) (1967-1970), there have been more efforts among the Igbo to abandon Christianity for Judaism. This includes learning [Hebrew](#), acquiring Jewish prayer books and studying Jewish history. The traumatic experience of civil war has also been cited as a major reason for the predominance of the Igbo among Jews in Nigeria. It even gave rise to controversial [Holocaust](#) comparisons which emerged among the Igbos as a result of mass killings that they experienced in the run-up to and especially during the Biafran War. Holocaust rhetoric, Zionism and outward trappings of Judaism have also been instrumentalized by Biafran neo-secessionists who are not necessarily part of the Nigerian Jewish community (Miles, 2023).

## 2.3 On the history of Jews in DR Congo

**Cartoon 11: 'The kind negroes'**  
*Double racist prejudice against Africans and Jews*<sup>13</sup>



Source: © De Weyer, 2015; [Europe Comics](#), 5 July 2020

During the colonial period, the small Jewish community occupied a special place in the colonization of the '[Heart of Darkness](#)'. The latter was aptly described in [Joseph Conrad's](#) seminal novel about the excesses of imperialism and racism, which showed little difference between 'civilised Europeans' and African 'savages'. Many Jews were among the close advisors to the Belgian emperor [Leopold II](#), founder and sole owner of the [Congo Free State](#) from 1885 to 1908 and the agents of his Congolese empire. Associated with the beginnings of the colonial enterprise, [Jews](#) played a major role in Congolese history in the 20th century (Baumann, 2010).

**Graph 10: Localization of the three historical communities of Congo Jew**<sup>14</sup>



Source: n.a.; [fr.wikipédia](#)

An outstanding example is [Katanga](#), where the opening of the first [uranium-](#) and [copper-mines](#), the founding of [Elisabethville](#) (now Lubumbashi) in 1910 and the creation of a [railway link to South Africa](#) attracted Jewish immigrants, first mainly East European [Ashkenazi](#) and then mainly [Sephardic](#) Jews from North Africa (Benatar & Pimienta-Benatar, 2002). Another

<sup>13</sup> Cartoon by Belgian comic strip artist [Hergé](#), on [Tintin in the Congo](#). Africans were also often depicted as cannibals, for example in [Tibet's "Chick Bill"](#) (© Le Lombard, 1954; De Weyer, 2015).

<sup>14</sup> From : [Histoire des Juifs en république démocratique du Congo](#), fr.wikipédia

smaller community also existed in Luluabourg ([Kananga](#)), in [Kasai-Central](#). At the time, up to 3,000 Juifs lived in the colony (Baumann, 2010).

The first Jews were Eastern European immigrants from [Romania](#) and [Poland](#). Subsequently, more Jewish immigrants arrived from [South Africa](#). In 1911, Sephardic Jews from the island of [Rhodes](#), then part of the [Ottoman Empire](#) settled in the Congo. The inauguration of the Elisabethville synagogue (1930) and the arrival of [Rabbi Moïse Levy](#) (1937), later-on named [Chief Rabbi](#) of the Belgian Congo, [Ruanda-Urundi](#), and [Northern Rhodesia](#), marked the rise of a prosperous Jewish community in [Central Africa](#) (Baumann, 2010). Often originating from [Rhodes](#), like Rabbi Levy, these immigrants formed a social group essential to the colonial economy. Many of them were [travelling salesmen](#). They sold local products, handicrafts, wholesale and retail goods. In this way, from a colonial perspective, Jewish merchants contributed to the 'emancipation' of the 'natives' by introducing them to manufactured products and making them full consumers. However, the commercial practices of the Jews and their daily relations with the colonised set them apart from other whites. Therefore, the Congolese themselves have never assimilated the Jews to the Belgians. However, social relations between blacks and Europeans on an equal footing were unthinkable before [independence](#) (Baumann, 2010). Nevertheless, unions between a single 'colonial' living alone in the middle of the bush and an African 'housewife', a handywoman, were part of colonial realities. Several Jews who had fathered a child with an African woman in the 1920s and 1930s recognised him, gave him their name and paid for his education (Baumann, 2010).

