Studying African Judaism: Some Methodological Challenges

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Abstract

The academic study of religion needs to strike a fine balance between theoretical reflections and ethnography. In this article, I provide some methodological reflections emerging from my fieldwork on African Judaism in Zimbabwe. In doing so, I describe the challenges of studying an African community that understands itself as Jewish and draw attention to the truth question in the study of religion, showing that many people have questioned the possibility of African Judaism. I highlight the insider/outsider problem in the study of religion and reflect on my status as a black African seeking to understand African Judaism. I also discuss the challenges surrounding the classification of African Judaism as an African Independent Church (AIC) or as a New Religious Movement. In conclusion, I maintain that fieldwork remains central to the study of religion in Africa.

Introduction

The close parallels that exist between African cultures and those described in the Hebrew Bible have given rise to creative interpretations by both religious people and scholars. On the religious front, many African Independent Churches have used the Hebrew Bible as the foundation of their beliefs and practices, and scholars in the area of biblical studies have examined the interaction between Africa and the Bible (West and Dube 2000; Getui et al. 2001; Yamuchi 2004). The Hebrew Bible continues to fascinate Africans since it captures an agrarian way of life that most Africans are familiar with. Furthermore, it makes reference to dietary regulations, ritual sacrifices, marriage practices and other aspects of life that Afri-

cans can easily identify with. Anthropologists, missiologists, biblical scholars and practitioners from other disciplines have addressed the theme of Africa and the Hebrew Bible. While much of the research on the interaction between African culture and the Hebrew Bible has been within the context of studies on the African Independent Churches, the presence of African communities that claim to practice Judaism in Southern Africa presents a major methodological challenge. These communities have been the focus of media attention and some scholarly accounts of their beliefs and practices now exist. However, perspectives from within religious studies or the science of religion have not been proffered on how to generate reliable data about these communities. In this article, I am arguing that there is need for scholars within religious studies to provide methodological reflections on the study of African Judaism and other groups whose religious status is contested. Method and theory have been at the center of the development of religious studies. As Walter H. Capps argues, religious studies seeks to empower its practitioners to clarify the meaning of religion. He writes:

> Simply put, religious studies provides training and practice (each an essential quality of a discipline) in directing and conducting enquiry regarding the subject of religion. Religious studies (as is the case with all other legitimate subject-fields) utilizes prescribed modes and techniques of inquiry to make the subject of religion intelligible. This is its twofold task: to discover as well as to elicit its subject's intelligibility. (Capps 1995: 14)

This article seeks to highlight some of the central methodological issues that emerge in the study of African Judaism and is informed by the growing emphasis on fieldwork in religious studies (Spickard and Landres 2002: 13). I argue for the importance of reflexivity in studying religion, alongside illustrating the need to tie methodological reflections to practical investigation of religious phenomena. There is a worrying trend within religious studies where lofty discussions on method and theory take place without any reference to fieldwork. On the other hand, undertaking field research without being aware of methodological issues is equally detrimental to the development of the subject. The absence of African voices amongst those who have been influential in the craft of religious studies (Stone 1998) should be viewed with concern. As David Chidester (1996) has shown, the term "religion" has, historically, been contested in Southern Africa. Practitioners of religious studies in the region therefore need to be conscious of the methodological and theoretical issues that bedevil the subject. The first section of this article tackles the truth question in the study of African Judaism. Taking cognizance of the fact that the term Judaism has been deployed with racial and cultural overtones, the section illustrates how a study of African Judaism

is confronted by the truth question. The second section revisits the insider/outsider problem in the context of conducting research on African Judaism. Who is best placed to study African Judaism? What are some of the advantages and disadvantages that a black African researcher possesses? The last section seeks to respond to the question of whether African Judaism could be categorized under African Independent Churches. Would this be satisfactory, given the fact that the practitioners themselves place emphasis on having a Jewish, as opposed to a Christian, identity? It highlights how some adherents of African Judaism may resist such classification. The concluding section reiterates the importance of both fieldwork and methodological reflections in the study of religion. The central thrust of this article is to highlight the complexities and challenges surrounding the study of religion that have been noted by fellow scholars:

> It is no exaggeration, then, to state that studying religion is a daring intellectual, emotional and spiritual adventure: exciting, unpredictable, but also trying. In other words, it is an ordeal in the true sense of the term. It is not painless to study religions, rather the opposite; it is laborious, painstaking, sometimes agonizing, but then again at other times rewarding, even amusing and fun. (Gothoni 1995: 38)

