

Genetics, Mass Media and Identity

A case study of the genetic research on the Lemba and Bene Israel

Tudor Parfitt and Yulia Egorova

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This book, *Genetics, Mass Media and Identity*, looks at the effect of genetic research on the identity of the populations studied and is the first monograph devoted to the subject. The specific genetic research treated here was conducted in the 1990s on two quite different communities: the Lemba of southern Africa and the Bene Israel of western India. The genetic research had as its principal aim the solution of the mystery of the origin of the two groups. With the dissemination of the results of the tests in the mass media the Lemba became famous overnight as DNA analysis appeared to support their ambiguous historical traditions. These traditions which had hitherto been rejected by mainstream Jewish communities maintain that they are Jewish and came from a town called Sena 'somewhere in the far north'. In the case of the Bene Israel, another somewhat ambiguous Jewish group, the results were interpreted in a way which is embedded in local Indian traditions. This engaging and accessible study is based on extensive interviews with the members of the two communities and their neighbours and an analysis of a wide range of the mass media material devoted to them. The authors demonstrate how media reports of research in genetic anthropology may have a significant impact on a group's own sense of its identity and on the way in which it is perceived by others. Such research in addition provides ammunition both for conservative forces in the preservation of their prejudices and for liberal groups who seek the elimination of differences among peoples.

This book will be of interest to researchers and students of Jewish history, genetic anthropology, science and technology studies and religious and cultural studies.

Tudor Parfitt is Professor of Modern Jewish Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. His areas of expertise include Muslim–Jewish relations, the history of the Jews in Africa and Asia, Judaising movements and discourses surrounding genetics.

Yulia Egorova is a Research Fellow at the School of Religious and Theological Studies at Cardiff University. She is working on a project on 'The Meanings of Genetics'.

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vi
1 Introduction	1
2 Between art and science: ‘non-scientific’ aspects of genetics	10
3 Jews and genetics	29
4 Are Jews black?	44
5 The Lemba	51
6 The Lemba tests: media and responses	57
7 The Bene Israel	89
8 Genetic research on the Bene Israel	111
9 Conclusion	120
<i>Notes</i>	126
<i>Bibliography</i>	130
<i>Index</i>	141

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1 Introduction

How much can our genes tell us about where we are from and what we basically are? Can they tell us anything about our religion and our culture? According to some outstandingly well-placed observers the message of our genes is pretty reductive. James Watson, for instance, observes ‘The double helix is an elegant structure, but its message is downright prosaic: life is simply a matter of chemistry’ (Watson 2004: xx). Indeed a striking achievement of modernism is the overall success of the natural sciences in explaining a whole swathe of human conditions, not least the condition posited by the enlightenment that all men are equal, that our shared and common humanity can be reduced to an ultimate chemical basis. At the same time it may be perceived that the rapid development of genetic science is in many ways anti-modernist: many of the supposed differences in peoples, nations and sexes appear to find some sort of corroboration in the differences found in both group and individual genetic make-up. This book looks at the effects of genetic tests which had as their aim the solution to the mystery of the origin of two small communities – the Lemba of southern Africa and the Bene Israel of western India – both of whom have an uncertain and ambiguous historical tradition.

It will be shown that perceptions of genetic research very substantially bolster and modify issues of group self-identity and in addition provide ammunition both for conservative forces in the preservation of their prejudices and for liberal groups who seek the elimination of differences among peoples. Paul Brodwin and Carl Elliott have maintained in a recent article that ‘tracing genetic identity can lead to resolution of uncertainty but can cause more problems than it solves’ (Elliott and Brodwin 2002). Perhaps this is true but probably it is too early to say. In fact, for the moment, little research has been devoted to determine the impact of genetic testing on individual and group identity and it is this gap in knowledge that this present book is endeavouring to address. Certainly over the last few years a number of famous test cases linking genetics and identity have emerged and these have been widely discussed although their impact upon the populations and individuals concerned have not been subjected to close scrutiny. The case of the Lemba tribe of southern Africa is one of the most frequently

2 Introduction

cited. In this case, an oral tradition cherished by many of the tribe that they are of Jewish origin appears to be supported by genetic research. This has had an impact on the way the tribe is viewed and on the way they perceive themselves. There are a number of other well-known cases. One of these and perhaps the most celebrated is that of the corroboration of the claims of some African Americans to be direct descendants of the US President Thomas Jefferson and his slave mistress Sally Hemings (Foster *et al.* 1998; Davis 2002). This may have had some impact upon the identity of the families concerned and perhaps upon the identity of other African Americans in the United States. Another well-known case emerged in June 2002 with the announcement of the results of genetic testing on a 'mixed ancestry' group of mysterious origin in eastern Tennessee and Virginia known as the Melungeons (Price 1951; Reed 1997; Balloch 2002). As Carl Elliott puts it: 'many Tennesseans grew up thinking that Melungeons were moonshiners and counterfeiterers, that they had six fingers on each hand, and that when they emerged from the hills and hollows, it was to capture misbehaving children.' Melungeons were variously said to be descendants of runaway slaves, gypsies, a lost tribe of Israel, ancient Carthaginians or American Indians. Another theory maintained that they were the descendants of Raleigh's Lost Colony which had intermarried with a tribe of Croatan Indians. The genetic testing, broadly speaking, confirmed the Melungeons' own oral tradition which is that they were of Portuguese origin (actually the genetic markers suggested that the ancestry of the group studied consisted of 5 per cent native American, 5 per cent African and 90 per cent 'Eurasian' – a vague group that includes the populations of India, the Middle East and Europe) (Elliott 2003: 18). It may be that the results will have had some impact upon identity issues within the group.

These attempts to prove origins or seek out information from the past concerning issues of descent are not in themselves unique: there is a long history of the use of various methodologies from genealogical research to measuring cranium size to prove that an individual belongs to a given group. The so-called 'one drop' rule in the American south in which anyone suspected of having even a drop of 'black blood' was rendered illegible for an array of legal advantages, led to appropriate measures being taken to prove whiteness. In more recent times great efforts have been made in the United States and Canada by native Americans to prove their membership of a given tribe (often great financial benefit may be derived from tribal membership). In both cases a provable genetic identity could impact on political and ethnic identity.

A question posed by Elliott and Brodwin is whether the possession of certain genetic markers in any way makes you any more English, or Sioux, or Jeffersonian? (Elliott and Brodwin 2002: 1469). This question it seems to us is not entirely the question which should be posed. Indeed there are two questions which are not, strictly speaking, linked. One is that the current methodologies for genetically determining the origin of groups are

based on a minuscule sample of overall biological inheritance. The other is the extent to which lay readings of such genetic research affect issues of identity. This too is an issue which this book will be dealing with in some detail. As Hauskeller observed, recent research has demonstrated that the complexity of human genomes is such that even in those cases when they are identical in sequence, they may not always be identical in effect (e.g. as studies on twins have shown, inherited diseases may become expressed in one twin but not in another) (Hauskeller 2004: 296). Hence her conclusion is that society should 'give up the idea that molecular biology can deliver the material foundation for concepts of what being human is and what it should be' (Hauskeller 2004: 297). As Brodwin and Elliott point out, the technology currently being used in population genetics is based on the fact that from one generation to the next neither Y chromosomes (found in men) nor mitochondrial DNA (found in men and women) tell us anything about an individual's ancestry except for the single line going back from son to father to paternal grandfather and so on or from son or daughter to mother to maternal grandmother and so on. Thus if one went back just four generations, analysis of the Y chromosome would reveal material belonging to only one of a male's sixteen direct ancestors, that is, his great great grandfather. In other words current techniques actually tell you very little about your relationship with the vast majority of your ancestors and if this is the case, why should a DNA test have any impact at all on your identity? In response to this Brodwin and Elliott remark:

[I]dentities have hung on far more slender genetic threads than this. Just as it once took only a single genetic line to disqualify a person from being counted as white in the American south, today it takes only a single genetic line to connect a person to the British Royal Family, to get him or her a German passport, or to qualify him or her as a member of the Jewish Cohanim.

(Elliott and Brodwin 2002: 1470)

Two years ago, after a bitter monetary dispute, the Seminole Nation of Oklahoma passed a resolution that will effectively expel most black Seminoles, or Seminole Freedmen. The Freedmen are the descendants of former slaves who fought alongside the Seminoles in the Seminole Wars and who have been officially recognised as members of the Seminole Nation of Oklahoma since 1866. The new constitution says that to be a part of the tribe, a person must show that he or she has one-eighth Seminole blood (Glaberson 2001; Johnston 2003). In other words the fact of being able to establish a particular genetic line, if you will, can have specific legal or political results. As we shall see, the knowledge of a specific connection even where it has no immediate, objective benefit can still have a considerable effect.

A particular difficulty which we shall be discussing is the question of who decides who is a member of a group. In the case of the Lemba, is it they who

4 Introduction

decide on the basis of their reading of the genetic results that they are Jewish – or is it only the Jewish rabbinate who can decide? In the case of native Americans, who is best able to read and interpret genetic results? As Brodwin and Elliott point out ‘the US federal government has one set of rules, enshrined in law, and individual native American tribes have others. Genetics (or “blood quantum”) has one role in one set of rules and another quite different role in others’ (Elliott and Brodwin 2002: 1470).