With the unrest following the proclamation of Independence and the [secession of Katanga](#) from [Congo-Léopoldville](#) on 11 July 1960 under [Moïse Tshombe](#), the Jews of Elisabethville fled, like most whites. Many never returned or settled in [Léopoldville](#), where the Jewish community of Congo developed after 1960. In 1962, however, the authenticity campaign of [Zairianization](#) of Mobutu (1973) and the [looting of 1991](#) forced most Jewish entrepreneurs to leave the country. Today, a small Jewish community still lives in the capital [Kinshasa](#). The Beit Yaacov synagogue is the only functioning Israeli place of worship in the heart of Africa (Baumann, 2010).

## 2.4 On the History of Jews in Ethiopia

Graph 12: illustrations to the *Kebrā Nagast*, 1920s<sup>15</sup>



Source: © unknown Ethiopian artist; [Kebrā Nagast](#), en.wikipedia

There is no written proof of the existence of [Jews in Ethiopia](#) before the [13th century](#). Since then various hypotheses have been put forward about their origins, without being able to establish historical certainty (Zonszain, 2019). The hitherto prevalent hypothesis, also shared by the [Ethiopian Christian Church](#), is that they descend from the [Israelites](#) who accompanied the legendary first [Emperor of Ethiopia](#), Prince [Menelik I](#), when he brought the [Ark of the Covenant](#) to Ethiopia, in the 10th century BC. Menelik was the son of the [Queen of Sheba](#) and [King Solomon](#) (970 to 931 BC), the monarch of [ancient Israel](#) and the son of [King David](#), according to the [Hebrew Bible](#) and the [Old Testament](#). The Jews of Ethiopia themselves, called [Beta Israel](#) ('House of Israel'), claim to be descendants of the [Lost Tribe of Dan](#), one of the [twelve tribes of Israel](#), according to the [Torah](#), exiled by the [Assyrians](#) at the end of the [8th century BC](#). This theory tends to become the most widespread because it has been endorsed by the [Chief Rabbinate of Israel](#) since 1973 (Duplaquet, 2015). The [Beta Israel](#) reject the [Amharic](#) term '*Falacha*', used by the Ethiopian Church to describe them, as degrading, because it means not only 'exiled' but also 'wandering, landless' (Zonszain, 2019).

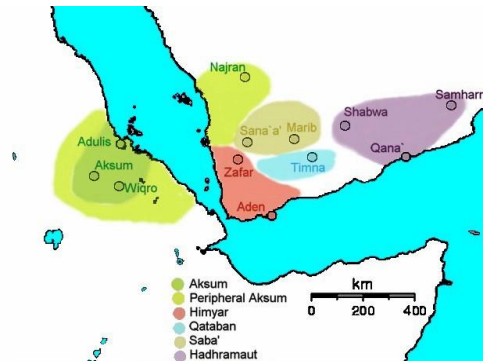
The [Beta Israel](#) are mainly established in northern [Ethiopia](#). They respect the [Shabbat](#), practice [circumcision](#) of new-born males on the eighth day, and observe [rules of food purity](#) such as the ban on pork. Their liturgical language is [Ge'ez](#), the ancient liturgical [South Semitic language](#), also used by the Ethiopian church, because they do not know [Hebrew](#), nor any post-biblical writing. The main feast of their liturgy, [Sigd](#), was integrated into the [Israeli Hebrew calendar](#) in 2008. It is celebrated 50 days after [Yom Kippur](#) (Zonszain, 2019).

For several centuries the [Beta Israel](#) developed in northern [Ethiopia](#), mainly in the [province of Gondar](#) and to a lesser extent in that of [Tigray](#), where they benefited from small independent states. In the 17th century, these lands were conquered by the [Ethiopian Christian army](#) and the Beta Israel were generally devalued in the new Ethiopian state. All the Jews of Gondar lost their land, although a small middle class managed to survive. From the 18th to the 19th century, the central Ethiopian state disintegrated and was ruled by various warlords. The Beta Israel community was then largely marginalised and withdrew into itself, into reserved

<sup>15</sup> The [Kebrā Nagast](#) is believed to contain the genealogy of the [Solomonic dynasty](#) that succeeded the [Ethiopian Orthodox Church](#). The manuscript ends with a final prophecy that the power of Rome will be eclipsed by the power of Ethiopia, and describes how King [Kaleb of Axum](#) will subjugate the Jews living in [Najran](#). ([Kebrā Nagast](#), en.wikipedia).

