

IN MY FATHER'S HOUSE:
TWO TALES OF JEWISH ORIGIN AMONG THE GA-
ADANGME OF ACCRA IN 2015

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***Abstract:** In Accra, two houses represent two distinct places that portray memories of a Jewish origin. One of them is the stool house of the royal Nikolai family. On a mural the wanderings of the Ga-Adangme ancestors from Israel into West Africa is portrayed. The other house holds the burial place of Wulff Joseph Wulff, a Danish Jew who settled in Osu in 1836. In this article, I will compare the two narratives and reflect on how both contribute to a contemporary Jewish myth of the origin of the Ga-Adangme-speaking peoples of Ghana.*

Key Word: Ga-Adangme, Israel Ancestry, Wulff Joseph Wulff, Nikolai, Osu Ghana

Introduction

In the hustle and bustle of Ghana's capital city, Accra, two houses a few miles apart represent two distinct places that portray memories of a Jewish or Hebrew/Israelite origin among the Ga-Adangme-speaking peoples.

One of them, in Ussher Town, one of Accra's oldest neighbourhoods is the stool house of the royal Nikolai family of the Asere Division. On a mural in the courtyard of the compound, the wanderings of the Ga-Adangme ancestor, Ayi Kushie, from Israel to Ethiopia and of Nikolai (Ni Koi Olai), the patriarch of the Asere, from Kush (Sudan) into West Africa in 1424 are portrayed. From there, one of his descendants, Nii Nikolai Ashaley I, led his people to the coastal area, where they settled at Ga Mashie, present-day Accra, in 1660.

The other house, a 30-minute walk along the coast to the east on Castle Drive in Osu, Christiansborg (present-day Accra) and opposite the old Danish cemetery, holds the burial place of Wulff

Joseph Wulff, a Danish Jew who settled in Osu (present-day Accra) in 1836. Through his relationship with a local woman, Wulff established the line of the Wulffs within Osu's prominent families.

Both of these places seem to contribute, in their different ways, to a memory of and identification with a Jewish or Hebrew/Israelite past among the Ga-Adangme-speaking peoples of Ghana. In this article, I will compare the two narratives and reflect on how (or if) both contribute to a Hebrew/Israelite myth of the origin of the Ga-Adangme-speaking peoples of Ghana expressed in a recent outpour of literature and writings on the topic. I will also ponder the question about the function of such narratives, including how they might contribute to an apparent emergence of Judaism as a religious option in Ghana.¹

On a field trip to Ghana in early 2015, I became interested in exploring research prospects about an apparent Jewish revival among the Ga-Adangme-speaking people of Ghana. The recent literature on the practice of Judaism or related new religious movements in Ghana has so far focused on the two newly established Jewish communities in Sefwi.² My attention had been drawn to this topic by the brief discussion of the Ga-Adangme Jewish or Hebrew/Israelite myth of origin by some scholars in the emerging field of Afro-Jewish Studies.³

¹ See for instance: <http://gadangmenikasemoasafo.wordpress.com/the-king-taki-tawiah-memorial-lectures/lecture-i-a-people-blessed/>, accessed 25 March 2014.

² Janice R. Levi, "The House of Israel: Judaism in Ghana," in *African Zion: Studies in Black Judaism*, ed. Edith Bruder and Tudor Parfitt (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), 117-137; Martina Könighofer, *The New Ship of Zion: Dynamic Diaspora Dimensions of the African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem* (Wien: Lit., 2008).

³ Nathan Paul Devir, Tudor Parfitt, *Black Jews in Africa and the Americas* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2013); Edith Bruder, *The Black Jews of Africa: History, Religion, Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

The Ga-Adangme-speaking people today constitute one of Ghana's many ethno-linguistic groups. With an estimated population of two million, their main place of settlement is in the Greater Accra, Eastern and Volta Regions. Other places of settlement outside Ghana are to be found in Togo, as well as in the diaspora outside of Ghana and the African continent.⁴ As its name already suggests, the Ga-Adangme peoples are essentially formed by two related, but linguistically distinguishable, groups of the Ga and Adangme, who are said to have shared a common proto-Dangme language sometime in the past, as well as who arrived by land or by sea from the east in different waves of families. Within this group, the Ga or Akras established a series of contiguous settlements some miles northwest of modern-day Accra in the 15th century. The word "Accra" is derived from "Nkra", a term the Europeans seemed to have had problems pronouncing. "Nkra" is a Twi word for "black ants", by which the Ga people of Ga-Mashi were known to outsiders. In historical terms, Ga-Mashi represents the nucleus around which the city of Accra, Ghana's capital, has grown. Traditionally Ga-Mashi was made up of seven quarters of which Asere, Abola, Gebese and Otublohum are referred to as Usshers's Town, overseen by the Dutch in the 17th century, and Ngleshi Alata, Sempe and Akumadje, the formerly British area or James Town. Christiansborg, or Osu Castle, became a third town settled by Adangme that later became part of Central Accra.⁵

Arguably, the Ga-Adangmes are of a mixed heritage. Not only were the earlier inhabitants of the area, the Guan, apparently absorbed by the immigrating groups, a number of Akwamu were also

⁴ In the Gadangme Nikasem Asafo Lecture (see footnote 1), London, Birmingham, Manchester, Cardiff, Hamburg, Frankfurt, Paris, Milan, Toronto, Washington, New York, New Jersey and Oklahoma City are mentioned.