A further difficulty is deciding the relative weight given to genetic evidence over other sorts of evidence, from oral history to conventional genealogy. No doubt tests that prove something a given group wants to have proved will be more eagerly accepted and therefore have more impact than negative results, as we shall be arguing. In the case of Thomas Jefferson’s descendants there was a general consensus that the DNA evidence was overwhelmingly likely to confirm the claims of the descendants of Eston Hemings while it failed to support the claims of the descendants of Thomas Woodson, another of Sally Hemings’ children who is supposed to be Jefferson’s illegitimate son. But should genetics be taken as the final and decisive arbiter of such cases? As Dena Davis remarks:

the Jefferson–Hemings saga teaches us that even when DNA evidence is completely certain and immune to controversy, all it can tell us is the facts. How those facts are shaped, how the story is told, is out of the hands of scientists and may ultimately prove to be the more important question.

(Davis 2002: 207)

In other words, the way the results are presented, let us say by the media, and the way these presentations are converted into group narratives play a supreme role in the way genetics actually impacts on issues of group identity. In our current work we see that the presentation of genetic data by the media was crucial in the formation of group narratives among the Lemba and the Bene Israel who celebrated the results in somewhat different ways.

The means by which an understanding of genetics feeds into conceptions of other people’s ‘essentiality’ places the project in the theoretical area of constructions of ‘otherness’ which has been developed in cultural and social studies (e.g. Hall, Saussure, Derrida, Bakhtin, Foucault, Saïd, Mary Douglas etc.). The idea that ‘otherness’ is *not* linked to biology appears impossible for most people. However the contemporary discourse around population genetics concentrates on inter-group *difference* and this is particularly so in the case of Jewish populations. This is ironic and even galling given that the main thrust of the genomic revolution has been to show that all human groups are virtually indistinguishable.

Some of the theoretical implications of this project have to do with notions of Jewish physicality, which have been brilliantly analysed by sociologist Sander Gilman (Gilman 1986, 1991). One issue is the persistent

notion that Jews are actually *black* which has relevance for the discourses surrounding some target groups. This discussion will be rooted in an awareness of the long tradition of anthropological discussion of kinship, fictive kinship and related topics (Holy 1996; Stone 1997; Carsten 2000; Stone 2001). The impact of genetics upon laymen's understanding of 'racial' and ethnic differences and the development of contemporary notions of Jewish identity are linked by a certain tension within Judaism and within Jewish society. On the one hand, Jews proclaim that Judaism has nothing to do with genetic descent; on the other it clearly does, as the rabbinic definition of a Jew is someone born of a Jewish mother, who in turn is Jewish because she was born of a Jewish mother. It is also possible to convert to Judaism but this in practice, at least historically, rarely happened (at different times conversion to Judaism from Christianity and Islam was punishable by death). This being the case, is Judaism as a *religion* particularly vulnerable to pressures emanating from genetic discourses? It may very well be that Zionism, a modern, essentially secular doctrine, has inherited some of the vulnerability within Judaism which has been exploited by its detractors in, for instance, the United Nations resolution equating Zionism with Racism (the famous 1975 'ZR' resolution).

From early mediaeval times the Jews have attempted to define their identity and peoplehood both in an abstract, more or less theological way, and also to determine their outer limits. Who belonged to this people? Where did they live? How different were remote groups of this people? What were their histories? The writings of Eldad ha-Dani,¹ the ninth century Jewish traveller and romancer, the twelfth century traveller Benjamin of Tudelah² and many others held a fascination for Jews in mediaeval and later times largely because of the glimpses they gave or purported to give of the life of marginal members of the Jewish people in remote parts of the world. Groups that claimed Jewish status through conversion, such as the Khazars (Koestler 1976) in the ninth century or the Himyarites³ five centuries earlier, fared badly in early Jewish historiography: they were almost totally ignored. But equally remote groups with an imagined bloodline to the Jewish people were of great interest.

The outer edge, if you like, of this imagined blood-community always included the Lost Tribes of Israel shimmering faintly over the horizon of the known world whose ongoing reality was taken to be axiomatic by the majority of Jews until fairly recent times. Whether different groups throughout the world – for instance the North and South American Indians – formed a part of this people or not was a heated debate among both Christians and Jews from the beginning of colonial intervention in the Americas. Similarly, the periodic sightings of representatives of the Lost Tribes in various other parts of the world caused great, even messianic excitement as the conventional geography of the Jewish people was challenged or asserted. Over the last century or so the further away a given group of exotic claimants to membership of the Jewish people were, the

6 Introduction

greater the interest other Jews had in them. Currently, one of the most studied Jewish groups is the minuscule handful in Kaifeng in China about whom a colossal amount has been written as two recent bibliographies indicate. The two recent and substantial bibliographies on the Falashas of Ethiopia, mostly containing works written by Jews, similarly denote a fierce interest by Jews in the Jewish periphery which may be perceived as the frontier of the Jewish people – that is the ultimate line that divides them from others.⁴

The two groups under discussion here form part of this periphery. In the case of the Bene Israel (meaning Children of Israel) of western India whose origins have always been something of a mystery,⁵ they were marginally present in the consciousness of the Jewish people from about the first half of the nineteenth century to about 1948, and for the last fifty years, since the migration of the majority of the community to Israel, they have been somewhat more central. In the case of the Lemba they have been marginally present for perhaps five years and for a tiny number of Ashkenazi Jews, living in what was the Transvaal, who had come across members of the Lemba tribe and heard the claims advanced by them and on their behalf, they were present almost as a joke for much of this century.

Jewish scholarly efforts to define the peoplehood of the Jews including the periphery date back some centuries. Recent efforts in the same direction have included a substantial number of genetic studies dealing with the origin of various Jewish and would-be Jewish groups (see Chapter 3). One issue which links the Lemba and the Bene Israel is the way in which the study of genetics has been perceived by Jews and others as supplying appropriate tools to explain their past in the ongoing attempt to include or reject peripheral groups in the family of Israel. A further area of similarity which links these two case studies is the fairly intense media discussion which accompanied the release of the genetic studies. In both cases the media reporting of the research has impacted substantially on the community in question. The construction of the essential differences ('othering') of peoples and groups through media presentation of genetic data has a powerful impact. Media studies have contributed to our understanding of ethnic perceptions (Dijk 1993: 242) and the relaying of genetic information in the media may be seen in this context. In 'Imagined Genetic Communities' the anthropologist Bob Simpson (2000: 3) made a contribution to our understanding of 'genetic essentialism' and a part of this project will be to scrutinise media reports in the light of this and other work in the social sciences.⁶

The book treats the media images and reinterpretation of the DNA tests in question as being quite independent of the research and its findings. We support Jose van Dijk's conclusion that '[i]deological tenets have always shaped the cultural forms and (narrative) conventions by means of which we make sense of new developments in science and technology' (Dijk 1998: 4); however, we do not entirely agree with her suggestion that

'there has never been a distinct separation between science and its images' (Dijck 1998: 196). It is not within the scope of this book or within the competence of the authors to engage in detail with the 'pure science' of the tests in question. Recent decades have witnessed the growth of scholarship grounded in the perspectives of anthropology, sociology, cultural and critical theory and the history of science demonstrating the culturally mediated nature of both science in general and of genetics and molecular biology in particular (see Harding 1992; Spanier 1995; Haraway 1997; Keller 2000; Harding 2003 to name just a few). This book uses such concepts in its analysis of the way the research questions on the Lemba and Bene Israel genetic studies were formulated and the way their results were disseminated; however, it will not be trying to contest their findings on the 'scientific' level. Rather it will concentrate on the fact that the carrying out of the tests and the various media reports of the tests produced certain effects on the people researched which was somewhat independent of the 'science'.

In the course of this project we conducted interviews, distributed questionnaires, analysed the mass media representations of the genetic tests in question and participated in community events. The interviews were conducted during our trips to South Africa, Zimbabwe and India. In South Africa and Zimbabwe we had a number of key informants whom Tudor Parfitt visited several times over the past fifteen years. During our trip to India in 2002 we attended two community events devoted to the genetic research involving about 100 Bene Israel in the first case and 50 in the second. The first event had a two-hour question-and-answer session with the participants, which enabled them to express their views of the tests and their results.

We also distributed and got back 94 filled in questionnaires from the Bene Israel and 100 from the Lemba. Each questionnaire contained about 100 questions on a variety of issues regarding the respondents' view of the genetic tests conducted in their community and about their ethnic, cultural and religious affiliation (see Chapters 6 and 8). The respondents were invited to write their answers and return them to us. Practically all the questions were open-ended which allowed our informants to express their views in their own words. In processing the results of the questionnaires we treated them as narratives and applied to them a qualitative approach. Though our analysis contains some basic quantitative elements (we try to give rough estimations of the 'majority' and the 'minority' views on certain issues), this is not a statistical study.