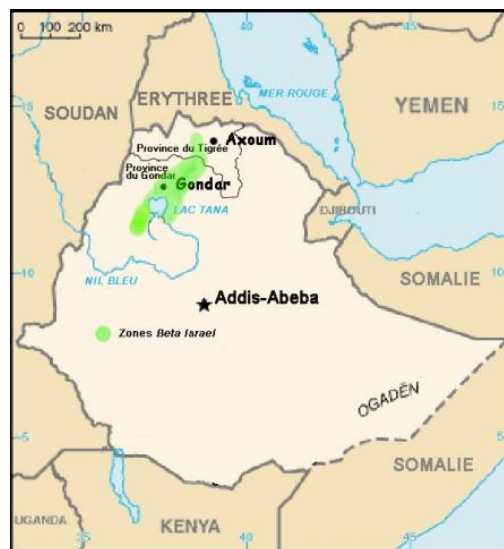
villages (Duplaquet, 2015). Nowadays, the Beta Israel live in Northern and North-Western Ethiopia, in about 500 small villages spread over a wide territory, alongside predominantly Christian and Muslim populations (Weil, 2012).

**Graph 13:** *Kingdom of Sheba: Map of Aksum and South Arabia, ca. 230 AD*



Source: © [Yom](#), map of [Sheba](#), en. Wikipedia

**Graph 14:** *Map of the areas where the Beta Israel lived in modern times*<sup>16</sup>



Source: © [Christophe cagé](#), [Juifs éthiopiens](#), fr.wikipédia, 28 September 2006

The [Jewish communities of Europe](#) only became aware of [Beta Israel](#) in 1859, when they came into contact with Protestant missionaries from the ‘[London Society for the Promotion of Christianity among the Jews](#)’ (now Church’s Ministry Among Jewish People (CMJ)). Several rabbis then quickly proclaimed the Jewishness of the ‘*Falashas*’ and a mission was organized by the [Alliance Israelite Universelle](#), under the direction of [Joseph Halévy](#). At the beginning of the 20th century, another mission was led in northern Ethiopia by [Jacques Faitlovitch](#), a disciple of Halévy, who worked to train a ‘*Falasha*’ elite in various Western Jewish institutions. From 1921, their Judaism was officially recognised by [Rav Kook](#), Chief Rabbi of the [Ashkenazi](#) community of British [Mandatory Palestine](#) (Duplaquet, 2015).

In 1938, one year after the end of the colonial [Second Italo-Ethiopian War](#), in which hundreds of thousands of Ethiopian civilians died among others by the use of [mustard gas](#) by the Italian

<sup>16</sup> From the 10th century at the latest to the 17th century, the region was the power base for the [Kingdom of Simien](#), also known as the Kingdom of [Beta Israel](#).

troops, [Benito Mussolini](#) tried to convince the Ethiopian emperor [Haile Selassie](#) to find a place in Ethiopia for the Jews who were being exiled from Italy. There were parallels to Hitler's subsequent [Madagascar Plan of 1940](#) and the prior [British Uganda Scheme](#) initiative of 1903.

**Cartoon 12:** *Mussolini trying to convince Haile Selassie to find a place in Ethiopia for the Jews exiled from Italy*<sup>17</sup>



Source: © [Punch Magazine](#), 1938

However, when [Israel](#) was created in 1948, the [Chief Rabbinate](#) decided, unlike its predecessors, not to recognize the Jewishness of the [Beta Israel](#) and therefore not to authorize their [immigration to the new Jewish state](#). The majority of Ethiopian Jewish schools, funded by the [Jewish Agency](#), gradually closed, and [American Jewish institutions](#) that financially helped Beta Israel ceased their activities. Only around twenty Ethiopian Jews were present in Israel in the 1950s and they all returned to [Ethiopia](#) after obtaining their diploma. However, a small immigration network was quickly set up. It was mainly the work of educated men who came to Israel on a tourist visa and then remained there illegally (Duplaquet, 2015).