⁵ Deborah Pellow, "Cultural Differences and Urban Spatial Forms: Elements of Boundedness in an Accra Community," *American Anthropologist* 103, no. 1 (2001): 59-75.

incorporated into the Ga-Adangme group during the Ga-Akwamu war in the 17th century. Many others have their origins in one of the neighbouring Akan ethnicities (such as the Ashantis) or from one of the many other ethnic groups in Ghana who had moved into the Ga-Adangme areas of settlement during the past few hundreds of years. Practically all of Ghana's ethnic groups are said to have migrated to their present area from somewhere, and the Ga-Adangme are not the only ones who have been portrayed to be of Israelites origin⁶.

The remnants of European trading posts and former slave castles that dot Ghana's coast (the former Gold Coast) also bear witness to the fact that the Gold Coast and the area of Accra constituted one of the early contact zones between Africans and Europeans. These castles were crucial points of exchange in the trade of humans (Trans-Atlantic slave trade) and other goods. At the beginning of the slave trade, it was likely that slaves became integrated as part of the adopting Ga-Adangme group. Seeking access to trade and protection from the attacking Fanti to the West and Akyem and Akwamu to the North, the Ga-Adangme often served as intermediaries. Europeans, such as the Portuguese, Brandenburgers, Dutch, Swedish, Danish and British, left their genealogical mark among the population of the coastal areas. Late joiners to the Ga group were, for instance, the Tambon people who trace their origin to Afro-Brazilian re-settlers in the 19th century.

Narrating or imaging the Ga-Adangme identity can therefore only be looked at as a constructive process that was fed by several sources. The Jewish or Hebrew/Israelite component of the Ga-Adangme identity would have to be treated in a similar way;

⁶ Thomas McCaskie "Asante Origins, Egypt and the Near East: An Idea and its History," in *Recasting the Past: History Writing and Political Work in Modern Africa*, eds. D. R. Peterson and G. Macola, New African Histories Series (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2009).

however, it seems to have played an important part in the overall construction of the Ga-Adangme identity, which has seen a certain historical continuity, and some Jews migrating to this part of the world might have further enforced it.⁷

Whether a Jewish or Hebrew/Israelite claim has anything to do with the writings of the mysterious Jewish traveller of the 9th century, Eldad HaDani, who reported the lost tribes of Israel on the other side of the River of Kush must be left as a of myth. Similarly, it must be left open at the current state of inquiry, if some Jews who had participated in the Trans-Saharan Gold Trade, had settled down in Ghana. It seems, however, quite probable that among the Portuguese, who were the first Europeans to establish themselves along Ghana's coast in the 15th century, a portion might have been "New Christians"—converted Sephardi Jews—fleeing from the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492 and the Inquisition on the Iberian Peninsula that preceded and followed it.⁸ That an element of people with such an origin started to arrive at the Gold Coast first with the Portuguese and later with the Dutch is for instance surmised by William Bosman, Chief Factor of the Dutch at the Castle of St. George d'Elmina, who had arrived to the Gold Coast in 1688.⁹

From the perspective of a contemporary Jewish on Hebrew/Israelite myth of origin, as portrayed on the mural of the Royal stool house in the Asere quarter, the ancestor and first king of the Ga-Adangme, Ayi Kushie, left Israel for Ethiopia/Sudan. From there, one of his

⁷ I am aware that as a newcomer to research about the Ga-Adangme, I am most likely only scratching the surface regarding the complexity of the topic in the best case and to misinterpret Ga-Adangme history in the worst case. I, nevertheless, hope to have outlined some possible avenues for future research on the topic.

⁸ For the latter, such a presence has been established for Senegal's Petite Côte, as well as for the Island of Sao Thome in the Bight of Biafra. Peter Mark, José da Silva Horta, *The Forgotten Diaspora, Jewish Communities in West Africa and the Making of the Atlantic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

⁹ William Bosman. *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea, Divided into the Gold, the Slave, and the Ivory Coasts* (James Knapton: London, 1705), 210.

descendants, Nikolai, moved to West Africa in 1424. Nii Nikolai Ashaley I led the Ga to the coastal area, where they settled at Ga Mashie in 1660. The Nicolaitans are said to have formed the core group of the Akras in 1660.



Portrayal of the Israelite origin on banners of the Nikolai family of the Asere clan of Ga Mashie on the funeral of Nii Amugi in 2011.¹⁰

¹⁰ I thank Rev. Dr. Nana Kwakye Opara for providing me with this source.