The same methodological tools were used in working with the interviews and mass media reports. As far as the mass media materials are concerned they have been collected since 1998 in case of the Lemba tests and represent a variety of clippings from Western, South African and Israeli press, popular and semi-academic publications, TV documentaries and numerous websites. The tests conducted on the Bene Israel have been mediated in

8 Introduction

the Indian press and we have attempted to collect all the articles available. The following is a brief outline of the structure of the book.

The second chapter deals with the wider issues raised in the study of the social, ethical and cultural implications of genetics, which will later appear in our discussion of the tests on the Lemba and the Bene Israel. We will demonstrate that the topic of genetics has attracted the attention of scholars coming from a variety of humanities and social science disciplines and will outline the main themes in their discussion of the general effect of genetics on the concept of being human and the nurture/nature debate. It may be suggested that the leading voice in this discussion is that of philosophers and social theorists who have dealt with the ethical implications of biotechnology and medical practices arising out of genetic research. Needless to say this type of engagement with the topic is extremely relevant to the subject of our study, which looks mainly at the implications of DNA testing for target communities rather than the 'pure science' behind the tests. The second part of this chapter deals specifically with research in population genetics. Again, we examine the main issues regarding the implications of this research – some of them population-based testing shares with genetic studies in general and others are specific only to this type of research. It will be demonstrated that in population genetics, issues of the autonomy of the testees and of their informed consent acquire a very different kind of problematic. Special attention will be paid to studies in genetic anthropology which have been aimed at reconstructing the history of particular communities.

In Chapter 3 the focus is narrowed to genetic studies done on various Jewish groups, which provided both the scientific and the social background to the tests on the Lemba and the Bene Israel. More or less serious work from the standpoint of modern population genetics is of fairly recent origin but the real breakthrough has been over the last ten years. Some of the most widely publicised of these were the various studies carried out on the *Cohanim* (Jewish priests) and those on the origin of various Jewish communities, led by Michael Hammer of the University of Arizona.

Chapter 4 explores the question of Jews and blackness, which is important for the discussion of 'origin stories' of 'non-European' Jewish communities, a topic obviously very relevant to any historical/sociological study of the DNA tests conducted among the Jewish groups in question. We shall discuss both the constructions of colour in Judaism and the way the 'colour' of the Jews has been perceived by 'outsiders'. The former topic will help us situate the responses of Western Jews, Israeli religious authorities and the Jewish neighbours of the target communities to the tests. The latter may cast some light on the causes of the interest in the Lemba and Bene Israel tests. Why did they generate a lot of media response? Why were they conducted in the first place? Was it because everybody knows that Jews are not black or is it because at some level they are assumed to be so?

Chapters 5 and 7 provide a historical background on the Lemba and the Bene Israel and demonstrate what questions pertinent to the emergence and development of the two communities the genetic tests were trying to answer. Both groups claim Jewish origin and both have had trouble fighting for recognition in the Jewish world and among their immediate neighbours; however, as we shall see, their histories are quite different. The Bene Israel, though they belong to one of the so-called ‘newly-discovered’ communities whose origin is not clear, have been practising a recognisable form of Judaism and been firm in their Jewish identity for almost 200 years. The Judaisation of the Lemba is a much more recent development, which has not affected all the members of the community.

Chapters 6 and 8 examine the Lemba and the Bene Israel responses to the tests respectively and demonstrate the importance that they had for the two communities both for the reaffirmation of their identity and *vis-à-vis* their opponents in the struggle for recognition. As the Lemba tests were conducted earlier we have had a chance to monitor their impact on the community for a number of years and follow not just the development of the Lemba narratives about their Jewish origin but also the changes in their religious practices. Apart from that, genetic research done on the Lemba produced a greater resonance around the world which we shall also explore and try to account for. Finally, we shall compare the two cases and will see how deeply responses to and constructions of the knowledge and practices arising out of genetics are embedded in the ‘older’ and bigger questions which scientists were trying to answer.

2 Between art and science

‘Non-scientific’ aspects of genetics

Genetics, ethics and human nature

Recent growth of research into the social and cultural aspects of genetics accompanied the development of what came to be known as the ‘new genetics’, that is, knowledge and techniques arising out of the discovery of recombinant DNA in the 1970s. ‘New genetics’ involved genetic engineering and culminated in the launch of the Human Genome Project (HGP) initiated in 1990 by the US Department of Energy and the National Institutes of Health. Its ultimate goal was ‘to generate a high-quality reference sequence for the entire human genome’ and ‘identify all human genes’. The Project produced rapid results and in 2000, scientists announced the generation of the first working draft sequence of the entire human genome. The whole project was completed by April 2003. Genome research has produced a vast number of new applications from microbial genomics to agriculture, health risk assessment and DNA forensic identification. A whole range of disciplines from bio-archaeology to anthropology and the history of human migration have become affected by genetic studies (Human Genome Program 2003).

At the same time the rapid and successful development of genetic research led to an intensification of the debate about its possible negative outcomes, first in the area of the implementation of biotechnology arising out of medical genetic research, such as screening for genetic predispositions to various diseases and stem cell research. At the same time parallels have been drawn between genetics and eugenics: antenatal genetic screening-programmes were even likened to Nazi practices (Glover 1999: 106–7). This debate attracted the attention of scholars from a variety of humanities disciplines and social sciences with ethicists leading the discussion.

Jonathan Glover in his book on genetic engineering has attempted to offer a philosopher’s response to contemporary developments in biotechnology. He maintained that we should proceed to the development of genetic techniques with great caution. On the other hand we should not rule them out completely. Glover concedes that the ‘principle of caution’ is a less strong argument than one ruling out all positive engineering and allows

room for the possibility that the dangers may turn out to be remote, or that greater risks, of a different kind, are involved in *not* using positive engineering (Glover 1984: 42–3):

Few people object to the use of eugenic policies to eliminate disorders, unless those policies have additional features which are objectionable. Most of us are resistant to the use of compulsion, and those who oppose abortion will object to screening-programmes. But apart from these other moral objections, we do not object to the use of eugenic policies against disease.

(Glover 1984: 31)

Glover observes that the critics of genetics oppose it because they fear that geneticists will 'play God' and decide 'what sort of people there should be'. Who is going to take decisions about supposed improvements? Which qualities will be considered beneficial? Whatever group it is, be it scientists, philosophers or lawyers, they are bound to have their limitations and the implementation of their policies will lead to a 'loss of variety of people, that would come from the imaginative limits of those taking the decisions' (Glover 1984: 46–7).

Troy Duster has termed genetic practices of today 'a backdoor to eugenics': the front door to eugenics was presumably closed with the collapse of Nazi Germany. The author recognises the importance of genetic research as a medical tool, but argues that when placed in a larger framework of medical and social practices it is likely to have discriminatory outcomes. Duster does not give any radical advice about the way genetic research should be conducted but suggests that public debate surrounding it should be more vigorous (Duster 1990: 112–30).

The philosopher Philip Kitcher also warns about 'eugenics tendencies' in contemporary genetic research but stresses that one should not forget about the huge benefits for humanity that genetics may bring. He calls it *laissez-faire* eugenics when everyone is free to take advantage of existing genetic findings and in this sense can take on the role of eugenicist. He does not doubt the usefulness of genetic screening but at the same time raises a lot of questions in respect of the possible misuse of genetics. How does one make sure that the reproductive decisions that people make on the basis of genetic screening are really their own? How can we make genetic resources available to all members of society? Can individual decisions based on genetic science be morally misguided? Kitcher argues that one of the ways of combating negative outcomes of *laissez-faire* eugenics is to watch out for cases of discrimination and coercion which appear in contemporary genetic practices in the form of social directives and it is this component that *laissez-faire* eugenics shares with its unattractive predecessors (Kitcher 1996: 195–9).

A recent critique of contemporary genetics was offered in Anne Kerr and Tom Shakespeare's book *Genetic Politics, From Eugenics to Genome*.

The authors advocate the idea that knowledge and technology are not neutral and that research on genetic diseases and genetic screening involve a number of powerful interest groups which determine what technologies get developed. It is this involvement that Kerr and Shakespeare discuss and critique (Kerr and Shakespeare 2002: 2). The authors explore the history of the development of genetics and demonstrate its historical connection with eugenics as well as the similarities in some of their goals and policies. They observe that the term eugenics nowadays does not have a well-defined meaning and is often used by advocates of contemporary genetics as a rhetorical device to label discriminatory practices of the past. Kerr and Shakespeare critique the geneticists' attempt to distance genetics from eugenics by calling the latter 'bad science'. They argue that this approach which represents contemporary Western usage of genetics as focusing on disease as opposed to social or racial groups is just a rhetorical ploy. According to the authors, it is impossible to always tell disease from social deviance, 'as diseases are defined according to social attitudes about acceptable behaviour and physical and mental aptitudes'. Referring to the implementation of contemporary medical genetic research they argue that 'it is also difficult to clearly distinguish the priorities of eugenics policies in the past from some of the priorities of contemporary genetic screening policies, where emphasis is often placed upon reducing the number of people born with genetic diseases' (Kerr and Shakespeare 2002: 3). This book focuses on genetic research which many people would consider extremely sensitive and also inviting analogies with eugenics. In this respect we will return to the critique of genetics described above and raise the questions of the role of geneticists in defining their tasks and of the relationship between scientific research and the potential implementation of various policies based on its results.