Does African Judaism Exist? Negotiating the Truth Question

My interest in African Judaism within Zimbabwe was ignited in the early 1990s while conducting research on African Independent Churches (Chitando 1991). It was also a result of my interest in Rastafarianism and other Africa-centered religious traditions. However, it was in the mid-1990s that African Judaism gained visibility, with some of its representatives appearing on Zimbabwean television. More sustained fieldwork within the African Jewish congregation in Warren Park, Harare, began in 2002 and continued up to 2004. From the late 1990s, I had regular interaction with some representatives of the community due to my participation in the program, Nzira Yomutendi (The Path of the Believer) that brought together adherents of different religious traditions and scholars (Chitando 2002: 84). My interest in religious groups that utilized the African heritage in their repertoires led me to study African Judaism. Personal involvement and interest means that there is a danger, or possibility, of the researcher mounting a defense on behalf of the community, which necessitates vigilance on my part. However, one of the most pressing questions has been: is African Judaism real(ly) Judaism? Can a black African legitimately claim to be an adherent of Judaism? Although terms like African Christianity (Sindima 1994: 27) and African Islam (Rosander and Westerlund 1997) continue to provoke debate, they have gained

a certain level of acceptance in academic circles. These terms seek to draw attention to the African acceptance and ownership of world religions like Christianity and Islam. They endeavor to explicate the vernacularization that these missionary religions have undergone in their encounter with African cultural realities. African Christians and Muslims do not cause any curiosity when they show up at conferences or meetings of representatives of the various religions of the world. Christianity and Islam have become "African religions", in terms of their widespread acceptance. On the other hand, "African Judaism" does not appear to be used in the same sense as African Christianity and African Islam.

The general impression that has been created is that Judaism is tied to a particular racial group. Consequently, references to African Judaism immediately conjure images of a religion that is less authentic and of questionable character. Open derision and skepticism have accompanied most African/black communities that have claimed to be members of Judaism. While being Christian or Muslim has been taken to be an open possibility, Judaism has been associated with a definite racial or ethnic identity. The emergence of black Judaism in the United States of America, in particular, has led to scholarly reflections (Chireau and Deutsch 2000). Other communities dedicated to black Judaism, like those in Surinam (Bennett 1992: 15) and the Bayudaya of Uganda (also called the Abayudaya) who practice African Judaism (Oded 1995: 111) have also received scholarly attention. In Southern Africa, the claims to Judaism of the Lemba/VaRemba of South Africa and Zimbabwe have been examined from diverse angles. Such communities have challenged conventional wisdom that limits Judaism to a specific racial group. This poses a number of methodological problems to the academic study of religion, as this article will highlight. The Jewish claims of the Lemba began to receive prominent media coverage in the 1990's. Initially, sensationalism and exoticism accompanied journalistic accounts of the community. Some of the reports insinuated that these claims were a result of hallucinations or fertile imaginations. It was only when scholars like Tudor Parfitt began to pursue the issue that the Lemba were taken seriously. Parfitt produced documentaries on the Lemba for the British Broadcasting Corporation in 1992. He also authored the book "Journey to the Vanished City" (1992) in which he maintained that the Lemba traditions as the lost tribe of Israel had some merit. He claimed to have discovered Sena, the city identified in Lemba traditions as the place they left on their fateful journey to Africa. Similarly, Magdel le Roux, an Old Testament scholar at the University of South Africa, also conducted fieldwork amongst the Lemba in South Africa and Zimbabwe. She examined their enthusiasm for sacred hills, ritual practices, dietary regulations and endogamy. She maintained that the Lemba bring useful insights into the culture of early Israel (Le Roux 2003). These works have brought the Lemba's claim to Judaism before a global audience. In an effort to push his claims further, Parfitt has utilized science to lend weight to the claims of the

Lemba and Y-chromosome testing has been used in efforts to reconstruct a genetic ancestry of its people. A team of geneticists discovered that Lemba men, specifically those of the Buba clan, carry a DNA sequence that is distinctive to the Cohanim, a hereditary set of Jewish priests. This sequence is not common among lay Jews and rare in non-Jewish populations (Parfitt 2003).

A number of questions emerge following such efforts to ascertain Lemba religious identity. Does identity reside in genetic structures? Can a community's religious truth claims be settled through a scientifically testable argument? What are some of the ethical, political and practical challenges that emerge from such an undertaking? Such questions accompany efforts to study African Judaism in Zimbabwe. While the Lemba identity has tended to be restricted to cultural and historical issues, the African Jewish community in Rusape and Harare has actively expressed itself in religious terms. In both places, one finds a tabernacle for worship of the Sabbath and all the major Jewish holidays are observed. Members of the community claim to be a typical house of Israel and descendants of Abraham. They maintain that indigenous African cultural practices are in fact biblical, making reference to the strict monotheism of Shona traditional religion, its opposition to idolatry, marriage and burial practices, as well as the importance of totems. The Lemba assert that Moses, the founder of Judaism, was of Cushite or black origin and thus seek to uphold both ancient biblical culture and African indigenous beliefs and practices. In interacting with the community, it becomes clear that they are keen to be identified as adherents of Judaism. They value the unity of God (Deuteronomy 6: 4), recognize the Torah and use symbols like the Star of David. The Lemba also apply Jewish titles like "Rabbi" and make use of Hebrew, though sparingly, throughout their Sabbath services. However, most members do not have any knowledge of the language. Like some of the other African Independent Churches in Zimbabwe, the Lemba maintain that Shona is closely related to Hebrew (Engelke 2004: 81-82) and thus do not see any reason for studying Hebrew. At any rate, they contend that Shona is itself an equally "divine" language. The community practicing African Judaism in Zimbabwe seeks to be scrupulous in its observance of ritual demands within Judaism. They observe dietary regulations and seek to uphold ritual purity. Locating themselves within Prophetic Judaism, they maintain that divine revelations continue to guide humanity through selected intermediaries. However, they clearly distance themselves from Christianity, polemically insisting that they follow the religion *of* Jesus, rather than the religion *about* Jesus. They incorporate Jesus into the African totemic system, identifying him as a member of the clan of the lion of David. As a member of African Judaism, Jesus is therefore related to those whose totem is the lion.