In the [1974 Ethiopian coup d'état](#), a group of pro-communist soldiers with anti-religious positions that were detrimental to [Beta Israel](#) overthrew the regime of [Haile Selassie](#) a member of the [Solomonic dynasty](#), which claims to trace lineage to Emperor [Menelik I](#). Ethiopia descended into civil war between government forces and left-wing rebels, and the country soon faced a famine that left the population of the north of the country, including Beta Israel, permanently destitute (Duplaquet, 2015). Thousands of Ethiopians were then on the move, fleeing war and famine in neighbouring countries. At about the same time, debates about the Jewishness of the 'Falashas' were revived in Israel. The [Sephardi Chief Rabbi of Israel](#), [Ovadia Yossef](#), recognised their Jewishness in February 1973, based on an Egyptian rabbinical decision from the 16th century. The following year, the [Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi](#) agreed with this decision. At the governmental level, it was not until 1975 that Prime Minister [Yitzhak Rabin](#) recognised the Jewish character of Beta Israel and thus granted them the benefit of the law of return. From that moment on, several mass exoduses took place, even though the Ethiopian government had prohibited these Jewish citizens from emigrating to Israel. The Israeli government then organised several massive transfer missions of Ethiopian

<sup>17</sup> Imaginary Conversations. "Negus, my heart is softened. I have decided to repopulate your country with our own magnificent Jews." [It is said that Signor Mussolini intends to find a place in Ethiopia for the Jews who are being exiled from Italy.] [Punch Magazine](#), 1938. There are parallels to Hitler's [Madagascar Plan](#) of 1940 and the British [Uganda Scheme](#) initiative of 1903.

Jews, notably through [Operation Moses](#) in 1984-85 during the [Second Sudanese civil war](#) and subsequent famine, and [Operation Solomon](#) in 1991 in which 16,000 and 14,000 ‘*Falashas*’ respectively were brought to Israel (Duplaquet, 2015).

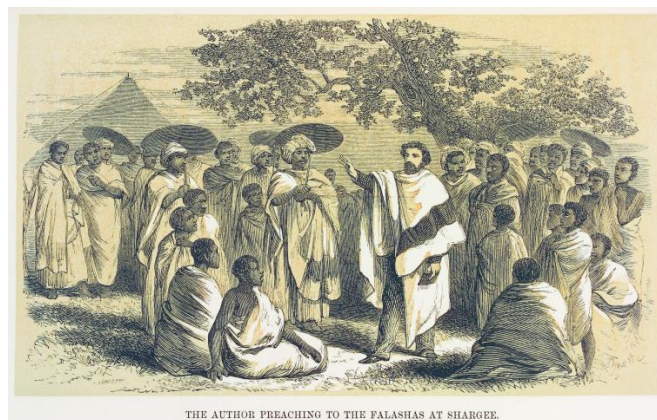
**Cartoon 13:** ‘*Journey to Ethiopia in the Footsteps of [Beta Israel](#)*’



Source: © Turetsky & Turetsky, 2020

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, many [Beta Israel](#) converted to Christianity, largely as a result of Western [proselytization](#). They were called [Falash Mura](#) (Bard, 2019). While most converted voluntarily, some were forcibly converted or felt compelled to convert due to economic hardship and social exclusion in a majority Christian population. Many have made it to [Israel](#), but in 2010 there were still around 12,000 members of the Beta Israel communities in [Addis Ababa](#) and [Gondar](#) waiting to make [Aliyah](#), that is to emigrate to Israel (Bard, 2019).

**Cartoon 14:** *Missionary Henry Aaron Stern preaches Christianity to Beta Israel*



Source: © Henry Aaron Stern, 1862; [Falash Mura](#), en. Wikipedia

Since the late 1980s, [Ethiopian Jews](#) have thus become a relatively [large community within the Israeli population](#). However, Israeli society was already highly fragmented into different, often hermetic communities, and the integration of [Beta Israel](#) became complicated



(Duplaquet, 2015). When the new migrants arrived in Israel, they faced several problems. Since most of them originated from small Ethiopian villages, they got a considerable [cultural shock](#) when they arrived in the Israeli urban world. In addition to the difficulty of adaptation, a recurring problem with each new wave of immigration to Israel was that of space and housing. Since the first waves of immigration, caravan camps were set up on the outskirts of cities. However, this temporary solution became permanent for thousands of people, some of whom had to wait for twenty years, thus slowing down the integration of the 'Falashas'. Today, about 135,000 Ethiopian Jews live in Israel (Duplaquet, 2015).

