



JOHN JACKSON, ETHNOGRAPHY, and THE HEBREW ISRAELITES

In 1967, 400 African Americans followed a metal worker named Ben Carter from the South Side of Chicago to Israel. Anthropologist and PIK Professor John L. Jackson has spent the last decade documenting that group—and contemplating what they mean to his field.

BY MOLLY PETRILLA

In the Israeli city of Dimona, some 20 miles from the Dead Sea and two hours south of Jerusalem, the Village of Peace doesn't just hum with activity, it sings, chants, shouts, prays, sprints, and dances.

One day there may be a flurry of preparation for the community's New World Passover—a two-day festival with concerts, feasts, plays, and volleyball showdowns. Next a group of African dignitaries may be welcomed, or a holy day celebrated, or maybe a celebrity will arrive, as Stevie Wonder, Whitney Houston, and Erykah Badu have all done in the past. As one frequent visitor put it: "There's always this frenetic energy there, either in gearing up for a big event or as a result of one they've just survived."

But for the newcomer, the Village of Peace can also be an enigmatic place, governed by unfamiliar—and, at times, seemingly contradictory—rules and beliefs. It's not unusual, for instance, to hear Hebrew words and prayers or see residents debating specifics of the Old Testament, yet those same people say they're not Jewish, or even religious at all. Members of the community believe they know the secrets to eternal life,

and they aren't shy about encouraging others to hop on their strict path to immortality, which includes eating only vegan fare; avoiding alcohol, drugs, and tobacco; and regular exercise. They're also the largest organized group of African-American expatriates in the world: about 3,500 strong, with new arrivals all the time.

That community, the African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem, was the reason John L. Jackson Jr., now the Richard Perry University Professor of Communication, Africana Studies and Anthropology, found himself on a plane to Israel in 2005.

He'd been studying the group on and off for several years by that point, amassing extensive information but never doing much with it. When he'd heard that one of his graduate students was heading to Israel for her dissertation research, he'd asked her to swing by Dimona and visit the AHIJ Village of Peace for him.

"They told me, on camera, that I had to come and visit," Jackson says now. "And since they specifically asked me to, I started planning a visit for the following semester. That was my first trip there, and I haven't looked back since."

Jackson would return to Israel multiple times over the next decade. He'd also travel to Jamaica, Africa, the Caribbean, and dozens of US cities, conduct more than 250 interviews, and write his new book, *Thin Description: Ethnography and the African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem* (Harvard University Press), all in an attempt to answer some seemingly simple questions: Who are the AHIJ, what are they doing in Israel, and what can the rest of the world learn from their story?

IN 1960s Chicago, an African-American metal worker named Ben Carter had a vision.

The full story has blurred over the years—some say his name was actually Gerson Parker and that he heard the voice of God, or saw Angel Gabriel—but one fact stands undisputed: a year after that vision, Carter, who now goes by Ben Ammi, had convinced 400 African Americans to sell their possessions and follow him from the South Side of Chicago to Israel.

Those self-selected African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem have spent the last four decades in Dimona building up a “purposeful revitalization community,” as Jackson describes it. But the AHIJ story actually begins long before Ammi.

In the 1880s, F.S. Cherry founded the first known Black Hebrew group. Several years later, a “prophet” named William S. Crowdy traveled through the South proclaiming that African Americans were the descendants of the Lost Tribes of Israel. Groups of Hebrew Israelites continued to spring up in the years, decades, and century that followed, and today there are dozens of communities all over the world, each with its own beliefs, traditions, and values. Some consider themselves Jewish; others don't. Some stand on soapboxes on city street corners and proselytize; others find new constituents through tech-savvy videos and websites.

The AHIJ are notable among Hebrew Israelite groups not only for their bold move to Israel in the late 1960s, but also for their “purposeful attempt to reconstruct every version of their world,” Jackson says. “It's almost like they've made it their business to say, ‘Let's look at everything we've been given, everything we take for granted, all the stuff that makes up the cultural common-sense of the communities that we know

and of the world generally, and let's just think about it differently.’”