In the light of the determination by the community to be identified as members of Judaism, how should scholars of religion describe them? Is it necessary to subject such a community to genetic tests in an effort to "prove" its membership

to the ancient faith of Judaism? Although these are weighty matters, insights from the phenomenology of religion are helpful in the resolution of such methodological issues. While there have been calls for the academic study of religion to transcend phenomenology (Flood 1999: 99), its principles remain instructive. One of its leading practitioners, William Brede Kristensen, suggested that "the believer is always right" and that there is no other religious reality than the faith of the believers (Plantinga 1989: 177). This implies that researchers should be willing to give priority to the testimony of the believers. Although some critics argue that scholars of religion should pass judgment concerning religious beliefs and practices adopted by the communities that they study (Bourdillon 1993: 229), this is problematic. On what authority does the researcher pronounce the truth or falsehood of a community's religious beliefs? On what basis can a researcher declare, for example, that African Judaism is false? If the believers identify themselves as members of African Judaism, how can the researcher make an assertion to the contrary? The question of religion and truth (Wiebe 1981) is a vexing one indeed. As researchers, scholars may not endorse or reject the assertions of a particular religious community. They are supposed to maintain a position of methodological agnosticism. In the specific case of African Judaism, researchers should maintain a position of scholarly neutrality. While Parfitt appears to have gone ahead to insist that there is merit in the Jewish claims of the Lemba, the more satisfactory position appears to be one where only their beliefs and practices are described as accurately and as sensitively as possible. The nagging question: "But, are they really Jews?" though legitimate, properly belongs to the domain of theology and not the scientific study of religion. It is as a theologian that one grapples with the question of whether African Judaism is tenable. Although theology can be regarded as a "scientific" discipline, its prior commitment to religious truth differentiates it from the academic study of religion. Nonetheless, one must concede that the status of theology in religious studies remains open to debate. The history of religions does not pass verdicts on competition amongst and within various religious traditions. Its task is to describe the historical development of specific communities, as well as to outline their beliefs and practices, without evaluation. While Orthodox Jews in Zimbabwe and South Africa may refuse to recognize adherents of African Judaism, this rejection is only taken as part of the data to be analyzed. In other words, the history of religions does not make a distinction between "legitimate" forms of Judaism and "aberrations". The competing forms of religious expression, in this instance Orthodox and African versions of Judaism should be understood within the context of the history of religions where different forms of Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and other religions have battled for supremacy. The notion that there is "standard" Judaism is therefore based on theology and should not guide researchers within the science of religion. Once it is granted that the scholar of religion is not obliged to prove the veracity of the believer's truth claims, the

issue of subjecting adherents of African Judaism to genetic testing proves to be fraught with difficulties. It does not matter that most Lemba "voluntarily" submitted to such tests since it remains problematic on ethical grounds. Have those groups that claim to be "authentic" Jews been subjected to such tests? Furthermore, it overlooks the fact that religious identity transcends genetics.

Religious identity is equally a product of history as it is a product of imagination and creativity. Thus, the introduction of scientific tools like genetic testing threatens to introduce a new form of reductionism to the study of religion. Assuming that religious claims can be subjected to scientific verification is a dangerous form of reductionism. Efforts to scientifically prove or disprove the claims of practitioners of African Judaism also have definite political implications. The Beta Israel/Falasha/Ethiopian Jews have had their membership to Judaism "approved", and many thousands have relocated to Israel (Kessler 1996: 11-12). However, other groups like the Bayudaya, the Lemba and the African Jews of Zimbabwe remain at the periphery. In addition, the African Jews who migrated from the United States of America to Israel have not been granted full citizenship. It is therefore crucial for researchers to always remember that their work can, and often does have, political significance which can be minimized by bracketing the truth question and concentrating on accurate description of religious phenomena. However, it should be admitted that neutrality is difficult to achieve. One could argue that the mere fact of a researcher embarking on a study of African Judaism grants some legitimacy to the community. In other words, once a researcher approaches a religious community, he or she is already according it some significance that it did not have prior to the study. A good example of this is how Parfitt's documentary and book on the Lemba have led to increased interest in the community, particularly from the United States of America. Making African Judaism visible is therefore not a politically neutral exercise. However, from a phenomenological perspective, one could argue that the decision to regard it as legitimate or fake does not lie with the researcher. Since the researcher does not possess the instruments for making a fair evaluation of religious truth claims, greater emphasis has been placed on avoiding distortion and striving for accuracy. It is also possible that one's description of the historical developments of African Judaism brings out facts that challenge some of the claims of the adherents in a serious way. A good example of this is how the Zimbabwean community is directly related to the emergence of black Judaism in the United States of America in the late 1890's. How does one harmonize this fact with the claim that they have observed Jewish practices since time immemorial? Does the discovery of recent origins nullify the claim that the community descended from Abraham? Is the researcher obliged to "explain" such discrepancies? Once again, these are significant methodological issues. It is suggested that the researcher could adopt historical tools to identify when certain beliefs were adopted. However, the researcher may not proceed to nullify the claim that the

beliefs and practices have a biblical origin. It could also be asked whether skirting the truth question does any justice to practitioners of African Judaism. Since for them it matters so much to be recognized as legitimate members of an ancient faith, is it meaningful for a researcher to say that he or she will not be preoccupied with this question? Again, this is a difficult issue, since believers are convinced that theirs is a true religion.