**Cartoon 15: 'Racism in Israel:  
How an Ethiopian Jew becomes Black in the Promised Land'**



Source: © Ben-Eliezer, 2007

Along with the [Palestinians](#), the [black Jews of Ethiopia](#) were among the major victims of the [racism](#) that is still growing in Israel (Ben-Eliezer, 2007). Most Ethiopian immigrants arrived in Israel at a time of great change in the country. For decades, Israel followed an ideology consisting of practices and a structure of governance known as *mamlakhtiyut* (statism) (Don-Yehiya, 2007). It was based on the [nation-state](#) model, where everything is managed, concentrated and controlled from above. The attitude towards the many immigrants coming into the inexperienced state was that they had to assimilate into the integrating society. If they did not, the mechanisms of the state would do it for them. Almost inevitably, attempts at [assimilation](#) created dependency. The absorption centres to which the Ethiopian immigrants were sent created and then increased their dependence on the existing population. By the 1980s, the [melting pot](#) discourse in Israel had been replaced by a new discourse advocating [cultural pluralism](#), the mixing and blending of cultures. In practice, however, newcomers were pressured to assimilate into the dominant culture (Ben-Eliezer, 2007).

More than thirty years after the first waves of immigration, the revelation of several scandals surrounding the arrival of the Ethiopian Jews confirmed both their non-integration and the persistence of [racism](#) against them (Duplaquet, 2015). For example, in 2013, the Israeli Ministry of Health admitted to having ordered to inject Ethiopian Jewish immigrants with a [long-term contraceptive agent](#), administered in Ethiopian transit camps before they arrived in Israel. The injections were given without the consent of the patients, who all thought they were receiving a vaccine. Since 2000, the fertility rate of Ethiopian Jews in Israel has fallen by 50 % (Duplaquet, 2015). In May 2015, a video broadcast of an Ethiopian soldier, Damas Pakada, being molested by two white police officers, provoked several demonstrations. On May 3, 2015, around 10,000 people gathered in Tel Aviv. During this demonstration, around twenty people were injured. President Rivlin admitted that Israel has made mistakes in the integration of Ethiopian Jews for years and promised to correct this (Duplaquet, 2015). In July

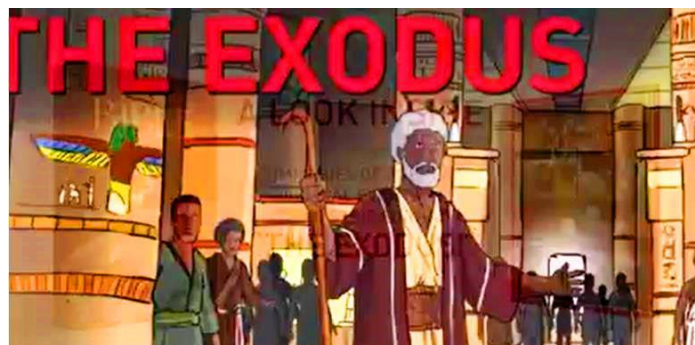
2019, there was another outbreak of [protest by Ethiopian Jews](#) in response to the shooting death of 18-year-old Solomon Teka at the hands of an Israeli police officer in Kiryat Haim, [Haifa](#) (Carey & Liebermann, 2019).

In 2019, a ground-breaking comic book for adolescents called 'The Journey to Ethiopia in the Footsteps of Beta Israel', by Yossi and Ruti Turetsky brought the story of Ethiopian Jews into the mainstream of Jewish history and consciousness, it was included in the curriculum taught in Israeli schools (Turetsky & Turetsky, 2020).

The great religious diversity of different streams of Judaism creates tensions, especially between the ultra-Orthodox, Orthodox and 'secular' Jews, but ethnic plurality is also often a source of discrimination. In this respect, the different waves of emigration to Israel show the evolution of social tensions. The arrival of many Ashkenazi Jews at the end of the 1980s, for example, gave rise to a new form of discrimination against the Sephardim, who were socially marginalised (Duplaquet, 2015). The socio-economic gap between the Ethiopian community and the rest of the Israeli population is abysmal. In 2013, a report by the State Comptroller General on social discrimination in Israel revealed that 65 % of young Ethiopians live below the poverty line and that 18 % of them are affected by unemployment, compared to 5.6 % for the rest of the population (Duplaquet, 2015).