Take language, for instance. Community members refer to their veganism not as a diet, but rather a *live-it*. The *Dead Sea* is actually the *Sea of Life*. People don't *fall* in love, they *rise*. In the workplace, *deadlines* are actually *lifelines*.

“Claiming this ‘power to define’ means that nothing is off-limits or unworthy of close reading,” Jackson writes in *Thin Description*. “It is all-encompassing, an elaborate new dictionary for an old and corrupted language ... Everything is up for grabs here, ripe for the rhetorical picking, and this topsy-turvy existence is crucial to understanding the AHIJ's inter-connected spiritual, cultural, and political goals.”

Jackson began studying the group as a graduate student at Columbia University. He'd been writing an ethnography of a different Hebrew Israelite group—one that was openly hostile toward the AHIJ. That other group, the Israelite Church of Universal Practical Knowledge, “was so consistently harsh [toward the AHIJ] that I decided I'd go to Israel whenever I got a chance and see what was really going on,” Jackson says. When he arrived several years later, “I realized this is an interesting story that is so under-the-matized, and I just kept following it as much as I could.”

In *Thin Description*, Jackson delivers a decade-in-the-making ethnography of the AHIJ, spanning from their early days in Chicago up through their still-evolving beliefs and mandates. “To me, the book is about letting people into this almost alternate universe,” he says, “this different way of being in the world that is both connected to ours but, if you tilt your head just so, seems so different.”

He sums up the group's overall mission as “creating healthier human beings in the 21st century”—people so healthy that they can live forever. “That's really their project,” he adds, “and for them, everything else is in service to that goal.”

The eternal-life claim tends to raise eyebrows but, as with most of their beliefs, the community has an explanation at the ready. In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve ate no meat or animal products; thus the human body was designed to follow a vegan diet, and returning to that diet means living forever, just as Adam and Eve were created to do.

Saints, as the group's members are called, spend their weekly Sabbath hunched over scientific publications, combing through research that backs up the current AHIJ claims and searching for new secrets to healthy living. As a result, monthly massages and three-times-a-week exercise sessions are mandatory. Tobacco, drugs, and alcohol are eschewed. No-salt days and sugarless weeks are commonplace, as are weeks devoted to eating only “live” (raw) foods.

“One of the things I find really compelling,” Jackson says, “is that as I'm studying this group, there's all this interesting science coming out that really corroborates their claim about our capacity to live much, much longer, and that some of that is connected to diet. The fact that this research is coming out of a very different agenda and model, for them, is just a corroboration of their point.”

Fixation on health aside, the community also asserts a deep connection to God. But while they closely follow the will of *Yah* (God), claim to be descendants of the Tribe of Judah, and call Ben Ammi their messiah, the group also says it's not just unreligious, but *anti-religious*.

“It's not that different from the distinction some people make between *religious* and *spiritual*,” Jackson says. “For them, it's about a rejection of formal religion; it's saying that Christianity, Judaism, or Islam aren't ways to get closer to the Almighty. They're just distractions away from it—they're human inventions. Their project is about stripping that stuff away and having relatively unmediated access to the Almighty.”

Looking back on his childhood now, it's easy to see how Jackson wound up an anthropologist.

Growing up in Canarsie and Crown Heights, Brooklyn, during the 1970s and 1980s, he was surrounded by ethnographies-in-the-making. His Jewish pals taught him Hebrew and invited him to their seders; his Italian-American, African-American, and Caribbean-American friends shared their foods and customs, too. “We all got along very well—when we knew each other,” Jackson says. “But when we didn't know each other, there could be a lot of tension and anxiety, too. It was a neighborhood where folks were dealing with ethnic differences all the time.”

He doesn't talk much about it in *Thin Description*, but Jackson crossed paths with quite a few Hebrew Israelite groups during those childhood years. "There were tons of Hebrew Israelites in the neighborhoods around me," he says. "I even had relatives who became part of the community and were then ostracized by other relatives."