Apart from raising a variety of ethical issues surrounding medical biotechnology, genetics has contributed to the nature–nurture debate with philosophers and social theorists reflecting on the determinative power of the genes and the effect that genetics may have on human self-understanding, and it is this group of studies that will be particularly relevant to our topic with its emphasis on the effect of DNA testing on group identities. Jürgen Habermas in his recent publication 'Debate on the Ethical Self-Understanding of the Species' states that he is 'not taking the attitude of a cultural critic opposed to welcome advances of scientific knowledge' but is rather asking 'whether, and if so how, the implementation of these achievements affects our self-understanding as responsible agents' (Habermas 2003: 12). The author is apprehensive of the possibility of the future genetic engineering when parents could get an opportunity to intervene with the genome of their child. He argues that once the child realises that he was programmed before birth he would be affected on an existential level: the fact of his being a body will be subordinated to his *having* a body (Habermas 2003: 54). Habermas adds that he does not wish to undermine

the importance of 'non-genetic' parental guidance and influence on the child, but maintains that the latter impact may be resolved through psychotherapy, while a genetic intervention would be 'a mute and... unanswerable act' (Habermas 2003: 62). He argues that this position should not be taken for genetic determinism. For him it does not even matter how deeply genetic interventions can alter a child's physicality or determine his behaviour. Even if it is negligible the '*post factum* knowledge of this circumstance may intervene in the self-relation of the person' (Habermas 2003: 53).

Another recently published book almost totally devoted to the question of the impact of biotechnology on human life is Francis Fukuyama's *Our Posthuman Future*. Fukuyama advocates the idea of the common human essence and the restoration of a universal concept of human rights. He argues that the possibility of 'buying' genes for one's children, which he reckons will become one of the inevitable consequences of the 'genetic revolution', will have a disastrous social effect on humanity: society will be divided into 'GenRich', well-off strata who can afford to buy 'good' genes for their offspring and 'GenPoor', short of wealth and short of advantageous genetic make-up (Fukuyama 2002: 154). Fukuyama quite clearly opposes social constructivist ideas about human nature and promotes the idea of the biological 'essence of life'. The essence, as it follows from his analysis of biotechnology, is in the genes. Like Habermas, Fukuyama assigns the genes this very special meaning, but he does not engage with the question of their actual deterministic power.

The question of the status of the gene is addressed also by Jacques Derrida in his essay 'The Aforementioned So-Called Human Genome'. Derrida has two distinct sets of feelings about genetic advances. On the one hand he is concerned about the possibility of their resulting in eugenic practices or with the identification of the superhuman and the subhuman, but on the other hand, he gets a 'relativising' and 'demystifying' feeling based on the assumption that to map the genome does not yet imply that we have the ability to manipulate it.

Derrida argues that genetics has led us to this 'unique moment in the history of humanity where the question, *What is man?* could no longer wait as it seems to have done formerly, considering the time and patience of theological or metaphysical speculations.' Today it is 'taking on, here, now, a terribly concrete and urgent form at an infinitely accelerated rate in the very place where decision about the processing of the aforementioned so-called *human genome* could no longer wait' (Derrida 2002: 209). Derrida engages with the idea of the essence of human life and maintains that we are now running

the risk of new crimes being committed against humanity and not only... against millions of human beings as was the case, but a crime such that a sorcerer's apprentice who was very cunning, the author of

14 'Non-scientific' aspects of genetics

potential genetic manipulations, might in the future commit or supply the means for committing – in the name of science, of techno-science – against man, against the very humanity of man.

(Derrida 2002: 208)

In this statement the author clearly implies that genome is an important component of what it is to be human if intervening in it will threaten 'the essence-itself of humanity'.

A significant response to the conceptual and imaginative challenge of genetics comes from cultural anthropology and social studies which have produced a considerable body of literature on the impact of genetic research on social practices and the public perceptions of genetics. A good example of this is the work of Paul Rabinow, who has suggested that

the new genetics will prove to be an infinitely greater force for reshaping society and life than was the revolution in physics, because it will be embedded throughout the social fabric at the microlevel by medical practices and a variety of other discourses.

(Rabinow 1992: 241)

Writing at the beginning of the Human Genome Project he argues that '[i]n the future, the new genetics will cease to be a biological metaphor for modern society and will become instead a circulation network of identity terms and restriction loci, around which and through which a truly new type of autoproduction will emerge.' Rabinow calls this type of autoproduction bio-sociality, where 'nature will be modelled on culture understood as practice'. In his view, nature will be changed through culture and thus will become artificial, which would bridge the gap between nature and culture (Rabinow 1992: 241–2).

It may be argued that the fact that some of the most distinguished humanities scholars and social theorists have commented on genetics suggests that genetics is a good example of science 'going public'. It has become an important social phenomenon not to be ignored either by the public or by the general academic fraternity. Yet the question of the determinative power of genes is not completely problematised in the philosophical research mentioned above. Derrida, surprisingly, demonstrates a markedly essentialist approach towards genetics. Habermas and Fukuyama take it for granted that genes (whatever the term itself means) have a profound determinative power on human identity. Though Habermas denies believing in genetic determinism, his thesis about *post factum* knowledge of genetic intervention affecting the 'self-relation of the person' (Habermas 2003: 53) may easily be construed as such. Elsewhere Habermas observes that genetic involvement will change 'the initial conditions for the identity formation of another person' who as a result 'may suffer from the consciousness of sharing the authorship of her own life and her own destiny with somebody else's

(Habermas 2003: 81). In Habermas's critique of genetics, environmental influences appear to be easy to 'undo' while genetic impact, however small, is forever. What is going to determine this *post factum* knowledge and why is it going to be so crucial for the self-relation of the person? What is important to explore in this respect is whether for this *post factum* knowledge to affect self-relation on an existential level it does not need to be based on a very deterministic image of the gene to begin with. Would not the relationship between genetics and identity be secondary to humanity's perception of genetics? This book will engage with the question of what exactly influenced the identity of the communities that we are looking at and the way they were viewed by others as a result of the tests: genetic research per se (and if so, what can be considered as such), the portrayal of its results as it was offered in the media or any other forces, such as, for instance, the community elite?

Studies of geneticists' rhetoric and cultural (including popular and mass media) representations of genetics form an important part of the Humanities and Social Sciences' response to genetics. This analysis has led many to criticise a set of phenomena, which have been defined as geneticisation or genetic essentialism. The former term was coined by Abby Lippman and was intended to mean 'the ongoing process by which priority is given to differences between individuals based on their DNA codes, with most disorders, behaviors and physiological variations... structured as, at least in part, hereditary' (Lippman 1993: 178).

The expression 'genetic essentialism' first appears in the work by cultural anthropologist Sarah Franklin, who defined it as a 'scientific discourse... with the potential to establish social categories based on an essential truth about the body' (Franklin 1993: 34). The idea was developed by a number of scholars including Nelkin and Lindee, who considered the way various genetic practices and achievements are portrayed in the North American mass media and some semi-academic and popular accounts of genetics. It is argued that the symbolic meaning of the gene is already quite independent of its 'scientific' meaning (Nelkin and Lindee 1995). A similar critique is offered by Elaine Graham, who opposes the idea of the relationship between the genome and the meaning of being human and argues that there is a lot of culturally constructed notions surrounding contemporary genetics which are promoted as an objective and real blueprint for human nature. In Graham's view this is likely to reduce diversity in favour of standardisation (Graham 2002: 122). Donna Haraway, a cultural theorist and a feminist scholar, also draws on the notions of genetic essentialism and genetic fetishism. Having been trained as a molecular biologist and as a historian of science, Haraway is well placed to engage both with the mass media representations of genetics and with discourses of the geneticists themselves. She has highlighted the constructivist nature of the term 'gene' and the way it is mediated by the wider cultural discourses of the Western society (Haraway 1997: 10).

Another important work coming from the field of cultural studies is Jose van Dijck's *Imagination* (Dijck 1998), where the author examines the popular representations of the gene since the 1950s. Like Nelkin and Lindee, van Dijck suggests that both academic and popular literature tends to construe DNA as the 'essence of life' and 'on a more philosophical level, DNA-manipulation and genome research stir up profound agitation over the integrity of the human body and the corrosion of human identity' (Dijck 1998: 7). Like some of the previous authors van Dijck suggests that the development of new biotechnologies paradoxically has been accompanied by the reinforcement of the older ideologies of hereditary determinism. Contributing to the critique by Franklin and Nelkin and Lindee, the author insists that 'while the new genetics, and especially genomics, is motivating an implosion of categories at various levels, the ontological categories that distinguish the technical from the organic, the natural, and the textual are vigorously reinstated' (Dijck 1998: 194). This, according to van Dijck, is generally symptomatic of postmodern culture, which shares the nature/culture, science/society, fact/image oppositions of modernity. Thus, in post-modern theory genetics would become a linguistic practice, which in itself constructs a contradistinction between the material and the textual world. van Dijck neither endorses this view, nor does she argue that genetics is totally separate from its representation. For her genetics neither equals its image, nor is it separable from it. What the author attempts to demonstrate is rather that 'there has never been a distinct separation between science and its images' (Dijck 1998: 196).