The age of this narrative cannot be reconstructed, but it does certainly serve the claims of royalty and it is publicly displayed

To the best of my knowledge, no outside sources of the time would confirm such a migration of Jews or Hebrew/Israelites. Bosman, who arrived more than 20 years after the above portrayal of the arrival of the Nicolaitans to the Ga-Mashie (Accra) area in 1660, which is one of the earliest written sources to discuss the topic, writes the following.

The Children are not circumcised anywhere on the Gold Coast, but at Accra. But whence the Custom of holding Women unclean, and Circumcising of Children, should be derived from, I own I cannot tell; to carry it up as high as the Judaick Times seems to me too far: Though several Europeans favour this Assertion, urging, that the Negroes still retain several Laws and Customs which favour of Judaism, as that last mentioned, the Honouring of the Moon at the time when the Jews begin their Festival, the marrying of their Brothers Wife, and several more, which seem the same in effect, as well as the Names, of which here are several which occur in the Old Testament. But all this cannot in the least incline me to their Opinion; I should be more easily persuaded that they had all these from the Mahometans, whose Religion is a mere Rhapsody of Christianity, Judaism and heathenism; [...].¹¹

Notwithstanding Bosman's scepticism against some of his contemporaries' opinions about the Judaic origin of the Gas, his source became an important reference point for future portrayal of the local native population—the Akras and later the Ga-Adangmes - as having a Jewish origin.¹² The scope of this paper does not allow delving into more detail here, but much of the evolution of Accra as a town and the evolution of the identity of its people, “the Akras”, must have been closely connected to the African-European encounter. A central part of the encounter was that the land where

¹¹ Bosman, *A New and Accurate Description*, 89-90.

¹² It seems noteworthy to mention here that Carl Christian Reindorf used Bosman as a historical source to write his *History*.

the Europeans tried to establish their outposts or forts in the 17th century (Ushers Fort [Dutch], James Fort [British], Christiansborg [Swedish and later Danish]) had its own ownership. In the case of Accra, as tradition demands in most of Southern Ghana, land ownership was tied to sacred objects, known as “stools,” which are symbolic of lineages. Among the Ga-Adangme, stools are in the possession of particular extended families. Accordingly, strangers or a person of a different tribal origin can never acquire true ownership of stool land.¹³

The local custom of burying important people or the family’s patriarch in the basement of a house seems also to have served to lay claims to the land. Mensa, for instance, writes:

It can be said that if one picks a speck of dust in the centre of Ga-Mashi [Accra] or any principal Ga-Dangmes’ town or village, it is likely that some minute remain of a Ga-Dangmes ancestor might be mixed with it. This is not simply a metaphorical statement one may argue; for the Ga-Dangmes have practices over the century’s intramural sepulture of prominent individuals in their families or Ga-Dangmes’ society. It is well known that heads of families and other prominent people in Ga-Dangmes society were buried beneath the floor of the family house referred to as “Adebo Shia.” [...] “The ancestral homes of Ga-Dangmes are often said to be “heavy” (tsii), due to what the Ga-Dangmes believed to be spiritual presence of the ancestors in the ancestral houses. Thus, the ancestral settlements of the Ga-Dangmes, built as they are on the remains of the tribal patriarchs; and remain a revered spiritual home in whom the Ga-Dangmes “blood flows”.¹⁴

It is to one of such graves that we now turn our attention.

¹³ Pellow, “Cultural Differences and Urban Spatial Forms”.

¹⁴ J. A. Mensah, *Ghana History and Traditional Customs of a Proud People* (New York/Florida: Exposition Press, 1981).

I. The Danish-Jewish Wulff Family at Osu.

With a general European expansion in West Africa, the Gold Coast became one of the earliest places where Europeans established their outpost in a number of forts that dotted the line of the Gold Coast's sea line. Among the Portuguese, Dutch, Branden burger, Swedish, Danish, British and other emerging colonial powers, a few Jews also took part in the endeavour and a number of them struck their roots in the African soil.

One of them was Wulff Josef Wulff, a Danish Jew who in 1836 arrived in Christiansborg at the age of 23. Soon after his arrival, he noted similarities between the natives and his Jewish tradition. He for instance wrote to his parents: "The songs they sing while paddling are a mixture of the Negro language, English, Portuguese, as well as Hebrew. There are, in fact, Jews here among the Negroes, but the truth is that they are just as ignorant heathens as the others and do not know where they originated".¹⁵The passage from this letter is intriguing, as it is the only Western Jewish eyewitness account of this time (to the best of my knowledge) that repeats Bosman's earlier account.