As I have argued above, a researcher in religious studies does not possess the requisite tools to settle truth questions. One can describe the debates between adherents of Orthodox Judaism and those of African Judaism, without suggesting which one appears to be more plausible. Consequently, a researcher can outline beliefs and practices found in African Judaism that are put forward by adherents as evidence of the longevity of their faith, while refraining from commenting on whether this makes them "truly" Jewish. Phenomenology's quest for the meaning of religion for the practitioners (Sharma 2001: 34) also allows researchers on African Judaism to approach the truth question in a different way. Instead of undertaking painstaking linguistic studies as to whether Hebrew and Shona are indeed related, one may want to understand why such claims are made in the first place. How did colonial policies suppress indigenous languages? What is the role of indigenous languages in the construction of post-colonial identities? Such questions help to establish the meaning of religion for the adherents. Even if one were to establish that Hebrew is in fact not related to Shona, the fact that practitioners of African Judaism make this claim remains significant. While the truth question remains important, the study of African Judaism highlights the challenges that researchers face when they attempt to tackle this subject. It is probably more helpful to pursue the theme of how some Africans have approached Judaism as it has offered a viable context for formulating their identities. African Judaism illustrates the fact that postcolonial African identities may no longer be discussed only with reference to Islam and Christianity (Nyang 1984). Adherents of African Judaism have shown that religious identity can be constructed along many diverse and complex directions. As a result, researchers within the field of religious studies need to immerse themselves in the worldviews of such communities and try to understand reality from their perspectives. Whether it is in fact possible for an outsider to capture how followers of African Judaism view the world presents us with another major question. In the following section, I illustrate the insider/outsider problem in the study of religion with special reference to my experiences of African Judaism in Zimbabwe.

Seeing Like a Believer? The Insider/Outsider Problem in Studying African Judaism

The truth question in the study of religion that has been described in the foregoing section is closely related to the insider/outsider problem in religious studies.

Adherents of a particular religion (insiders) are convinced about its truth claims. In this regard, followers of African Judaism hold the conviction that they are members of a truly ancient tradition that has been divinely revealed. On the other hand, the researcher in his or her professional capacity does not have to share the believers' commitment. While adherents of African Judaism maintain that African culture derives from biblical revelation, and that their contemporary practices are consistent with the biblical account, the researcher adopts a position of methodological agnosticism concerning such claims. However, this stance generates a number of challenges, as I shall illustrate in this section. The insider/outsider problem relates to the question of whether it is possible for a researcher to faithfully reproduce the religious beliefs and practices of a community that he or she does not share. At the basic level, believers constitute the insiders, while the researcher is the outsider. However, it is important to bear in mind that these positions are not static and absolute. Thus, there are degrees of being inside and outside a religious tradition. Within a religious tradition, there is a hierarchy or stratification, with leaders having greater access to matters relating to the religion than ordinary members. Religious elites may be dubbed "insider-insiders", while ordinary members may be classified as "insider-outsiders". Some researchers may gain access to a religious community, becoming "outsider-insiders", or remain completely outside as "outsider-outsiders". However, it is important to define the insider/outsider problem in the study of religion. Russell T. McCutcheon provides an incisive definition:

> In a nutshell, the problem is whether, and to what extent, someone can study, understand, or explain the beliefs, words, or actions of another. In other words, to what degree, if any, are the motives and meanings of human behaviors and beliefs accessible to the researcher who may not necessarily participate in these practices? Do students of culture have virtually unimpeded access to the intentions and meanings of the people, societies, or institutions they study or, to take a contrary view, are all human observers cut off from ever being able to see past their own biases, contexts, and presuppositions? (McCutcheon 1999: 2)