The issue of the mediatisation of genetics will often be raised in this book. We suggest that it is important to explore the images of genetics to assess its effect on various human identities, as it is the mass media images rather than scientific articles that are most available to the public. Indeed, when it comes to the study of public perceptions, as van Dijck has suggested, the image of genetics equals genetics itself. However, we would argue that this position should not prevent us from exploring the misrepresentations of genetics. Ronald Worton, the President of the American Society of Human Genetics, has observed that judging by the quantity of material on genetics findings in the press, the public shows considerable interest in the subject and that scientists should be concerned about the proper usage of this information and its dissemination:

Hardly a day goes by without a news item about a gene for something or other – heart disease, baldness, bad behaviour, good behaviour, sexual preference, weight control, and even aging. Yet my experience is that very often the articles themselves are filled with misconceptions, and the expectations are totally unrealistic. Often the headline itself is totally misleading. One wonders sometimes whether the problem lies in the quality of information provided to the media or in the capacity of the media to adequately interpret the information. But one thing is

certain, and that is the need for all of us to be more involved in providing accurate information and to be more ready to assist in the interpretation of genetic information.

(Worton 2001)

The risk of the mass media oversimplifying the results of genetic tests, which can be complex, is real and it is indeed important for geneticists to assist in the dissemination of their research to the general public. However, problems associated with the dissemination of scientific findings do not come down solely to their distortion by ill-informed journalists and popularisers of science. There is a complex set of questions relating to the mediation of science in general and to the problems engendered by science 'going public'. How do the results of genetic research get to the media? What interests are represented in their dissemination? How is information on genetics and population studies selected? Representations of the findings of genetics just like the formulation of its goals, are perhaps inevitably linked to a wider discourse about heredity and seek to contribute to discussions started long ago. In considering the portrayal of DNA testing in the mass media it is important to look into the history of the questions posed and to examine how this history has influenced discussion of specific genetic research in the mass media.

As the Sociology of Scientific Knowledge (SSK) maintains, scientific data does not speak in its own voice. The space between geneticists' perspectives and their reception by the public is encumbered with misunderstandings (Franklin 1995, 2000, 2001). Often the most elementary exposition on the part of a geneticist remains opaque to outsiders. Yet genetic arguments are regularly advanced as unassailable evidence by non-experts in discussions about 'race', ethnicity, boundaries, origins etc. The fact that DNA analysis is perceived as clinching evidence for forensic or paternity purposes no doubt adds to its perceived authority in terms of other genetic studies including population-based research which is the focus of our next section.

One genome or many? Population genetics

Dorothy Nelkin has observed that there is a certain gap in the studies of the social and ethical implications of genetics, which is that they have mainly concentrated on the implications that genetic research may have for individuals rather than groups (Nelkin 2002: 122). She refers here to the Human Genome Diversity Project (HGDP) started in 1991 with the aim of documenting the genetic variation of the human species worldwide. Its founder is Luigi Luca Cavalli-Sforza, Professor of Genetics at Stanford University. The Project was supposed to involve collecting DNA from different groups all over the world and to use them to reconstruct the history of human migrations as well as to learn about disease frequencies in different populations (Human Genome Diversity Project 2005) (M'charek 2005).

Both components of the HGDP, as well as a number of other population-specific genetic studies, have proved to generate controversy among both the researched community and the academic community. Dorothy Nelkin has argued that medical population-based genetic research 'can reinforce stereotypes about race and ethnic differences with important implications for social policies and institutional practices' (Nelkin 2002: 122). She has challenged the idea of drawing distinctions between peoples on the basis of 'genetic predispositions' on the grounds that this may lead to discrimination against individuals and whole groups. As a consequence of such studies, according to Nelkin, some people may be excluded from work opportunities, or denied immigration rights or suffer political discrimination should they belong to an ethnic group associated with a particular disease or behavioural predisposition (Nelkin 2002: 121).

Like many of the critics of genetic research in general Nelkin stresses that throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries 'scientific' studies were regularly deployed to categorise people often for starkly political purposes, for instance when the 'sciences' of craniometry and phrenology were used to 'evaluate' people's abilities and played a role in criminal investigations, employment and immigration policies in the US (Nelkin 2002: 122–3). Popkin has demonstrated how the application of scientific ethnology to the American Indians 'justified taking away their lands, driving them westward, and decimating them' (Popkin 1989: 74). Steven Jay Gould observes that the evidence coming from such studies conducted on African Americans and Native Americans in any case was slanted to fit the thesis that they were racially inferior (Gould 1978).

Arthur Caplan also argues that genetics in general has a problematic history which involves the abuse of minorities and the poor. He refers to the Nazi science of racial hygiene and argues that it is impossible to dismiss this simply as bad science. He cites the example of the US effort to link genetics and social policy in the first half of the twentieth century to subject some disabled people to sterilisation. The author stresses that genetics and eugenics have much in common in terms of their goals and the space for abuse that they provide (Caplan 1994: 41). Projecting current population-based genetic research into the future Caplan draws worst case scenarios like granting the right to live in Israel only to those with a 'Jewish' X chromosome, using genetic tests to determine membership of Native American tribes, denying populations with various genetic conditions at a high frequency the right to travel, interfering with individuals' family planning and so on (Caplan 1994: 30–9).

Medical genetic research has generated a good deal of criticism from a range of communities. In the US the leaders of indigenous groups were often opposed to attempts to collect DNA on the grounds that the studies were likely to have commercial significance (Nelkin 2002: 127). Debra Harry, Director of the Indigenous Peoples' Council on Biocolonialism (IPCB), a group with the aim of protecting indigenous communities from

the possible negative effects of biotechnology, argues that people are not given all the necessary information about the tests to give fully informed consent. What is going to happen to the samples may be a particularly sensitive issue for the indigenous communities:

We have cultural beliefs and feelings about our biological make-up and what is done with human body parts – hair, blood, tissue samples – that is very important to us. If researchers don't know that, they probably won't address them in their research.

(Quoted in Smoke-Asayenes 2003)

Nelkin has observed that this research opened the way for a wider discussion of the exploitation of the resources of developing countries. Though scientists aimed at improving the health of the tested communities, some critics believe they were exploiting them: 'Was the blood taken for this research intended for the purpose of improving health or for the purpose of patents and profits? How will the information gleaned from population studies be interpreted?' (Nelkin 2002: 128).

A Maori leader in New Zealand also concluded that DNA collection should be considered in the context of colonialism: 'Human genes are being treated by science in the same way that indigenous "artefacts" were gathered by museums' (Nelkin 2002: 127). A representative of the Arahua community of Columbia reckoned that this was yet another form of exploitation and one similar to the historical exploitation of these people in the past: 'Only this time, they are using us as raw material' (Nelkin 2002: 127). Rodney Bobiwash, Director of the Centre for World Indigenous Studies, commenting on the collection of DNA among the small indigenous populations in the Amazon said that it was bio-piracy, in which the communities 'no longer have control of [their] own genetic code, resulting in the actual patenting of human beings'. He also feared that once the DNA of smaller groups 'had been patented, researched, or entered into the human genome diversity project, there would be no incentive for governments to keep them alive' (quoted in Smoke-Asayenes 2003).

Brett Lee Shelton, the IPCB's Director of Policy and Research, argues that medical genetic studies hurt rather than benefit indigenous groups, as they divert funds away from direct health care:

[S]everal critics of the current wide-spread emphasis on genomic research have noted that economic oppression, not genetics, is a major cause of illness in minority/ethnic communities. An emphasis on genetic research will pose no benefits to vast numbers of the public, whose health problems are a product of contaminated environments, and economic poverty, not inherited diseases.

(Shelton 2003)

The concern of some Native American groups about genetic research was expressed in the Mataatua Declaration on Cultural and Intellectual Property Rights of Indigenous Peoples signed at the 1993 First International Conference on Cultural and Intellectual Property Rights of Indigenous Peoples and in the 1995 Declaration of Indigenous Peoples of the Western Hemisphere regarding the Human Genome Diversity Project.¹ In 2000 the IPCB produced a primer highlighting the main problems associated with the genetic research on indigenous communities and their suggestions on combating its possible negative outcomes, which, according to the authors, were numerous. The main issue that worried them was that the indigenous communities were usually unaware of the scale and potential impact of genetic research and were treated as 'an object of curiosity' rather than partners in a scientific quest. The studies were always designed without any prior consultation with the people under investigation and lacked any notion of group rights. With respect to research aimed at reconstructing community history the authors expressed concern about the possibility of its questioning the aboriginal rights to territory and resources. Population-based medical genetic studies were found objectionable, too, as they could easily lead to stigmatization and reinforcing of social stereotypes about and even discrimination against some communities, particularly when we talk about conditions associated with behaviour, like in the quest for 'drinking gene'.