### 3. Conclusion

**Cartoon 16:** *'The exodus'*<sup>18</sup>



Source: © [The Black Hebrews](#), 27 August 2015

The presence of Jewish communities in [Sub-Saharan Africa](#) has a rich historical background. The presence of Jews in Sub-Saharan Africa dates back centuries, with significant historical episodes shaping their communities' development. Jewish migration to Africa can be traced to ancient times, with notable settlements in regions such as [Ethiopia](#), where the [Beta Israel](#) community resided. Additionally, the arrival of [Sephardic Jews](#) in North Africa, particularly in countries like Morocco and Tunisia, contributed to the broader Jewish presence in the African continent. Colonial influences further impacted Jewish communities, with European powers introducing Jews to territories such as [South Africa](#), where Jewish immigrants played crucial roles in various sectors.

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<sup>18</sup> According to the [Black Hebrew Israelites](#), a [new religious movement](#) claiming that [African Americans are descendants](#) of the ancient [Israelites](#), 'this is the kind of cartoon Black Jewish children should be watching' ([The Black Hebrews](#), [www.mybiblehistory.com](#), [Facebook](#), 27 August 2015).

However, in contemporary times, the landscape for Jews in this region presents a complex tapestry of challenges and opportunities. Contemporary Jewish communities in Sub-Saharan Africa exhibit a diverse range of socio-cultural dynamics, influenced by factors such as geography, historical experiences, and interactions with neighbouring populations. In countries like [South Africa](#), where Jews have a relatively prominent presence, they have established vibrant communal institutions, synagogues, and cultural organizations that contribute to maintaining their identity and heritage. However, in other Sub-Saharan African countries with smaller Jewish populations, such as [Nigeria](#), [Ghana](#), [DR Congo](#) and [Ethiopia](#), Jewish communities often face challenges in preserving their traditions and identities amidst cultural assimilation and limited resources.

Despite the resilience and adaptability of Jewish communities in Sub-Saharan Africa, they confront numerous challenges that impact their socio-economic well-being and cultural continuity. [Anti-Semitism](#), although not as prevalent as in some other regions, remains a concern, with sporadic incidents reported across the continent. Economic disparities, political instability, and security threats also pose significant challenges to Jewish communities, affecting their livelihoods and sense of security. Additionally, the emigration of young Jews seeking better opportunities abroad further strains the sustainability of these communities.

In response to the challenges they face, Jewish communities in Sub-Saharan Africa have demonstrated resilience and resourcefulness through various communal organizations and initiatives. Synagogues serve as focal points for communal gatherings and religious observance, while Jewish schools and cultural centres play vital roles in preserving heritage and educating future generations. Furthermore, diaspora networks and international partnerships provide avenues for support and solidarity, enabling African Jewish communities to address common challenges and access resources for sustainable development.

Amidst the challenges, there exist opportunities for the growth and resilience of Jewish communities in Sub-Saharan Africa. Engaging in interfaith dialogue and fostering partnerships with local institutions can promote understanding and tolerance, mitigating the risks of discrimination and fostering social cohesion. Moreover, leveraging advancements in technology and communication facilitates connectivity within and beyond African Jewish communities, enabling access to educational resources, cultural exchange, and economic opportunities. By harnessing these opportunities and building upon their historical legacy, Jewish communities in SSA can navigate the complexities of the contemporary landscape and thrive amidst diversity. By addressing challenges collectively, fostering dialogue, and seizing opportunities for collaboration and innovation, African Jewish communities can navigate the complexities of the present era and chart a path towards a vibrant and sustainable future.

In December 2022, the Sub-Saharan African Jewish Alliance ([SAJA](#)) was founded to promote Judaism in Africa, share successes, challenges and resources, build friendships, and be a unified voice of the sub-Saharan Jewish community to the outside world and the world Jewish community. Until then, the vast majority of African Jews were unaware of the emerging Jewish communities in [SSA](#) (Kumar, 2022). The organization is a coalition and borderless network of Jewish people across eleven African countries, including [Cameroon](#), [Gabon](#), [Ethiopia](#), [Ghana](#), [Ivory Coast](#), [Kenya](#), [Madagascar](#), [Nigeria](#), [Tanzania](#), [Uganda](#) and [Zimbabwe](#). The creation of SAJA was supported by [Kulanu](#), a New York-based non-profit organisation that supports emerging Jewish groups around the world, not least to combat prejudice against African Jews, who are often accused of practising [witchcraft](#) and [black magic](#), among other anti-Semitic accusations. Allegedly, some of them were only pretending to be Jewish to move to Israel for safety and economic reasons. But making [Aliyah](#) is not high on SAJA's agenda. Many of these communities have lived in their own world, creating their