The Jewish identity of the natives is his opinion and it does not appear that Jewish identity was expressed as self-identification among the Ga-Adangme at the time, as he mentions their "ignorance" of their origin. The fact that Wulff mentions the mixture of Portuguese and Hebrew with local languages would appear to strengthen the argument of an earlier Sephardi element among the Ga-Adangme. Could it be that the narrative of some families with a Sephardi origin merged into a more general Ga-Adangme narrative of a Jewish or Hebrew-Israelite origin? The question must be

¹⁵ Selena Axelrod Winsnes, *A Danish Jew in West Africa: Wulff Joseph Wulff. Biography and letters 1836 - 1842* (Trondheim: Faculty of Arts, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, 2004), 73.

left open at this point. Wulff, as with Bosman, furthermore establishes a cultural proximity between the local culture and Jewish custom when he writes:

Now, dearest Parents, I shall continue by telling you entertaining things. During the first days of September the Negroes celebrate their Yam Custom, which is much like our harvest festivals at home, and is held to the New Year, which is called the Blacks' New Year, in order to distinguish it from the Whites' New Year. At their Yam Custom their most prominent Negroes are carried around in baskets, accompanied by music and song, and with a large parasol over them.¹⁶

Wulff was certainly not an orthodox Jew, as the strict dietary laws would have made it very difficult for him to practice his religion in the setting of Christian Europeans and African Traditional Religion. Nevertheless, he was also not hiding his heritage and he was much delighted when his parents sent him a Jewish religious calendar, which allowed him to keep track of the Jewish festivals and hence compare the festivals. His Jewishness, however, made it difficult for him to become promoted, because of his “mosaic” heritage, despite the fact that as time passed, his surviving presence became crucial for the Danish government.

The arriving Europeans were literally dying like flies upon their arrival. As time passed, he became more locally oriented, signing some of his letters to his parents with “the African” and establishing his own business and household in nearby Osu. The people of Osu were generally regarded as being of Adangme origin, although with a strong Ashanti element among their population. Wulff's relationship with a local woman, Sara Malm, whom he called “Mulatine” (of mixed heritage as well) might have been factors contributing to this change of orientation. The relationship with her certainly strengthened his bond with the local culture, a bond that

¹⁶ Axelrod Winsnes, *A Danish Jew*, 127.

became more pronounced as he fell sick and understood that he would never be able to return to Denmark. Although Sara Malm was reportedly baptised, as were the couple's three children, Wulff himself rejected to be baptised. Not only would this prevent him from any promotion, moreover, his refusal to be baptised made it impossible for him to be buried in the Christian Danish cemetery just opposite his house. Knowingly, he laid out his last wish in his testament that he wanted to be buried in his house according to local custom. He suspected that his house would fall into ruins; however, Wulff's grave, dated 1842, remains the only visible Danish tomb today as against the Danish cemetery opposite his house.¹⁷



Pictures of the Wulff house and of Wulff Joseph Wulff's tomb. Taken by the author in 2015.

The Danish conceded their political rights to the British in 1850. Even earlier, the Danish missionary activities of the United

¹⁷ Selena Axelrod Winsnes, "There Is a House on Castle Drive: The Story of Wulff Joseph Wulff," *History in Africa* 27 (2000): 443-448.

Brethren had been handed over to missionaries that were arriving from the Basel Mission.

II. The Entry of the Basel Missionaries

Accra (Osu and Christiansborg) and the Krobo mountains, situated within the Ga-Adangme territory, became one of the focal points of the Basel Mission early on with the arrival of the first missionaries in 1828.¹⁸ Missionaries, such as Andreas Riis (1804–1854), Elias Schrenk (1831–1913), Johann Gottlieb Christaller (1827–1895) and Johann Zimmermann (1825–1876), became crucial in the reformulation of Ghanaian identity discourses by way of their linguistic work and their missionary activities.¹⁹ The first three Basel missionaries who arrived at Christiansborg in 1828 immediately began their missionary work in nearby Osu. However, their journey suffered a similar fate as the many Basel missionaries of the time who came to Africa, and, by 1829, all were dead.

By 1832, another three missionaries from Basel arrived in Osu. Two of them died just a few months later. Only the missionary Andreas Riis survived and went to Akropong in 1835. Two more missionaries were sent as reinforcements, but they did not survive long either. Political circumstances finally forced the missionary Riis to return to Basel in 1840. Another attempt was undertaken in 1843 with Riis and a group of West Indian missionaries. This attempt proved to be more successful, and a missionary primary school was

¹⁸ Willhelm Schlatter, *Geschichte der Basler Mission, 1815-1915: Die Geschichte der Basler Mission in Afrika* (Basel: Verlag der Missions Buchhandlung, 1916).

¹⁹ Ulricke Sill, *Encounters in Quest of Christian Womanhood: the Basel Mission in Pre-and Early Colonial Ghana* (Brill: Leiden, 2010); Veit Arlt, “Christianity, Imperialism and Culture: The Expansion of the Two Krobo States in Ghana, c. 1830 to 1930” (Phd. Diss. University of Basel: Basel, 2005).

established in 1843 in Osu just one year after Wulff had passed away.²⁰

With the British taking over from the Danish and thereby establishing a protectorate, this promised to be beneficial for the Basel missionaries whose “achievements in spreading Christianity and Civilization” were well recognised. However, it was only in the 1850s that the Basel missionaries really manage to get a foothold in the Gold Coast with the arrival of Johann Zimmermann, as well as other missionaries from Basel. Zimmermann called attention to the intrinsic worth of many African institutions and stated that some of the social arrangements should be preserved for the spiritual health of the people. In one of his quarterly reports to the Basel Mission Committee in 1852, Zimmermann wrote at length about the integrity of the traditional African families he had observed.