Apart from its centrality to the study of religion in general, the insider/outsider problem has been strongly felt in the study of religion in Africa. The predominance of European traditions in the study of African religions (Ludwig and Adogame 2004) has led to calls for the Africanization of the discipline. This has been emphasized in the study of African indigenous religions. The insider/outsider problem in the study of African Traditional Religions hinges on the question of who is better placed between African and European scholars to interpret

flect a need felt by the Catholic Church in southern Spain to define the theological boundaries of the processions. They are never ends in themselves, they are not to degenerate into theatre or entertainment but rather, they are to reveal higher truths, to renew and deepen the faith of the participants and the spectators, especially during a week when the fundamental tenet of the faith is commemorated, celebrated and reinforced: that Christ died and rose again in order to secure human salvation. However, that tension that exists between official ideology and the beliefs and ritual practice of the people is undeniable.[28] The processions are superbly theatrical, the *cofradías* are not immune to competition and rivalries,[29] the participants deliberately ignore the Bishop's injunction not to raise the Virgin more than three times above their heads (and this right in front of the cathedral opposite the Bishop's palace), the Virgins have their specific devotees and, in many respects, their own *culto*, despite the Council of Trent. Many of our informants who were not conventional believers (typical of Andalucía, where the Church's alliance with the Franco regime is not forgotten) explained their attendance at the processions in terms of 'our culture' and 'our traditions'. Thus for many Malagans, attendance at the Holy Week processions is a confirmation, not of their Catholic beliefs, but of their faith in the enduring nature of their community, of that indefinable something which constitutes being both Andalusian and Spanish. "The Virgins are our Virgins", *Málaga es mariana* (Málaga belongs to Mary) announces the anonymous author of *Los rostros de María* and it is this fiercely proud communal tradition which jostles with the overarching 'grand narrative' of the Church. The communal tradition has wider political and cultural resonance.[30] Significantly, the national anthem is played when all statues leave and return to their *templos*.

In the Hindu tradition also, tension often exists between popular devotion, as expressed by many women, and official attitudes, which attempt to demand orthodox adherence to teachings and practice. In KwaZulu-Natal the patriarchal priesthood has at times dismissed mother goddess rituals performed by women at home as 'backyard temple cults' (Diesel 1998b: 214). It seems that in both traditions, tensions arise between the male-dominated official clergy and the people, precisely because the popular religion involves veneration and worship of divine females. As many Malagans foreground cultural and nationalistic reasons for their participation in the Holy Week processions, so Hindus also frequently explain their participation in the fire-walking rituals as 'part of our Hindu custom', which reflects a sense of identity with the Hindu Diaspora community, as well as a pride in belonging to an ancient cultural and religious heritage.

Both the Holy Week processions and the Hindu concept of *darshan* have in common the importance of 'seeing' and the spiritual benefits this confers. López, in fact, speaks of the primacy of the image for the members of the *cofradías*.[31] Visualization is of fundamental importance to Catholic and Hindu ritual. Analysis of the 'gaze' has shaped much modern theorizing in film, media and gender

studies. Examining these rituals through this theoretical lens can deepen our understanding of them. In saying this, we do not mean to imply that looking at Draupadi and the Virgins as they pass is directly equivalent to watching a film in which the viewer is not directly involved, for the majority of believers who gaze at the Goddess and the Virgins, these images are powerful religious symbols. Influenced by Ricoeur and Turner, who have argued that religious symbols are opaque, open-ended, 'polysemic' and multivalent, Bynum et al. (1986: 2-3) have suggested that gender-related symbols do not simply reflect a culture's assumptions about gender and may have little, or nothing, to do with the actual social roles of men and women. Nineteenth century scholars who postulated the existence of matriarchies on the basis of powerful goddess figures in the iconographical or mythical traditions, clearly fell into this trap. However, Draupadi and the Virgins are women. Both men and women gaze at them and what this means clearly involves a complex interaction between symbol, text (mythology, revealed scripture or oral traditions) and the gendered viewer. As religion is the strong arm of political ideology (clearly evident in Franco's Spain and in South Africa under the apartheid regime), Draupadi and the Virgins are pieces in the mosaic of their respective cultures' ideologies.

According to Althusser (1993: 36-60), representation, especially at the service of ideology, is perhaps the most powerful contributory factor to the process of identity formation, or of constituting oneself as a subject. How could seeing Draupadi and the Virgins contribute to the formation of the believer's gender identity within highly patriarchal systems? In both ritual systems, men and women gaze at female figures on parade. In art and most cinema (and arguably in religious art on parade), men generally look at women and women watch themselves being looked at. As John Berger trenchantly argues (1972: 47): What significance might there be, if men look at goddesses and virgins and women, in turn, watch themselves being looked at? The image of Draupadi in procession is not preceded, or accompanied, by a male figure. She is independent and alone. The particular Draupadi images, which include a wig of long hair, should remind viewers of the incident when she was dragged by her hair into the men's court and humiliated by the eldest Kaurava who tried to strip off her sari. She pledged not to retie it until she had washed it in the blood of her enemies. Draupadi is a woman who has suffered, been abused and triumphed. Her sari, the symbol of her abuse, is now miraculously spread over the coals to cool them. She is the powerful source of new life, of fertility and spiritual regeneration.