He indirectly encountered the AHIJ group as an undergraduate at Howard University. He and his friends would often eat in a vegan soul-food restaurant across from the university's business school and "we had no idea that the people who ran that restaurant had this rich connection to [the AHIJ] community," he says. "They had some pictures on the wall, but they weren't actively proselytizing; they were just trying to get us to eat and to keep their business afloat."

By then Jackson had passed through a teenage standup-comic phase, which had involved secret late-night bus trips to Manhattan, and a two-year stint as the host of *The Jackson Attraction*, a show that aired on the non-commercial radio station 91.5 WNYE. (Besides hosting, he served as engineer and producer, performed skits, and even got to interview his hero, Spike Lee.) He planned to spend the rest of his life making movies. "For me, there's always been something about the power of telling

stories in images and sound," he says. "It can be so moving and so adept at making you feel a certain way."

The wrench came at the end of his junior year, when he participated in a summer-long "grad prep" program that touted the joys of the academic life. "I always jokingly tell people I was brainwashed," he says. "They flew in interesting scholars from all kinds of fields and spent the entire summer telling us that [a PhD] was a viable option and something we should consider, so I did."

But he wasn't ready to abandon filmmaking entirely. He began poking through various areas of graduate study and soon

found a compromise in anthropology. "There's a long history of ethnographic film and visual anthropology," he says. "I realized I could become an academic filmmaker, then use my skills in film to produce knowledge for anthropology. It's a case that can be made in anthropology and no other field—not even sociology or cinema studies. I figured I could have my cake and eat it too."

There were just a few eggshells to fish out first. As a grad student at Columbia, Jackson kept his filmmaking a secret from his professors, from his dissertation committee, even from his adviser. "I thought they would read it as me not really wanting



Celebrations in the Village of Peace in Dimona, Israel, home of the African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem.

PHOTOS BY CROWNED SISTER CATRIELLAH ESHET ROCKAMEEM.



to be a scholar," he says. "I did it all under the cover of darkness and didn't let them know until I was done and on to my post-doc." (Today, in addition to writing four books, Jackson has created feature-length, documentary, and short films that have screened at festivals around the world.)

He also faced criticism in grad school for grounding his ethnographic studies in nearby Harlem and Brooklyn rather than someplace more remote. One professor said Jackson would never find a job if he kept researching communities in the United States. That was the turf of sociologists.

"There's this myth in anthropology that to be a *real* anthropologist, you have to be alienated, at least initially, from the place you work," Jackson says now. Fighting against that notion marked the beginning of his career-spanning mission: a *purposeful attempt*, as he might describe it, to reconsider traditional approaches to ethnography and to yank anthropology into the 21st century.

Everything is ethnography.

It's Jackson's favorite refrain, one he often imparts to his students.

That guy in the YMCA locker room who yelled at him one day? Ethnography. The man shouting "Don't be a sucker!" on the New York subway, then handing him an Israelite Church of Universal Practical Knowledge pamphlet? That was ethnography, too.

In *Thin Description*, Jackson toggles between writing an ethnography on the

AHIJ and examining the very nature of ethnographies. "One of the things I'm trying to demonstrate with this book," he says, "is a different approach to ethnographic research."

In the past, he adds, writing an ethnography meant jetting off to some isolated, self-contained location and hunkering down for a year or two to "study the natives." After enough time in the field, the ethnographer would return to his cozy, well-lit office and write up everything he'd experienced. When he typed the final sentence of his book or paper, the whole process was over.

For his research on the AHIJ, Jackson set out to demonstrate ethnographic research that is "more organically folded into one's everyday life," he says. "For me, it was about always being in the field and continually trying to gather and capture and analyze and add to this corpus of knowledge I was obtaining about the group's efforts all around the world."

That's the future of ethnography, he says: part physical "field site" research, part everything else. "It's constant text messages back and forth," he adds. "It's emails; it's phone conversations using magicJack."