own Jewish identity over time, and have never experienced any Jewish life other than their own. Some may have travelled to Israel or met with expatriate Jews in their own country, but it was eye-opening for them to meet with representatives of other African Jewish communities (Kumar, 2022). Overall, this was seen as a significant step forward in the creation of a united [black African Jewry](#).

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**Résumé :** *[Sur l'histoire des Juifs, en Afrique subsaharienne : Le cas de l'Afrique du Sud, du Nigeria, de la RD Congo et de l'Éthiopie]* – Les Juifs d'Afrique ont une longue histoire. Les Africains ont rencontré les mythes et traditions juives sous différentes formes et situations, conduisant au développement d'une nouvelle identité juive liée à celle de la diaspora. Divers groupes de Juifs noirs d'Afrique occidentale, centrale, orientale et australe ont utilisé et imaginé leurs traditions orales et leurs pratiques traditionnelles pour construire une identité juive distincte. À partir du début du XXe siècle, deux diasporas distinctes ont fusionné dans un espace entièrement nouveau. Les Africains et les Afro-Américains ont adopté le judaïsme comme une forme d'émancipation personnelle face à l'oppression coloniale et aux effets du néocolonialisme. L'adoption du judaïsme par les Africains noirs était une forme de libération de l'autorité anglo-chrétienne. Les Noirs et les Juifs sont les deux minorités marginalisées et stigmatisées de la culture occidentale. Depuis l'Antiquité, ils entretiennent une relation complexe entre identification, coopération et rivalité. Les Igbo du Nigeria, par exemple, étaient à l'avant-garde d'un mouvement juif normatif qui comprenait également plusieurs autres groupes ethniques. La rhétorique de l'Holocauste, le sionisme et les caractéristiques externes du judaïsme ont été exploités par les néo-sécessionnistes du Biafra. De plus, depuis la première mention des Africains dans la Bible hébraïque jusqu'aux revendications contemporaines du mouvement Black Lives Matter, il y a eu un soutien à la « résistance palestinienne », mais presque rien qui aurait pu provoquer une confrontation entre noirs et juifs. La plupart des Juifs africains vivent en Afrique du Sud. Cependant, la plupart d'entre eux sont blancs. La communauté juive sud-africaine comptait plus de 120 000 membres au milieu des années 1970. Après plusieurs grandes vagues d'émigration à la fin du régime de l'apartheid, ce nombre est tombé à un peu plus de 50 000 personnes. Cependant, l'affirmation du peuple juif comme étant sud-africain est controversée. La société d'accueil sud-africaine fait une distinction entre la diaspora juive et l'appartenance sud-africaine. Depuis le début des années 1990, la deuxième plus grande communauté juive d'Afrique subsaharienne s'est développée au Nigeria, qui n'apparaissait auparavant sur aucune carte du monde juif. Neuf Juifs nigériens sur dix sont des Igbo. On estime qu'il y aurait entre 3 000 et 30 000 Juifs. Cependant, Israël refuse de les reconnaître comme population juive. En République démocratique du Congo, une petite communauté juive occupe une position particulière depuis l'époque coloniale. De nombreux Juifs figuraient parmi les proches conseillers et agents de Léopold II de son État indépendant du Congo (1885-1908). Les Juifs ont également joué un rôle important dans la province du Katanga au XXe siècle, puisque les premières mines y ont été ouvertes et qu'une ligne de chemin de fer vers l'Afrique du Sud a été construite. Cependant, la Zaïrisation de Mobutu (1973) et les pillages de 1991 ont contraint la plupart des entrepreneurs juifs à quitter le pays. L'Éthiopie pourrait être considérée comme le berceau du judaïsme, avec notamment l'ancien royaume de Saba, mentionné dans la Bible hébraïque et le Coran, ainsi que Beta Israel. Aujourd'hui, cependant, la dure réalité à laquelle sont confrontés les immigrants juifs éthiopiens en Israël révèle le racisme profondément enraciné dans la société israélienne.