Despite the cultural decay that was all around them, he noted many families preserved a clear and stable patriarchal form, suggesting the presence of a strong Old Testament influence. This observation led him to join in the speculation that West Africans had ties to the ancient Christian communities in Ethiopia. Therefore, he reasoned, West Africans quite possibly represented a mixture of Semitic and Hamitic cultural and racial strains.²¹ Zimmermann's influence on the Ga-Adangme identity was also crucial because of his translation of the Bible into the Ga language, along with other

²⁰Although I am unable to determine whether Wulff's children went to this primary school, it is likely they did. They were reportedly baptised and like another famous Ghanaian with a Danish heritage would have fit well in the primary school.

²¹ Vierteljahresbericht no. 10, Christiansborg, October 4, 1851 in D-1, 3, 1849-1851, cf. Jon Miller, *Missionary Zeal and Institutional Control: Organizational Contradictions in the Basel Mission on the Gold Coast, 1928 – 1917* (London: Routledge Curzon 2003), 144.

publications in the Ga language.²² Unlike the observations of other Basel missionaries in places like Abyssinia or on the River Niger, the Ga-Adangme might have been just one more of those tribes in Africa with an Israelite heritage.²³ The importance of the Basel Mission and other missionaries must be viewed as spreading knowledge about the Old Testament, while also contributing to a Modern Nationalist discourse of the Ga-Adangme identity. Both became represented by the most popular native Basel Missionary of his time, Carl Christian Reindorf. Born in 1834 in Gbugbla (Prampram), an Adangme trading town, Reindorf was both of Danish and Ga heritages. On his father's side, he was connected to generations of Danish and Afro-Danish mulatto officials and merchants. On his mother's side, he was of Ga heritage and of lineages long domiciled in the Asere and Gbese quarter of Ussher Town.²⁴

Reindorf, while residing with his grandmother, joined the Danish Castle School at Osu and then the Basel Mission School. He was baptised in 1844 and he began attending Christian worship. He became a pupil of the Basel missionary Zimmerman. During his

²² Johannes Zimmermann, *The Four Gospels in the Ga Language* (London, 1855), *An English-Accra or Ga Dictionary* (Stuttgart, 1858); *A Grammatical Sketch of the Akra or Ga Language and Some Specimens of it from the Mouth of the Natives* (Stuttgart, 1858), revised edition published as *A Grammatical Sketch of the Akra or Ga Language and a Vocabulary of the Same with an Appendix on the Adanme Dialect*, 2 vols. (Stuttgart, 1885), *The Acts of the Apostles* (Ga translation) (London, 1858), *The Epistle of St. Paul the Apostle to the Romans* (Ga translation), (London, 1859), *The New Testament* (Ga translation; London, 1860), 2nd edition (London, 1872), new revised edition 1889, corrected reprint 1908, corrected reprint 1911 (with J. G. Christaller and C. W. Locher), *English-Tschi-Akra Dictionary* (Basel, 1894), *The Old Testament* (Ga translation), rev. ed., (London, 1907).

²³ For more on this topic, see my forthcoming article in *Ethiopian Studies* and my forthcoming essay "Jewish identity among the Igbo of Nigeria, the Ga-Adangme of Ghana and the Beta Israel of Ethiopia: The Basel Missionary Factor in the 19th century", in *In the Shadow of Moses*, ed. Tudor Parfitt, William Miles and Daniel Lis.

²⁴ T.C. McCaskie, "Asante and Ga. The History of a Relationship," in *The Recovery of the West African Past: African Pastors and African History in the Nineteenth Century: C. C. Reindorf & Samuel Johnson*, ed. Paul Jenkins (Basler Afrika Bibliographien: Basel, 1998), 139.

lifetime, the town of Accra further expanded as an administrative and commercial center, attracting a large number of immigrants and in 1877, it finally became the capital of the British colony of the Gold Coast. In 1895, Reindorf's *History of the Gold Coast and Asante* was published—a work he had developed for decades and in close co-operation with Basel missionaries, such as Christaller. Thereafter, Reindorf was suspected to be a Jewish or of Hebrew/Israelite origin of the Ga-Adangme people.