Although the virgins are on their own floats they are almost always preceded by a Christ figure. They too have suffered, but it is the suffering of the mother mourning for her son. The Virgins are frequently depicted with hearts pierced by swords and their faces are almost always transfixed with grief. They are passive, submissive and alone in their suffering. As with Draupadi, their grief was caused by men. They are borne through the streets by men and the amorous smallest

African Traditional Religions (Chitando 2001). Since African Judaism in Zimbabwe utilizes indigenous beliefs and practices, the insider/outsider problem as debated in the study of African Traditional Religions is also applicable to African Judaism. In other words, is an African scholar in a better position to understand African Judaism than a non-African? As a non-practitioner of African Judaism my interaction with its followers has implied that I am an "outsider". Although "insider-insiders" like Rabbi Ambrose Makuwaza and Elders Benjamin Kwindima and Hosea Risinamhodzi knew that I was undertaking the research for academic purposes, they were quite welcoming. This could have been due to the value placed on hospitality within African Judaism and in African culture. Furthermore, my status as a researcher with the University of Zimbabwe might have contributed to my acceptance as my interest may have given them the feeling that they were getting some "official" recognition. This aspect highlights the relative power that academics have in forming or influencing public opinion on different matters. Researchers within universities have the power to confirm certain groups as "religious", while dismissing others as "cults", "sects", or simply as "confused". I have already referred to the impact that academics like Parfitt and Le Roux have had in changing perceptions regarding the Jewish claims of the Lemba. Despite my initial status as an "outsider", a number of factors facilitated my transition to the position of an "outsider-insider". To begin with, African Judaism is not a so-called "secret society". Although the concept is highly problematic, "secret societies" thrive on initiation rites and exclusive membership as well as access to esoteric knowledge (Ellis and Ter Haar 2004: 84). Conducting research on such groups is often difficult as "outsiders" are viewed with suspicion. Adherents of "secret societies" often take a vow of secrecy and guard information relating to their groups jealously. In most instances, privileged information may not be passed to individuals who have not undergone initiation rites. However, as the number of monographs on "secret societies" shows, some scholars have been able to assemble intelligible details relating to such groups. Anthropologists have been leading in this regard, although questions of power remain significant. Furthermore, colonial administrators and missionaries often labeled most African initiation societies as "secret societies", rendering the description redundant.

African Judaism is a transparent tradition that does not claim to articulate any hidden knowledge. This fact was quite helpful in facilitating my research activities. In addition, my identity as a black African offered a significant advantage. According to African Judaism, all "Bantu" people are descendants of the house of Israel. This Pan-African belief has facilitated their expansion to neighboring countries, although they do not engage in aggressive proselytizing. While they are suspicious of whites as they are accused of inculcating an inferiority complex amongst blacks, they are quite accommodating to fellow blacks. One of the earliest questions that I faced from the elders of the community was

the identity of my totem. They quickly established how I was related to all of them. Totems play an important role in Shona culture, and African Judaism uses them as a mark of authenticity. As an "anonymous" African Jew, I could be categorized as an "outsider-insider". A researcher without a totem might not have provided this shared identity. African culture plays a significant role in the performance of African Jewish identities. My knowledge of indigenous Zimbabwean cultural practices was crucial in understanding most beliefs held by members of the community. Furthermore, sharing a common language, Shona, facilitated closer interaction. On the other hand, my familiarity with debates on the Bible in Africa and the interaction between Africa and the Bible generated interest amongst those members of the community who are keen on identifying an African presence in the Hebrew Bible. The intellectual wing of African Judaism in Zimbabwe, represented by individuals like Frank Nyamala, is determined to have a working knowledge of developments in African/black biblical studies. However, members of the community wondered why I would not complete the journey by harmonizing my knowledge of the black presence in the Hebrew Bible with a conversion/reversion to African Judaism. The call for researchers to undertake a confessional, as opposed to a methodological, conversion is a major methodological hurdle in fieldwork. It needs to be negotiated with a lot of tact, care and sensitivity. Researchers within religious studies have to perform a delicate balancing act as they seek to enter into the life experiences of the believers while at the same time they have to guard against becoming complete insiders. Some researchers on religion in Africa, particularly anthropologists, have become converts. Others, like the missiologist Marthinus Daneel who has been leading African Independent Churches in the Masvingo Province of Zimbabwe, have been embraced by the communities that they have been studying (Daneel 2000). Such researchers have become "engaged scholars" and although this might indeed provide more direct access to the data, conversion generates related problems.

Complete insiders tend to be defensive and biased in favor of their faith traditions. They might also be tempted to suppress evidence that could project a negative image about their religions. In this regard, it was important for me to maintain my identity as a researcher so as to observe some critical distance between myself and the believers. Most religious communities, especially those that feel marginalized and misunderstood such as followers of African Judaism, would readily welcome the conversion of a university-based researcher. This would boost their profile and add legitimacy to their claims. However, the phenomenology of religion cautions researchers against conversion. Furthermore, it accepts that researchers may only attain approximate knowledge of the religious experiences of the believers. According to Kristensen, what the believer knows directly and clearly, the researcher only knows indirectly and approximately (Plantinga 1989: 178). Total objectivity is therefore not possible in the study of

religion. Although I participated in activities at the tabernacle in Warren Park, as well as enjoying the energetic and lively music sessions (cf Chitando 2002), I could not claim to have had a total experience of what it means to be a member of African Judaism in Zimbabwe. The humanistic motto that "nothing human is foreign to me" appeared rather exaggerated. There were a number of instances when I felt lost and could not identify with some of the statements that were being put forward by adherents. I struggled to understand how the entire Hebrew Bible was a history of African people, as I had not encountered this in my lectures on the Old Testament or Studies in World Religions as a university student. I felt excluded by the Shona salutation, "Rugare Israeri" (Peace unto you Israel). I was also uncomfortable with some of the forthright denunciations of Christianity, having been brought up to respect the religious tradition. One preacher actually maintained that Jesus was cursed, and mocked Christianity. Although members were very hospitable and answered my questions enthusiastically, I could not help but feel that somehow I did not belong to the community. My own inherited approach to religion ensured that I could not readily accept the reality of African Judaism.