**Zusammenfassung :** *[Zur Geschichte der Juden in Subsahara-Afrika: Fallstudien aus Südafrika, Nigeria, der DR Kongo und Äthiopien]* – Juden in Afrika haben eine lange Geschichte. Afrikaner sind jüdischen Mythen und Traditionen in unterschiedlichen Formen und Situationen begegnet, was zur Entwicklung einer neuen jüdischen Identität geführt hat, die mit der der Diaspora verknüpft ist. Verschiedene Gruppen schwarzer Juden aus West-, Zentral-, Ost- und Südafrika nutzten und imaginierten ihre mündlichen Überlieferungen und traditionellen Praktiken, um eine eindeutige jüdische Identität aufzubauen. Ab dem frühen 20. Jahrhundert verschmolzen zwei getrennte Diasporas in einer völlig neuen Arena. Afrikaner und Afroamerikaner übernahmen das Judentum als eine Form der persönlichen Emanzipation von der kolonialen Unterdrückung und den Auswirkungen des Neokolonialismus. Die Übernahme des Judentums durch Schwarzafrikaner war eine Form der Befreiung von der anglo-christlichen Autorität. Schwarze und Juden sind in der westlichen Kultur die beiden marginalisierten und stigmatisierten Minderheiten. Seit der Antike pflegen sie ein komplexes Verhältnis zwischen Identifikation, Kooperation und Rivalität. Die Igbo von Nigeria beispielsweise standen an der Spitze einer normativen jüdischen Bewegung, die auch mehrere andere ethnische Gruppen umfasste. Die Holocaust-Rhetorik, Zionismus und die äußeren Merkmale des Judentums wurden von biafranischen Neo-Szessionisten instrumentalisiert. Außerdem gab es, von der ersten Erwähnung von Afrikanern in der hebräischen Bibel bis zu den zeitgenössischen Forderungen der Black Lives Matter-Bewegung, Unterstützung für den „palästinensischen Widerstand“, aber fast nichts, was eine Konfrontation zwischen Schwarzen und Juden hätte provozieren können. Die meisten afrikanischen Juden leben in Südafrika. Allerdings sind die meisten von ihnen weiß. Die jüdische Gemeinde Südafrikas zählte Mitte der 1970er Jahre mehr als 120.000 Mitglieder. Nach mehreren großen Auswanderungswellen am Ende des Apartheidregimes sank sie auf knapp über 50.000. Der Anspruch jüdischer Personen auf südafrikanische Zugehörigkeit ist jedoch umstritten. Die südafrikanische Aufnahmegesellschaft unterscheidet zwischen der jüdischen Diaspora und südafrikanische Zugehörigkeit. In Nigeria hat sich seit Anfang der 1990er Jahre die zweitgrößte jüdische Gemeinde in Subsahara Afrika entwickelt, die zuvor auf keiner Landkarte der jüdischen Welt auftauchte. Neun von zehn nigerianischen Juden sind Igbo. Schätzungen zählen 3.000 bis 30.000 Juden. Israel weigert sich allerdings, sie als jüdische Bevölkerung anzuerkennen. In der DR Kongo nimmt eine kleine jüdische Gemeinde seit der Kolonialzeit eine besondere Stellung ein. Viele Juden gehörten zu den engen Beratern Leopolds II. und den Agenten seines Freistaats Kongo (1885–1908). Juden spielten im 20. Jahrhundert auch eine wichtige Rolle in der Katanga-Provinz, seitdem dort die ersten Minen eröffnet und eine Eisenbahnlinie nach Südafrika gebaut wurde. Allerdings zwangen Mobutus Zaïrisierung (1973) und die Plünderungen im Jahr 1991 die meisten jüdischen Unternehmer, das Land zu verlassen. Äthiopien könnte als Wiege des Judentums betrachtet werden, einschließlich des alten Königreichs Saba, das in der hebräischen Bibel und im Koran erwähnt wird, ebenso wie Beta Israel. Heute jedoch offenbart die harte Realität, mit der äthiopisch-jüdische Einwanderer in Israel konfrontiert sind, den Rassismus, der tief in der israelischen Gesellschaft verwurzelt ist.