From the beginning, when not corrupted by the Tshi [Akan] people, they were strict observers of their religious rites—a religion which appears a Jewish one, but now corrupted by fetishism; they were entirely forbidden to have anything to do with human blood. Even when a drop of blood is being shed in an assault, or by boys throwing stones, the king and elders are bound to make a sacrifice by way of purification, and the parties are fined. We say a Jewish one, which we probe by a few leading facts in their system of observances. [...]”
 “c) The circumcision which every male child of six to ten years of age is to undergo; -slaves of that age are also circumcised. This practice admits them to the courts of the principal fetishes; an uncircumcised person – may he be a king of any nation- is never allowed to step into the yard of the fetish, but is kept outside, when any ceremony is to be performed by him. Neither are persons having superfluity of members and menstruous women permitted to go inside. d) At the yearly harvest-feast called Hômwow the door posts or walls are painted with red clay, similar to what the Israelites did at their Passover - at which time all differences existing in a family must be settled in peace. [...]”²⁵

It might well be that apart from the influences of the Basel missionaries and other sources, part of the “Jewish” narrative was based on Bosman (whom Reindorf referred to as a source) and the American Missionary John Leighton Wilson.²⁶ However, Reindorf

²⁵ Carl Christian Reindorf, *The History of the Gold Coast and Asante, Based on Traditions and Historical Facts, Comprising a Period of More Than Three Centuries from About 1500 to 1860* (Basel: published by the author, 1895), 23-24.

²⁶ Heinz Hauser-Renner makes an interesting remark in his paper “Examining Text Sediments—Commending a Pioneer Historian as an ‘African Herodotus’,” *History in Africa* 35 (2008): 231-299. Apparently, Christaller had disagreed with a certain

not only suggested an Israelite origin for the Ga-Adangmes, but he also reconstructed their history using as a counterpoint the Akan overlords—the states of Akwamu, Akyem and, lastly and most importantly, Asante—as Babylon (who in turn have their own history of Israelite myths of origin). Reindorf also established a kind of mythical genealogy by tracing their history back to Ayi the Cushite and by cementing further, for instance, the important role of the Nikolai family of the Asere clan.²⁷

Ever since then, the Ga-Adangme Nationalist Historiography seems to have been built on Reindorf's *History of the Gold Coast and Asante*. In differentiating between a mythical origin of a people and its religious orientation, it is important to note that Reindorf did not experience Judaism as a living religion and clearly called for the Ga-Adangmes to accept Christianity to prove again that the Divine Protector had favoured such a small tribe among the

(unidentified) part of the history because he had given Reindorf the details of a particular source, Wilson, J. Leighton, *Western Africa: Its History, Condition, and Prospects* (New York - Evanston: J. & J. Harper Editions, 1856, 1969), which the latter did not yet know. Wilson noted: "Mixed up with these pagan notions and custom there are many obvious traces of Judaism, both in Northern and Southern guinea; and in the latter, some undoubted traces of a corrupted form of Christianity, which have probably travelled across the continent from ancient Ethiopia where Christianity was once firmly established. [...] In Northern Guinea, paganism and Judaism are united; and in Sothern Guinea, paganism, Judaism, and some imperfect traces of a corrupted form of Christianity. In the former region of country Judaism is more prominently developed; some of the leading features of which are circumcision, the division of tribes into separated families, and very frequently into the number twelve; the rigid interdiction of marriage between families too nearly related; bloody sacrifices, with the sprinkling of blood upon their altars and door-posts; the formal and ceremonial observance of new moons; a specified time of mourning for the dead, during which they shave their heads, and were soiled and tattered clothes; demoniacal possessions, purifications, and various other usages, probably of a Jewish origin. Some of these usages, especially the rite of circumcision, might be supposed to have been of Mohammedan origin, if it were not for the entire absence of all other traces of this religion among the pagan tribes of both Guineas" (220-221).

²⁷ Nikoiolai, the great chief of Asere, and his wife Kuoko Adshemang, kept their son Nikoite (Amon) at home.

numerous populations on the Gold Coast.²⁸ The Jewish or Hebrew/Israelite myth of origin among the Ga-Adangmes then seems to have been passed on by way of the migratory narrative and by way of cultural comparison (such as circumcision). Reindorf's narrative in this perspective was carried on by people like A. B. Quartey Papafio (in the 1910s), who spoke of "the Akra or Jewish people or family with their Chief, Nikoliam".²⁹ Following his example J. M. Bruce-Myers in 1920 wrote on the origin of the Gas in the same influential scholarly *Journal of the Royal African Society* society.³⁰

As Accra's commercial, administrative and political role grew during the two World Wars, it further attracted a large number of immigrants from within and outside the Gold Coast. The political importance of Accra resulted from its position as the capital of both colonial and post-colonial states. These twin factors made Accra the hub of the Gold Coast and later independent Ghana. By 1970, the Gas accounted for less than a third of the population of Accra, and the seven old Ga-Mashi quarters together represented only one small neighbourhood in a city more than 30 times the size of Accra in 1911.³¹ The Ga-Adangmes, who had been known as the owners of the land, felt increasingly marginalised in their own space. The scrambling for land for development and the buying and building up of open spaces in the inner city made some Ga-Adangmes to

²⁸ Reindorf, *The History*, 24.