Dissolving those old boundaries around "ethnography" and "everything else" extends well beyond the research process, though—as one of Jackson's graduate students at Duke (where he taught before coming to Penn in 2006) learned several years ago after submitting her dissertation. Jackson notes that, when he published his own dissertation, "you had to be a real

expert to get access to that thing." But the Internet changed that, and some of the student's research subjects found her paper.

"They wrote her this scathing, multi-page critique," Jackson recalls. "They emailed it to her *and* to all the other people she'd interviewed. To me, that is maybe the most frightening example of the changing landscape. Now you have folks who can respond in real time—and who can often disseminate their critique farther and wider than the ethnographer can. I think it's both terrifying and liberating."

Technology is also encouraging many research subjects to become "citizen-ethnographers, purposeful describers of their own lives," Jackson writes in *Thin Description*. In fact, much of his interest in the AHIJ stemmed from their skillful use of new media. The community's Ministry of Information is responsible for documenting all AHIJ activities, from their annual New World Passover (a celebration that commemorates the day Ammi and the others left Chicago) to Whitney Houston's and Bobby Brown's high-profile visit in 2003. Its vast archives contain photos and videos, many of which are also available online—material so extensive that the AHIJ often supply their own footage to the film crews who come to document them. But where does all that self-ethnography leave Jackson?

"As far as I'm concerned, everything they're producing is data," he says. "It's more material for me to incorporate into my analysis of what they're doing. They're

A QUESTION OF SINCERITY

The question of sincerity has always been paramount in the Israelite community, even as early as the 1960s. For many detractors, that was the first issue of concern. Men like Ben Ammi and Shaleahk Ben Yehuda must have been running some kind of scam, some "religious" con, soliciting donations from people with this talk about black folk being descendants of ancient Israelites. They couldn't be serious ...

But even worse, maybe these folks were serious. Once the community really began to organize for life away from America in 1966, their sincerity looked a little more testable, more measurable, but also more potentially incomprehensible and bizarre. This would have been a particularly elaborate ruse for con artists looking to trick black people out of their savings, especially if they were planning on living in Liberia with everyone else as part of the scam. The emigrationist preparations began to silence some of that concern for insincerity—only to raise questions about their actual sanity.

The sincerity of the ethnographer is also at stake—and increasingly verifiable as ethnographic research morphs into publishable material. But before publication, sincerity demands vetting. For the [Israelite Church of Universal Practical Knowledge], they felt the power of Yah was more potent than any potential espionage I might have been performing in their nightly classes. How could I hear the truth of what they were saying, with books they asked me to bring back from my own school's library, and not eventually come to accept their claims as well? Likewise, for some of the [African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem] saints, skepticism (about me) was tempered by their faith in Yah's divine and preordained plans. I might have imagined that mere curiosity brought me to Dimona that first time in 2005, but just because I believed that to be true didn't make it so. More likely was the idea that Yah had guided me to my scholarly interests, to this vanguard community, to His chosen people and their truth. To my destiny. Whatever I believed about my anthropological mission might very well be irrelevant. Spirit had guided me there, and it was just vanity and ignorance to think otherwise.

From *Thin Description: Ethnography and the African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem*, by John L. Jackson Jr., Harvard University Press, 2013.

not trying to get tenure with their material. They're not trying to add to this particular academic literature, either. That difference makes their material rich and interesting, and it provides me with another window into how these communities are thinking about themselves and the world they inhabit.

"Increasingly, academics are going to be forced to deal with folks who are telling their own stories," he adds—and with the journalists and filmmakers who are offering their versions, too. "Ethnographers are going to have to make a strong case for how and why their work is still valuable," he says.

How ethnography's parent field, anthropology, will weather these changes is also up for debate. Jackson doesn't see the study itself disappearing, at least not in the next 30 or 40 years, but "the idea of what we mean when we say *anthropology* is probably going to have to change," he says.

At its most basic level, the field is about "trying to figure out what makes people human," Jackson says. That can mean studying any aspect of social or cultural life: law, science, medicine, performing arts. "No matter what you're doing," he adds, "there's an anthropologist studying it with the folks who are researchers and experts in that field. I think that's what makes anthropology very valuable. The anthropologist at his or her strongest is able to do the same thing we said we did when we were studying the 'primitives': to show people the parts of their everyday cultural worlds that they don't usually have the luxury to see."