Finally, the authors fear that this sort of research may lead to genocidal practices in the future, such as forced sterilization of those found to have 'undesirable' genetic predispositions and even genetically specific warfare weapons designed to affect only people with particular genetic traits. The primer acknowledges that we are not quite there yet, but argues that all current research, like the achievements of the Human Genome Project, which gives us a good understanding of the basic human genome, and of the Human Genome Diversity project, which identifies how populations differ in their genetic make-up, takes us much closer to the creation of genetic biological weapons (IPCB 2000). It is worth mentioning in this respect that similar concerns have been expressed by lay commentators with respect to genetic research on Jewish populations. As we shall see in the following chapters, these studies generated references in the mass media discourse to geneticists having discovered a 'Jewish' gene or a 'Moses' gene together with a concern that in 'the wrong hands' DNA mapping may be used as a means of implementing policies of genocide.

We can see that some of these arguments come directly from the critique of genetic research in general ('we do not know where it may lead us', 'genetic means are too radical and open the way for misuse') and of general and population-specific medical DNA tests ('they are likely to lead to stigmatization'). The nurture–nature debate surrounding genetics appeared in the IPCB critique in a more specific form of accusing the scientists and those supporting their research of addressing 'wrong' underlying causes of

the poor health of indigenous communities. As far as studies looking at the history of human migrations are concerned they are dismissed here as useless for the communities and even potentially dangerous.

The primer also gives some advice on what indigenous peoples should do to protect themselves against 'genetic exploitation': to be aware of and regulate any activity using their genetic resources, to educate its members about this research in order to be able to monitor it properly, to demand that federal priorities be shifted away from genetics to funding programmes aimed at improving the environment of the communities, to demand at the federal level improvements in policies regulating population-based genetic research. The authors were also extremely concerned about the introduction of genetically modified plants within tribal jurisdiction (IPCB 2000).

How did geneticists themselves respond to such criticism? As Arthur Caplan has put it:

Discussions of the consequences of increased knowledge concerning the composition and structure of the human genome for public policy often leave those involved with research or clinical care in the domain of human genetics surprised and angry. They are often taken aback by the high level of ethical concern expressed about their work. Why is it, they wonder, that knowledge of human heredity so often becomes the center of controversy and protest?

(Caplan 1994: 30)

However, some work has been done to address this dilemma by the HGP team. A number of conferences were organised from 1999 to 2003 on the HGP and its impact on minority communities, which were followed by meetings and training sessions discussing similar topics. Members of minority communities themselves were invited to participate in these discussions. In 1997 the HGP sponsored a meeting of 150 leaders of minority communities at the University of Maryland, the aim of which was to inform communities about the ethical, legal and social implications, as well as possible benefits of the research on the human genome, and to make the interests and expectation of communities known to scientists. The desire to facilitate a dialogue between geneticists and minorities grew out of concern about a lack of information among the latter about the HGP, which opens the way for misunderstandings about its goals (Human Genome Project Information 2005a). Informing wider audiences about the principles, techniques and aims of genetic research, as well as looking into the sources of anxieties generated by it definitely appears to be a way forward towards bridging the 'understanding gap' between geneticists and the public, which quite clearly exists.

It appears that population DNA screening not only shares the ethical and social aspects of genetic research in general but has some very specific implications of its own. Arthur Caplan has argued that population-based

genetic screening should be used only if it is going to benefit either the individual or the groups being tested and cautioned health professionals against 'using genetic information for purely social purposes if they hope to retain the trust of minority group members' (Caplan 1994: 40). In this respect it may be suggested that more often than not population-based medical genetic research is carried out not for social purposes but to have a better understanding of various genetic conditions and finding ways for their treatment, that is, precisely for the benefit of the communities, but it may still potentially produce negative outcomes for the tested groups. For instance, population-based genetic research on certain inherited conditions which in popular perceptions are associated with behavioural issues may be beneficial for the health of the members of the studied community but detrimental to its image. Given the history of eugenic policies of the past it is understandable that contemporary medical research based on populations is viewed with suspicion both by the general public and by sections of the academic community. It cannot be denied that this research may potentially be used in order to justify all sorts of political and social biases, although there may be grounds for insisting that it has little in common with the false science of the past.

The issue of informed consent becomes particularly problematic in population-based genetics as it is extremely difficult (if not to say practically impossible) to secure the consent of every individual to conduct tests on his/her community, though if popularised by the media the results of these tests will pertain to each and every member of the tested group for they will affect the way the whole community is perceived by others. Returning to Kitcher's concept of 'laissez-faire' eugenics it appears that in population-based genetic research the tested groups cannot really be 'their own eugenicists', because the results of the tests done on individuals become relevant to the entire group though not all its members necessarily want to know them. Hauskeller has suggested that this principle may pertain even to tests on individuals which have nothing to do with population genetics. As she has pointed out, such terms as 'informed choice' or 'autonomy' are frequently used in political discourses around genetics, while 'heteronomous identity politics' found when, for instance, results from monogenetic tests are used to increase the cost of a person's health insurance are denounced (Hauskeller 2004: 288). However, whatever 'genetic knowledge' an individual can get is potentially knowledge about his relatives, too, so '[t]aking this idea of autonomy seriously would mean asking for the prior consent of all relatives possibly affected by an individual's testing' (Hauskeller 2004: 291). Kittles and Royal, who have been involved in DNA testing of African Americans, have argued that

[i]nformed consent for genetic studies requires a paradigm shift from focusing on minimal physical risks to focusing on the more detrimental psychological risks, many of which may still be unknown; indeed, informed consent in genetics is something of a misnomer.

(Kittles and Royal 2003: 226)

In this study we tried to find out how those Lemba and Bene-Israel who did not participate in the tests viewed the idea of conducting them and what they thought of their results, as well as whether they had any suggestions for improving the policy of conducting such research, which could be relevant for future studies in population genetics.

Helping historians? Genetic anthropology

Genetic studies that are of particular interest for the purposes of this book are those belonging to the newly-established field of genetic anthropology whose founding father was Luigi Luca Cavalli-Sforza. As noted earlier, his HGD Project was supposed to collect DNA from different groups all over the world and use them to reconstruct the history of human migrations. It may be seen as the culmination of Cavalli-Sforza's work and produced impressive results. In 1994 together with Paolo Menozzi and Alberto Piazza he published *The History and Geography of Human Genes*, a monumental survey of the genetic differences of the various peoples of the world (Cavalli-Sforza *et al.* 1994). This weighty scientific treatise was followed in 2000 by the more popular *Genes, Peoples and Languages*, which introduced the general reader to the techniques and methods of genetic anthropology and to some of its discoveries.

One of the main points made by Cavalli-Sforza as a result of this research was that the notion of 'race', which figured prominently in the scientific, historical, political and popular 'common sense' discourses of the previous two centuries, had no genetic basis. If the previous discussion in its more recent manifestations had meandered balefully between whether race was relevant as a stratifying strategy or whether it was indeed an accurate and socially decontextualised taxonomy, the new perspective relegated race to the dustbin of history. It was shown that the genetic differences which exist between any two individuals were vastly more significant than those that pertained between any two populations (Cavalli-Sforza 2000: VIII). In 1995 these ideas were formally embraced by the academic community when a number of scientists and scholars from a range of different disciplines issued a 'revised UNESCO Statement on Race' which concluded that indeed from a scientific point of view there is no aspect of the term 'race' which has any scientific usefulness or meaning. As Katz puts it

its use for characterizing human populations is so flawed that it is no longer a scientifically valid concept. In fact the statement makes clear that the biological concept of race as applied to humans has no legitimate place in biological science.

(Katz 1995)

Though such conclusions appear to be a powerful weapon in the struggle against racism and any kind of 'essentialism' they none the less generated a controversy. It has been argued that far from being beneficial for minority

communities, these arguments were actually able to reinforce negative stereotypes and encourage racist thinking. It has been suggested that though the study stresses the similarities between all human beings irrespective of their ethnic group, it also demonstrates genetic differences between them. Despite the fact that the latter do not have any 'biological significance', the very idea of dividing people into categories which have genetic markers may open the way for various sorts of discrimination, or to use van Dijk's formulation, new knowledge and technologies related to genetics may reinstate old stereotypes (Dijk 1998: 194).²

One of the main questions raised by bio-ethicists and other scholars from different fields of the Humanities with respect to genetic anthropology is that of the impact of genetic research on individual and collective identities and it is this topic that concerns us most in this book. For example, like in the case with medical DNA screening 'historical' genetic research has encountered a lot of criticism. The enthusiasm of the scientists from the Human Genome Diversity Project and similar initiatives in genetic anthropology has been countered by the skepticism of the researched communities and of a number of scholars. The following is an outline of some of the genetic studies exploring ancestry related issues.