²⁹ A. B. Quartey Papafio, "The Native Tribunals of the Akras of the Gold Coast," *Journal of the Royal African Society* 10, no. 39 (1911): 320-330. Therein, Quartey Papafio mentions: "It seems as if some genuine tradition of migrations from the east had been located in Persia, Assyria, and Samaria under the influence of the Old Testament, since the Akras became acquainted with the latter. The subject is worth inquiring into. It may not be too late to disentangle the authentic elements- i.e. those derived from purely native sources" (325).

³⁰ J. M. Bruce-Myers, "The Origin of the Gas: Part I," *Journal of the Royal African Society* 27, no. 105 (1927): 69-76.

³¹ Roger Sanjek, "Cognitive Maps of the Ethnic Domain in Urban Ghana: Reflections on Variability and Change," *American Ethnologist* 4, no. 4 (1977): 603-622.

perceive their main economic basis - land - shrinking daily. Some core aspects of the economic and social entrepreneurship in Accra were in the hands of people of non-Ga-Adangmes origin.³² Ga-Adangme nationalism saw some renewal in the 1950s and 1960s with the Ga Standfast Association and the “Tokyo Joe Rebellion”.

On the eve of Ghana’s independence, Accra became a diplomatic spring board in West Africa for the activities of the newly established Jewish state of Israel and the economic and political cooperation between the two states became very intense, even if short lived (until 1963).³³ It will remain the task of further studies to determine whether the Jewish or Israeli presence at the time had some influence on the Jewish or Hebrew/Israelite identification of the Ga-Adangmes.

Literature on the Hebrew/Israelite origin of the Ga-Adangmes continued to be published in the 1960s,³⁴ but it seems that it was especially the entry of African-American Hebrew Israelite ideology at the end of the 1960s that started to reinforce such an identification and less so by a Jewish or Israeli response to it.³⁵

In Accra, the descendants of Wulff Joseph Wulff, carried on the family name in Osu, nevertheless, the memory of who Wulff was, including his Jewishness, seemed to have slipped away. On the occasion of my visit to Freddy Wulff in Accra in 2015, the fifth-generation descendant of Wulff Joseph Wulff, now in his retirement,

³² John Kwadwo Osei-Tutu, “Space and the Marking of Space in Ga History, Culture, and Politics,” *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana, New Series* 4-5 (2000-2001): 55-81.

³³ Zach Levey, “The Rise and Decline of a Special Relationship: Israel and Ghana, 1957-1966,” *African Studies Review* 46, no. 1 (2003): 155-177.

³⁴ E. A. Ammah, “Festival of Gas & Jews,” *The Ghanaian* (1961), 9-11; in 1969 E.T.A. Abbey published his *Kedzi Afo Yordan* (Bureau of Ghana Languages, Accra)

³⁵ See for instance Rudolph R. Windsor, *From Babylon to Timbuktu: A History of Ancient Black Races Including the Black Hebrews* (Atlanta: published by the author, 1969).

recounted how he had learnt relatively late about his ancestry. Having spent his childhood years in the Wulff house in Osu, in the 1930s, he had had no clear idea of who his ancestor was, nor that Wulff had been a Jew.

Having been brought up similar to probably all the members of the Wulff family as Christians, he, on the other hand, vividly remembered the celebration of the Homowo festival with its smearing of the doorposts with red clay, which referred to the Jewish Passover. As an engineer, the young Freddy Wulff had ventured to work in Britain where he was often asked about his name. Following Ghana's independence, he followed Kwame Nkrumah's call to build the newly independent nation and returned to Ghana. While working with Israelis, his name struck a chord with them and he lively remembered how one Israeli woman had told him: "You are one of us. We know our people." The Israelis were not the only ones who started to take an interest in his heritage, and in the 1980s, a Danish delegation visited the Wulff house, which resulted in the funding of the renovation of the Wulff house as a historic land mark of Accra. However, Wulff's Jewishness was not yet on the agenda. This began to change with the publication of Joseph Wulff's letters to his parents in a book by Selena Axelrod Winsnes titled *A Danish Jew in West Africa* in 2004, in which Wulff's Jewishness played a central part.³⁶ Today, the family seems to be well aware of the Wulff family's Jewish background.³⁷

Among the many descendants of Wulff in Osu (they might number up to a thousand people), interest in their Jewish ancestor seems alive, even as I did not have any indication that it would have

³⁶ Axelrod Winsnes, *A Danish Jew in West Africa*.

³⁷ As of writing this article, the Danish Jewish Filmmaker, Daniel Dencik, just released his film titled "Gold Coast," which took Wulff Joseph Wulff's story as a background of the film's main character, without however mentioning his Jewish background.

caused one of them to leave the Christian faith to practice the Jewish religion, Judaism. For Freddy Wulff and his cousins, the revelation of their (more recent) Jewish origin came too late (in their own words) to change their religious practice. Christianity had firmly taken hold and there was more concern among the old generation about the loss of traditional Ga-Adangme culture, including how the latter could be passed on to the youngest generation of the family that was fanning out in cosmopolitan Accra and the diaspora outside of the country.

