BOOK REVIEW

Noah Tamarkin. *Genetic Afterlives: Black Jewish Indigeneity in South Africa*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2020. 260 pp. Photographs. Bibliography. Index. $26.68. Paper. ISBN: 9781478009689.

Genetic Afterlives: Black Jewish Indigeneity in South Africa by Noah Tamarkin is a masterful exploration of a phenomenon in South Africa during the course of the late twentieth century: The Lemba of northeastern South Africa and Zimbabwe, who have no historical ties to Jewish life, have chosen to become part of the Jewish people and to adopt Jewish tradition. Following the Beta Israel (Falasha) of Ethiopia, they claim Hebrew descent and consider themselves to be the Lost Tribes of Israel.

Although they shared a deeply felt ethnic identity, the Lemba people of South Africa had not been recognized as an ethnic group under the Apartheid regime and were classified as Venda Bantustan. For the Lemba Cultural Association (LCA) and the Lemba chiefs, recognition became inexorably linked to difference. In July 1986, Professor Mathivha, president of the LCA, proclaimed in an article in the Pretoria News, "Our entire outlook is Jewish."

Since then, the Lemba have used their oral history and traditional customs (infant circumcision, endogamy, exclusion of pork) to claim a Jewish ancestry and identity. Their oral tradition recounts that the first Lemba, who came from Sena in the north, were Jewish men who married African women. In the 1990s, using this information as a starting point, geneticists had the idea of trying to solve the mystery of the Lemba's origin by collecting and analyzing their DNA. In their analysis, they established that 50 percent of the Lemba Y chromosomes were of Semitic origin and 40 percent were Negroid, with the remaining 10 percent unidentified.

While the term "Semitic genes" lacks precision—was this origin Jewish, Arab, or both ?—their conclusion suggested a genetic history quite consistent with the Lemba oral tradition and gave substance to their claim of ancestral connections to Jews. The results of another DNA study that followed in the 2000s linked Lemba men directly with the Cohanim, the Hebrew priests. These surveys found a wide audience and, since then, coverage in the media has brought the Lemba to the attention of a larger international public.

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Media accounts reported the tracing of the genetic ancestry of the Lemba as if genetic tests had authoritatively settled the question, although the answers to these questions are far more complex. It was against this murky background, linking different and contradictory levels of racial thought and scientific explanations, mingled with the vivid legend of the Twelve Tribes, that the genetic studies on the Lemba were received.

In *Genetic Afterlives*, Noah Tamarkin analyzes how the Lemba people, following the genetic surveys, have negotiated their relationship with the Jewish diaspora, African indigeneity, and South African citizenship. Their genetic material, which was intended to substantiate the Lemba's link with Jewishness, appeared to the LCA leaders as a powerful tool of differentiation. Gradually, genetics entered into Lemba political and legal struggles for post-apartheid recognition via claims to traditional leadership and land.

What is important in the Tamakin survey is that it is not limited to the scientific conclusion and its fallout. He extends his analysis across multiple social fields, considering genetic ancestry as a cultural object. His central concept highlights how the Lemba, through the interpretation and the circulation of their own genetic data, have reshaped themselves within the racial and political context of South Africa and have produced "new genetic knowledge." Tamarkin analyzes genetic circulation as knowledge production from an ethnographic point of view, focusing on the social interactions that happen after scientists have published their results. His concept of "genetic afterlives" builds on a point of convergence between the approaches of anthropological science and technological studies (STS) to scientific knowledge.

Following the DNA studies, the idea of Lemba indigeneity began to take shape among the LCA leaders, who were willing to be part of new national development concerning South African heritage. In 2007, the LCA joined the representatives of other South African claimants' communities in contributing to a reburial ceremony of thirteenth-century ancestral bones, which took place at the Mapubungwe Heritage Site. This moment was a pivotal event in which the Lemba articulated their claim to Jewish blood along with claims to African bones, without any contradiction. Rejecting a logic of unique origins, the Lemba representatives claimed African indigeneity and were in turn recognized by the South African state. In doing so, they introduced a conceptualization of indigeneity that rejects notions of origins and borders, promoting an idea of South African indigeneity characterized by multi-ethnic and multicultural coexistences. As demonstrated by Tamarkin, genetic data are not significant in themselves, but rather they are made meaningful in relation to both the political and cultural contexts in which they are analyzed and circulated.

What makes this study significant is that Tamarkin pushes the limits of genetic research as a site of social, cultural, and political meaning. He vigorously points out the emerging ethnographic significance of DNA studies

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in relation to the free movement of religions in a globalized world. This is an essential break with essentialist visions of origins and identity.

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