A significant number of these studies deal with the identity of Native Americans. Tests for Native American ancestry have even become available to individual customers though no Native American tribe has been reported yet to be using DNA tests as a means of determining tribal membership. Only the Western Mohegan, a tribe of the upper Hudson, which is not recognised officially, is said to have tested its members' DNA in an attempt to prove that they do indeed possess American Indian 'blood'. In 2000 the Vermont Legislature received a proposal that the State's Commissioner of Health establish standards for genetic testing in order to determine the identity of an individual as a Native American. The results of such research were supposed to be conclusive proof of Native American ancestry. The bill never became law, however, and received a strong negative response. Debra Harry found the bill totally unacceptable and ignorant. And indeed, one should bear in mind that mitochondrial DNA and Y chromosome testing are limited only to one maternal and one paternal line and says nothing at all about the bulk of any individual's ancestry. Using these tools and going back just three generations only 25 per cent of any individual's direct ancestors are referred to. Kimberly Tallbear of the International Institute of Indigenous Research Management suggested in defence of the bill that it was supposed to provide an additional, rather than sole, means of determining ancestry, but also noted that it was not based on the assumption that culture and identity have a biological basis (Genetics and Identity 2005).³

There is a similar controversy surrounding the Howard University project on African American ancestry, which is supposed to help African Americans trace their ancestry to a particular region in Africa. It was

launched by the geneticist Rick Kittles, himself a member of the African American community and an advocate of the idea of DNA tests aimed at determining an individual's origin. Those who support the project argue that it could help African Americans to find out where exactly their ancestors were from and thus to give them back their history or to define it in contexts other than simply the experience of slavery. In addition, such tests may turn out to be a useful historical tool for the study of migrations. Research on African American roots as conducted by historians is often limited due to lack of documentation although it is carried out and new archival sources from time to time come to light. Hence, it is argued that genetics provides simply a new and more efficient approach to work which is being done anyway (Sabeti 2002).

This research included mitochondrial and Y chromosome testing. Results were supposed to be compared with more than 2000 samples from 40 separate African populations and to some European, Native American, and Asian samples in case a gene cannot be traced to Africa. Kittles admits that for many of the people tested the results may be far from what they expected. In some cases for instance their distant ancestors may be shown to be white plantation owners. However, Kittles argues that notwithstanding its disruptive potential such research is beneficial in the sense that it helps to deconstruct the idea of race (Johnson 2002).

Another area of research which may have contributed to the debate on race and race discrimination is that on the origins of Indian castes conducted by Michael Bamshad of the University of Utah. The caste system of India is a hierarchical structure divided into a number of endogamous groups each pursuing a traditional occupation. The castes are organised into four classes (*varnas*): Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. Beyond the caste system there is a group of so-called untouchables, who are considered to be ritually polluting and their occupations are limited to traditionally 'unclean' jobs. It has been suggested that the system of the four classes may have reflected the ancient encounter of the Aryans, Indo-European-speaking groups who came to the subcontinent from Eurasia, with the indigenous population. The Aryans formed higher castes and the 'natives' made up the lower ones and the untouchables. Discrimination against the untouchables has always been a characteristic feature of Indian social life. The constitution of independent India outlawed the practice of untouchability. The concept, survived however together with the caste system itself. This has led to an increasingly aggressive confrontation between the so-called untouchables, who have adopted the name 'Dalit' (oppressed), and the upper castes.⁴

Bamshad's genetic study sought to test the hypothesis that West Eurasians formed the upper castes on the subcontinent. For this purpose his team compared mitochondrial DNA and Y chromosome variation of Indian males from eight castes of different rank, to those of Africans, Asians, Europeans and other Indians. Analysis of a variety of data collected

demonstrated that the upper castes indeed have a higher affinity to Europeans than to Asians (Bamshad *et al.* 2001).

One of the questions which became a topic of debate between the Indian government and representatives of the Dalit movement at the 2001 World Conference on Racism in Durban was whether the caste system was a form of racism. The Dalits argued that caste discrimination should be considered racism, while the Indian government insisted on the caste system being unconnected to race and succeeded in excluding any discussion of caste at the conference. Since the results of Bamshad's tests became published it has been suggested that they could be considered as evidence that caste-based discrimination is indeed similar to racism (Sabir 2003). We would suggest that this study highlights the ethical issues surrounding genetic research on race. It was argued by Cavalli-Sforza and his supporters that genetic research had completely dismantled the idea of race while this study shows clearly that particular genetic differences between peoples can be easily construed as race differences and have explosive potential for exacerbating tensions between groups.

Genetics and identity

Genetic research into the origin of different populations and the history of their migrations has thus raised a variety of ethical issues. Paul Brodwin, who stresses the importance of looking at the wider social and political context of genetic research, has suggested that tracing one's ancestry through mutations on the Y chromosome or in mitochondrial DNA 'has become not just a laboratory technique, but a political act':

Who in our society requests this sort of DNA analysis, and who provides it? Once people learn the results, who controls what those results mean? It is no longer just geneticists and population biologists, but also political activists, individuals claiming inclusion in a particular ethnic, racial, or national group, and those who must decide to accept or reject these claims.

(Brodwin 2002: 324)

Brodwin has pointed to a number of questions associated with the study of the impact of genetics on identity. First, how do we assess the value of genetic knowledge against other claims of identity, such as oral history, written evidence, cultural practices, and inner convictions? (Brodwin 2002). It may also be argued that genetic research can create a separate 'genetic' dimension of identity. This may be seen with particular clarity in the studies designed to help trace the origin of some African American communities. Professor Kittles, whose maternal genetic ancestry linked him to the Yoruba, has observed that it gave him 'a sense of connection to the Yoruba' and that he was now willing to research Yoruba culture (Johnson 2002). It

appears to be important to examine the relationship between this dimension of identity and others. Hard sciences are often perceived as sources of the most 'correct' knowledge and the science of genetics as relayed by the media is viewed by laymen as being irreproachably objective 'hard science': its disinterested 'scientific' findings appear immensely impressive and may therefore act as a powerful catalyst for change. Hence genetically-generated identity can be expected to supercede or change other aspects of identity – religious, communal, ethnic, cultural, etc. As Brodwin has observed, contemporary debates about claims of identity and about social connection focus around questions like 'Who am I, fundamentally?' and 'Who do I belong with, fundamentally?' and the presence of genetic evidence changes the meaning of this 'fundamental' (Brodwin 2002: 323). As far as relationships between genetically-generated and various other aspects of identity are concerned, the one which may appear to be particularly interesting to explore is that with the ethnic dimension. This is the identity which is most often described as biologically transmitted. It is interesting to see whether ethnic definition and self-definition of researched groups will be affected by genetic findings, particularly if they link the researched group to an ethnic group which traditionally they did not associate themselves with.

Second, we must consider the impact of genetics-generated identities and genetic research in general on the social ties of researched groups. As Brodwin has put it

We must...ask, how does new genetic knowledge change the ways people claim connection to each other and to larger collectivities? How, in turn, does this process change the resulting webs of obligation and responsibility: personal, legal, moral, and financial? Knowledge of genetic connection alters how we imagine our 'significant same': those people who are significantly like me, connected to me, and hence the same as me in some categorical sense.

(Brodwin 2002: 325)

Genetic research on origins is likely to affect not only the identity of researched groups but also the way they are perceived by others: by their immediate neighbours, by state authorities, and by the wider communities of those with whom genetic tests link them. It may even affect the self-perception of the latter who will have to redefine the 'requirements for membership' in their own group.

Finally, it is important to consider the sources of interest in these kind of tests. Needless to say, questions that scholars involved in population-based genetic research ask have a history which is older than that of genetics: 'Does race exist?', 'Are certain diseases associated with certain peoples?', 'Are a particular group's claims of origin justifiable?' The formulation of the task is determined by political and popular discourses which emerged a long time ago and it may be suggested that at least on the level of defining

the aims of research projects geneticists follow the paradigms of the past about divisions of populations. This is inevitable given the nature of scientific research which builds up on what is considered to be known and formulates new questions on the basis of questions raised in the past. As was shown, geneticists' answers to the 'old' questions have a potential both to dismantle some of the old notions, and to reinstate them. Scientists and relevant policy makers need to be aware of the danger of following old paradigms at all stages of scientific research from the formulation of its goals to the dissemination of its results.

3 Jews and genetics

Of recent population-based genetic studies few have caught the public imagination more and been more commented on by the media than those concerning the origin of various Jewish groups.