While many of the AHIJ live in Dimona, there are also thousands across the US, the Caribbean, Europe, and Africa. (There is a strong presence in Philadelphia, where the newest satellite group produces its own vegan wine and has even catered vegan soul food for a few Penn events.) As Jackson sees it, the AHIJ "have been able to create a global sense of citizenship and belonging. It is a way of being in the world that's almost post-national, in a sense. Clearly they're committed to the Israeli state, but their product is irreducible to any nation-state borders. It speaks to the contemporary global moment."

Dimona saints travel the world to spread their message. Up to 20 percent of their Israeli village is sprinkled across the globe at any time, working to bring new members into the Kingdom. The group is especially

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active in Africa, where they're setting up larger versions of the Village of Peace, spreading the message that Africans are the true Israelites, and championing the AHIJ approach to healthy living.

"These are very purposeful attempts to create communities in these places," Jackson says. "It's not that different from Christian missionaries going and trying to create Christians in these same communities. The Hebrew Israelites wouldn't like that analogy, but the key is that this is a group that's based in one tiny part of the world but doing truly global work. I think that's interesting and different."

But not everyone has embraced the AHIJ. When Whitney Houston and Bobby Brown visited the Village of Peace, one national news outlet asked: "Is Whitney Being Used By a Cult?" Others have called the group "fringe," "hostile" and "dangerous," or confused it with unrelated Hebrew Israelite communities. "The AHIJ have been trying to distance themselves (in terms of rhetoric, ideology, and public posturing) from other Hebrew Israelite 'camps' throughout urban America," Jackson writes in *Thin Description*, "camps that are popularly dismissed as delusional, anti-Semitic, hyperparanoid, and extremist in their hatred toward white America."

For their first few decades in Israel, the AHIJ were also navigating a complex relationship with the country's government. When they arrived in 1969, members received temporary visas and were assigned to Dimona, a city developed in the 1950s for newly arrived European immigrants. Until the 1990s, when AHIJ members received temporary-resident status, most were living in Israel on long-expired tourist visas. To earn a living, "they were being hired illegally, working for less than Israeli citizens usually demand, and paying no income tax," Jackson writes. "This was 'real-life hustling,' as one saint described it, and the threat of deportation was always lurking."

Saints were granted permanent residency in Israel in 2003 with the option to pursue citizenship. In 2009, 40 years after the first saints arrived in Israel and several years into Jackson's research, an African Hebrew Israelite of Jerusalem became the group's first Israeli citizen. *The Jewish Daily* headline read, "Once Reviled, Black Hebrews Now Fêted," and *The Jewish Chronicle* reported on "[t]he black vegan cult finally loved by Israel."

The cover of *Thin Description* shows a row of young black soldiers, two of them holding Israeli flags. It's a nod, Jackson says, to the still-unfolding disagreement that's threatening the Village of Peace.

As permanent residents, the AHIJ aren't required to enlist in the Israeli military. But they can volunteer for it. The first saint joined the Israeli Defense Force in 2004, and more than 125 AHIJ youth have served since then. Allowing their young high-school graduates to join the IDF was "a major move," Jackson says, for a community so committed to peace and longevity. It also sparked "one of the major rifts in the community" when Prince Asiel—Ben Ammi's "righthand person for more than 40 years"—left the group in 2011. He has since become an outspoken critic of Ben Ammi. "That's a big development," Jackson says, "and I'm still trying to figure out what it means."

But he has every intention to do so. The research could become articles, maybe a film, perhaps even another book, but he'll be there, documenting and observing what happens next.

"I'm not sure what it will mean in terms of what I 'produce' as a scholar, but their story continues, and I'm still interested and invested," he says. "When you do the kind of research this book entailed—this everyday ethnographic research—I'm not sure there's a way to turn it off. There is no going home in that traditional ethnographic sense." ♦

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