My status as an outsider was also keenly felt in my hesitation to interact freely with the Vakunda VeJerusalem (Daughters of Jerusalem), the women's movement within African Judaism. African and Jewish patriarchal norms restricted my interviews with female members of the community. I had to utilize the services of a young female research assistant (Tendai Mtukwa) to collect more details on the religious experiences of women within African Judaism. My identity as a relatively young African male implied that I could not freely mix with either the young or older women. Given the emerging emphasis on religion and gender, as well as methodological reflections by women scholars of religion (Sharma 2002), my limitations as a male researcher became obvious. This highlights the fact that a researcher can be a partial insider in one respect, while being an outsider in others. Although I could spend long hours in debate and discussion with the male leaders of African Judaism in Zimbabwe, I could only have limited interaction with the female members of this community. From the foregoing paragraphs, it emerges that, like the truth question, the insider/outsider problem will continue to confront researchers who seek to understand African Judaism. Both European/white and African/black researchers have certain advantages and disadvantages. While European scholars have to contend with the charge of racism that I have referred to, they are seen as having greater influence in bringing African Judaism before a global audience. Before the slump in Zimbabwean tourism in the late 1990's due to political upheavals, some white visitors from abroad facilitated the movement of resources like money and literature from metropolitan centers. However, white researchers would need to find techniques of overcoming the obstacles of culture and language, although most members in Harare do speak English. On the other hand, most African scholars face

the disadvantage of being associated with Christianity as the majority of departments of religious studies/theology in Africa are dominated by Christians (Cox 1994). As noted above, there are instances when the rhetoric by adherents of African Judaism is strongly anti-Christian. Researchers who have sympathies for Christianity would need to employ phenomenological techniques like bracketing their prejudices, cultivating empathy, and respecting the testimony of the believers (Chitando 1998: 99). While the insider/outsider problem remains significant, it is worth observing that studies of the Lemba by "outsiders" like Parfitt and Le Roux have yielded valuable information relating to the community. These studies, and others such as Oded's (1995) study of Judaism and Islam in Uganda, illustrate the extent to which "outsiders" can succeed in describing the religious beliefs and practices held by others. Although one may readily admit that total objectivity is impossible to attain in the humanities, scholars should continue to strive for excellence (King 1999: 50). However, even if one attains an understanding of African Judaism, the challenge of classifying the phenomenon remains considerable. It is to a discussion of this issue that I now turn.

African Judaism in Zimbabwe within the Context of AICs: Prospects and Challenges

Literature on African Independent Churches in Southern Africa has grown phenomenally in the last three decades. It lies beyond the scope of this study to review the publications on the history, causative factors, attraction and other related issues. Having discussed the major questions relating to the truth question as well as the insider/outsider problem in the study of African Judaism, this section examines whether it is tenable to classify African Judaism as an African Independent Church. These issues are closely related since one's position regarding the character of African Judaism determines how one will categorize the phenomenon. The issue of classification is important as the academic study of religion puts emphasis on the accurate naming and categorization of religious phenomena. Adopting labels that violate the testimony of the believers is considered a major shortcoming by the phenomenology of religion. Since African Judaism presents itself as a distinct religious tradition, placing it amongst African Independent Churches might be regarded as a mark of insensitivity on the part of the researcher. At the same time, African Judaism may have a lot in common with some of the Independent Churches, thereby justifying such classification. As noted above, the dilemma of classifying African Judaism operates in tandem with the truth question and the insider/outsider problem. While adherents of African Judaism maintain that they are members of an ancient faith, suggestions that the movement has recent origins threaten their claims. In addition, while the "insiders" might wish to be identified as belonging to an ancient religion, as an "outsider" a researcher might consider it more appropriate to regard them as a

New Religious Movement (NRM), or as a type of African Independent Church. In this context, the classification of a religious movement is the direct outcome of the insider/outsider problem. Whether religious studies should adopt insider-perspectives or employ outsider-perspectives is a long-standing methodological problem. Some critics of religious studies like Donald Wiebe (1999) contend that the tendency to defer to adherents robs the study of religion of its scientific dimension. They allege that this reduces religious studies to theology, thereby reversing all the gains that have been made to emancipate the study of religion from the tentacles of theology. One therefore recognizes that the classification of African Judaism is of considerable methodological significance.