The concern for the preservation of Ga-Adangme traditions, culture and history has enticed some Ga-Adangme authors to reappraise it together with its Jewish component. The latter a diaspora culture per se, was prone to further ethnic pride in the past of its people and a sense of election and purpose in the world. Furthermore, the Hebrew/Israelite myth of origin among the Ga-Adangme was reinforced by Jewish identifications among other Black African groups, such as the Igbo of Nigeria, whose myth of Jewish or Hebrew/Israelite origin fit well into a Ga-Adangme narrative of having migrated from Ethiopia and Nigeria.

One of them, the Ghanaian author and Canadian resident, Joseph Nii Abekar Mensah, wrote extensively in his books on the supposed Israelite origin of the Ga-Adangmes.³⁸ Mensah portrayed a relationship between the Ga-Adangme and the Igbos people from Nigeria, from which the earlier had - by way of Benin and Togo - continued their wanderings in West Africa:

Some people believe that the name Osu may have been derived from Akan word for “river” (Nsu). However, the[re] was a place called Osu in ancient Israel and also in Igbo land in Nigeria. Since the Igbos seem to share some ancestry with the Ga-Dangme people, it seems

³⁸ Joseph Nii Abekar Mensah, *Traditions and Customs of Ga-Dangmes of Ghana: Descendants of Authentic Biblical Hebrew Israelites* (Houston: Strategic Book Publishing and Rights, 2013).

more reasonable that Osu is named after an ancient Hebrew town. It is interesting to note that Osu has the same meaning in ancient Israel, among the Igbo of Nigeria and among the Ga-Dangme of Ghana.³⁹

Mensah traced the Hebrew origin of the Ga-Adangme peoples in the following:

There are tribes in Africa, whose Hebraic customs and oral histories identify them as authentic descendants of the nation of Israel. It must be noted that throughout the culture and history of the Ga-Dangme tribe of Ghana, is strong conclusive evidence that they are direct descendants of the Hebrew Israelites that migrated to West Africa by way of Egypt, Ethiopia, Sudan and Lake Chad. Their cultural practices, laws and customs and even some of their names are so identical to those described in the Bible. Thus, the only logical conclusion to make is that they are as they claim themselves, descendants of the Biblical Hebrew Israelites. According to Ga-Dangme oral tradition, they migrated from Israel. They believe they are descendants of 'CUSH' or perhaps, Gad and Dan from the twelfth tribe of Israel [sic]. It is fascinating to note the name of their King who led them to Ayawaso in Ghana is Ayi Kush (Kus); and this lends support to their claim that they are Jews. The Homowo which the Ga-Dangme celebrate has Biblical origins (Exodus 11:4-7; Exodus 12:1-50; Exodus 13: 1-10 and Numbers 9:1-5).⁴⁰

Mensah heavily suspected the "lost Tribes of Israel" Dan and Gad as the ancestors of the Ga-Adangme, a discourse clearly fed by Jewish identity discourses of the Beta Israel from Ethiopia and the Igbo from Nigeria, to which a common origin is constructed and which are often brought in connection with the tribes of Gad⁴¹ and Dan.⁴²

³⁹ Mensah, *Traditions and Customs*, 34.

⁴⁰ Mensah, *Traditions and Customs*, 8.

⁴¹ The Gadite myth of origin among the Igbo people became especially popular within the so-called priestly group of the Igbo, the Nri who trace their origin to the mythical ancestry of Eri, a son of Gad.

⁴² The Ethiopian Jews, also called Beta Israel (House of Israel), were recognised by Israel's Chief Rabbi Ovadia Yosef in 1975 as the lost tribe of Dan and were hence granted the "Right of Return" to Israel, where they were granted Israeli citizenship. Yosef's decision was based on a 16th century decision of the former Chief Rabbi

As access to Hebrew/Israelite narratives of other African groups have become much easier through social networks and the respective literature, so has Judaism as a religious practice become much more accessible for many Africans. Even though Judaism does not see itself as a missionary religion but more as a religion of a people with a genealogical root in ancient Israel, it is especially the latter that holds great attraction for a growing number of Africans who have taken their genealogical identification with ancient Israel one step further.

On my visit to Accra in 2015, I had the opportunity to meet a young student of Ashanti-Fanti on his mother's side and of Adangme heritage on his father's side, who had recently started to practice Judaism. Coming from a Christian household and of mixed ethnic heritage, he had connected his practice of Judaism to his father's Adangme heritage. Although acting as an individual, this young student might just as well represent the beginning of the emergence of Judaism in contemporary Ghana.

Dr. Daniel Lis

of Egypt, called the Radbaz, and earlier accounts of the legendary 9th century Jewish traveller Eldad HaDani Eldad, the Danite who reported on the lost tribes on the other side of the River Kush.