Research indicates that while the adherents of African Judaism in Zimbabwe claim direct descent from biblical figures like Abraham, the community also has more contemporary origins. African Jews in Zimbabwe are closely connected to the Church of God and Saints of Christ founded in 1896 by William Saunders Crowdy in Kansas, in the United States of America. A former slave, Crowdy taught that blacks are descendants of the ten tribes of Israel (Baer 2001: 97). His movement expanded to different American cities, as well as outside the country. According to oral tradition, a South African, Albert Christian, traveled to the United States of America and met Crowdy in 1903. He brought black Judaism to South Africa, from where it reached Zimbabwe in the 1930's. The movement expanded within Zimbabwe, beginning from the small town of Rusape and then spreading to Harare and Bulawayo, as well as to other neighboring rural areas. Although it requires a longer narrative to discuss the growth of the community in Zimbabwe, these details should suffice for informing the question of whether it is legitimate to approach African Judaism as a type of African Independent Church. There are a number of factors that support discussing African Judaism within the context of the study of African Independent Churches. To begin with, some Independent Churches in Zimbabwe followed a route similar to that taken by African Judaism. As Marthinus Daneel (1971: 288-293) shows, some Zimbabwean leaders like Samuel Mutendi returned to Zimbabwe in the 1920's and started their own movements, having become members of African Independent Churches in South Africa. South African Independent Churches, in turn, had been influenced by developments in America, particularly the emergence of the Christian Catholic Apostolic Church in Zion, founded in 1896 by John Alexander Dowie. Thus, one observes the same pattern of religious developments in America shaping events in South Africa, with new religious movements emerging in Zimbabwe as a result of regular interaction between the two countries. From a historical perspective therefore, it is plausible to trace possible connections between the African Independent Churches and African Judaism. These movements emerged within the same historical context, justifying a comparative approach.

African Judaism also shares a similar ideological orientation with some of

the Independent Churches. The emphasis on Africa as sacred space is found in some churches like the African Apostolic Church of Zimbabwe, which maintains that God has a special plan for African people, and that Africa is the stage for the drama of salvation (Chitando 2003: 247). Many other African Independent Churches adopt a more positive approach to African culture, reversing the missionary verdict that indigenous culture needed to be cleansed by the power of the gospel. Like African Judaism, some of them have sought to promote African culture, claiming that missionary Christianity was informed by cultural arrogance. It is therefore possible to analyze African Judaism alongside African Independent Churches in this regard. Furthermore, they share similarities in terms of uniforms, the status of women and observance of the Sabbath. In Zimbabwe, some Apostolic and Zionist churches have uniforms or garments that serve as markers of identity. African Judaism is also characterized by the wearing of brown uniforms for men and blue for women. As in most African Independent Churches, men and women sit on separate sides during the services. While women may lead as choristers, and make announcements, elderly men tend to be in charge of proceedings. Men also play leading roles in most Independent Churches. These similarities could be due to the shared emphasis on the Hebrew Bible and reliance on indigenous culture and thus highlight the possibility of tackling African Judaism within the context of African Independent Churches.

The idea of New Religious Movements engenders considerable difficulties in the study of religion and its application to the study of African Judaism confirms the slippery nature of the concept. Some scholars studying African Independent Churches in West Africa, like Rosalind Hackett (1987) have, in spite of this, adopted the concept. The notion of a New Religious Movement creates the impression that one can make a neat distinction between "old" and "new" religions. In fact, most new religions appropriate old religious ideas and practices, while old religions are constantly being reshaped by new ideas (Berner 2000). It is difficult to classify African Judaism as a New Religious Movement since it draws on aspects of indigenous religions that have been in existence for a very long time. As noted above, the adherents themselves also insist that they are adherents of an old religion. Imposing such a label on African Judaism might suggest that the researcher is disregarding the testimony of the believers. Nevertheless, some researchers might feel that since it shares so much in common with African Independent Churches, which are sometimes classified as New Religious Movements, it could be categorized as such. Although it is possible to discuss African Judaism within the context of African Independent Churches, there is a major methodological challenge that has to be faced. Adherents of African Judaism clearly wish to distinguish themselves from Christianity as it regards itself as religious tradition that is separate and distinct from Christianity. While the founder, Crowdy, might have integrated aspects of Christianity and Judaism in the early period, today African Judaism does not uphold any Christian teach-

ings. Is it convincing to classify such a movement as Christian? In their teachings and religious practices, African Jews denounce Christianity as a religion based on distortion by white people. Grouping African Judaism with African Independent Churches violates their self-understanding as a non-Christian movement. While studying African Judaism within the context of African Independent Churches and New Religious Movements might provide valuable insights, ultimately, African Judaism has to be understood as a separate and distinct religious tradition.

Conclusion

In this article, I have traced how the study of African Judaism is plagued by serious methodological challenges. I have illustrated how key questions in the academic study of religion surface during research on African Judaism. These include the truth question, the insider/outsider problem and the challenge of classification. I believe that this exercise of linking methodological reflections to practical research efforts provides a more satisfactory way forward in the study of religion. The tendency to engage in abstract reflections on methodology without unveiling new material on religion is of limited value to the discipline. Scholars of religion in Southern Africa therefore need to continue to generate fresh data about the complex phenomenon of religion, while participating in global discourses on how to execute the task. As Rosalind Hackett suggests, we should "be more proactive in teaching about fieldwork methods in our graduate programs, and eventually publishing our own versions of `ethnographic toolkits'" (Hackett 2001: 107).

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