Perhaps the study which received most publicity was the one on the *Cohanim* (Jewish priests). Cohanim, according to the Jewish tradition, are direct descendants of the priestly class originating with Aaron, the brother of Moses, and whose functions centred on the Israelite Temple. After its destruction the institution of the priesthood survived until today with this priestly status transmitted generation after generation from father to son. It was surmised that if this tradition was correct all Jewish priests should demonstrate some genetic similarities on the Y chromosome. This hypothesis was developed independently by Karl Skorecki from the Haifa Technion in Israel and Neil Bradman from University College London. Both scientists decided to conduct a study of the Cohanim from different Jewish communities in order to see whether there were any differences in the frequency of Y chromosome haplotypes (combinations of polymorphisms, or DNA changes) between priests and lay Jews. The results, initially published in 1997 in *Nature*, showed that such differences existed and were observable in both Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jewish communities which was significant because it immediately established a date for the beginning of such differences before the great historic division of the Sephardi and Ashkenazi groups over a 1,000 years ago. Scientists identified haplotypes of 188 unrelated Y chromosomes from Israeli, North American and British Jews. Cohanim were identified on the basis of questioning. Geneticists constructed haplotypes using first the presence or absence of the Y Alu polymorphic (YAP) insert, which is considered to represent a unique evolutionary event dated between 29,000 and 340,000 years ago, second, a polymorphic GATA repeat microsatellite, DYS19, and third, typing a subset of samples for a non-Y chromosome CA-repeat polymorphism, D1S191.¹ The difference in the frequency of YAP+ chromosomes among the priests compared to lay Jews was striking: only 1.5 per cent of Y chromosomes among the priests were YAP+, in comparison to a frequency of 18.4 per cent among other Jews. At the same time, no significant difference

was found in the distribution of alleles for the non-Y chromosomes locus polymorphism D1S191. According to the article, these results confirm a distinct paternal genealogy for the Cohanim, as this haplotype distinction could be made between the Cohanim and the lay Jews within both Ashkenazi and Sephardi communities, which is consistent with the tradition of the early origin of priesthood (Hammer *et al.* 1997).

Using methods developed by Mark Thomas, the geneticists expanded their study to type 12 markers, 6 microsatellites and 6 slow-mutating biallelic markers, that is, combined stable markers with a more rapidly changing set, which allowed them to define a hierarchical classification. The study, which looked at the DNA of 306 Jewish priests, Levites and lay Jews from Canada, Israel and the UK, showed that the Cohanim had a high level of homogeneity – a considerable number of their Y chromosomes were identical in all 12 markers: 45 per cent of the Ashkenazi Cohanim samples and 56 per cent of the Sephardi Cohanim samples. When they included in this modal cluster, those Y chromosomes that differed from the most common type by a single mutation in a single microsatellite, the percentage of close chromosomes increased to over 60 per cent among both the Ashkenazi and the Sephardi groups. Hence it was concluded that this homogeneity of Cohen Y chromosomes supports maintenance of the paternal transmission of the priestly status among the Jews through the ages. Moreover, since the rate at which microsatellites on the Y chromosome mutate can be calculated, it was possible to determine a date when the common ‘ancestor’ of the bearers of this ‘typical’ ‘Cohen’ Y chromosomes lived. This date was estimated to fall between 2,650 and 3,180 years ago, that is, the period between the Exodus and the destruction of the First Temple in 586 BCE. This set of markers characteristic of Cohanim and subsequently called the Cohen Modal Haplotype (CMH) is found only at the frequency of 14 per cent among lay Jews and 4 per cent among Levites. It was absent in samples of more than forty non-Jewish Britons, Nepalese and Mongolians, and was found at a very low frequency amongst some other populations (e.g. at less than 5 per cent among the Greeks) (Thomas *et al.* 1998; Bradman and Thomas 1998b: 5).

Another study which caught the attention of the media was one led by Michael Hammer of the University of Arizona. This sought to determine whether different Jewish communities throughout the world could be traced to a single Middle Eastern ancestry or if they are genetically more closely related to their non-Jewish neighbours. Again this study essentially put basic Jewish tradition (and therefore Judeo-Christian tradition) on trial. The tradition has it that the Jewish people originated in the Land of Israel and for various reasons and at various times were scattered among the nations of the world, guarding their religious and cultural distinctiveness and maintaining strict barriers between them and their neighbours, chief of which was a ban on intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews. To achieve this, Hammer’s team used biallelic variations on non-recombining portions

of the Y chromosomes (NRY) of different Jewish populations and their non-Jewish neighbours. Research using mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) and Y chromosomes was in itself an innovation, as earlier studies looking at genetic affinities among the Jews in general and between Jewish communities and non-Jews living in the same geographic area worked with such 'classical' markers as blood groups, enzymes, etc., which were influenced by natural selection to a considerable degree and thus mutated rapidly. In this study scientists surveyed 18 biallelic polymorphisms of 7 Jewish (Ashkenazi, Roman, North African, Kurdish, Near Eastern, Yemenite and Ethiopian) and 22 non-Jewish populations from Europe, the Middle East and Africa analysing 1,371 males altogether. The combined results of the study suggested that the major portion of the NRY biallelic diversity present in almost all Jewish populations can be traced to a common Middle Eastern origin several thousand years ago. Jews were also found to be quite close to Middle Eastern non-Jewish populations, including Palestinians and Syrians. The main conclusion of the study was that Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews all over the world, with the exception of Ethiopian Jews, were genetically closer to each other than to tested non-Jews, which supported the hypothesis that most Jewish communities of the world remained relatively genetically isolated from non-Jewish groups during the period of the diaspora (Hammer *et al.* 2000).

This was not entirely confirmed when geneticists looked at *mitochondrial* DNA of different Jewish populations of the world. Although mtDNA is to be found in men and women, it is transmitted maternally and hence its analysis might be expected to cast light on how genetically diverse the female populations under study were. This research was conducted at University College London by Mark Thomas and colleagues, who looked at mtDNA from 9 geographically separated Jewish communities from Morocco to Georgia, 8 non-Jewish host populations and an Israeli Arab/Palestinian population and compared the differences found in Jews and non-Jews with those found using Y chromosome data from the same populations. The aim of the study was once again to put a basic Jewish tradition to the test. According to Jewish tradition the status of being a Jew is passed down, unlike the status of the Jewish priesthood, by the mother. It was technically, historically possible to become a Jew by conversion (although this rarely happened in practice) but by and large Jews were Jews because their mothers were Jews. If this essential religious and social characteristic of the Jewish people had been followed in practice it would be reflected in differences in the patterns of mtDNA and Y chromosome variation within Jewish communities. The results suggested that while most Jewish communities were founded by relatively few women and female-line continuity had been maintained since then, those 'founding mothers' were not genetically 'related' to each other through the female line any further back in time. In contrast to this, the paternally inherited Y chromosome did not show any signs of a founder effect. It is concluded in a paper

published in the *American Journal of Human Genetics* in 2002 that ‘Jewish populations appear therefore to represent an example in which cultural practice – in this case female-defined ethnicity – has had a profound effect on patterns of genetic variations’ (Thomas *et al.* 2002: 1417). A further surprise came from the data obtained in the Ashkenazi community, which also demonstrated less diversity in its mtDNA but had more numerous female founders, a possible sign of this group having been formed as a mosaic of previously separate populations (Thomas *et al.* 2002).

Research on the Cohanim was followed up in a more recent study conducted by a team of Israeli, British and American geneticists on the Levites, who, according to the Jewish tradition, are male descendants of Levi, one of the sons of the patriarch Jacob. As in the case of the Cohanim, the Levites had some specific, though more secondary functions to perform in the Temple and their status too was transmitted from father to son. In other words, one could only be a Levite by birth, and if this tradition has been properly observed contemporary Levites, just like the Cohanim, could be expected to demonstrate a higher degree of homogeneity on the non-recombining region of the Y chromosome than lay Jews. The study on the Cohanim, which used some Levite samples, had found high frequencies of multiple haplogroups in the Levites, which meant that no single recent origin could be ascribed to them. Moreover, a cluster of closely related NRY haplotypes was found at much higher frequency among Ashkenazi Levites than among either Sephardi Levites or any other Jewish group. This discovery led scientists to conduct a study which would focus solely on Ashkenazi Levites, as it promised to shed light on the patrilineal descent of the Levites and on the history of origin of Ashkenazi Jews. This is a somewhat controversial issue: some historians and linguists have questioned the Middle Eastern origins of this population and have argued that they were originally, at least in large part, converts. One of the theories, originally associated largely with the name of Arthur Koestler, has maintained that European Jews are substantially descended from converts drawn from the population of the Khazar Empire, who had adopted Judaism in the last quarter of the first millennium (Behar *et al.* 2003: 768–9).

Geneticists analysed NRY variation in 988 unrelated males from Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews and four non-Jewish European populations and confirmed the presence of a specific haplogroup (R1a1) within Ashkenazi Levites (not found among Sephardi Levites), which is found at high frequency among Northern and Eastern European non-Jewish populations and is extremely rare in other Jewish groups and non-Jewish groups of the Middle East. This contrasts both with studies on the Cohanim, as the CMH belonged to a haplogroup which is more likely to be of Near Eastern origin, and with Hammer’s study revealing that Ashkenazi and Sephardi lay Jews appear to share a paternal Near Eastern ancestry. The microsatellite haplotypes within this haplogroup were found to be very tightly clustered, which suggested that the event leading to a high frequency of R1a1 NRYs

within the Ashkenazi Levites involved very few, and maybe only one, founding father who most probably was of European non-Jewish origin. It was not possible to specify the exact origin of this putative founder, as the modal haplotype of haplogroups found in the Ashkenazi Levites is present at rather high frequency throughout Eastern Europe. However, the study suggests that ‘an attractive source’ would be the Khazar Empire, which occupied the area, where R1a1 NRYs are now widespread. The study also posits that it may have been easier to acquire Levite status than Cohen status, which must have been more rigorously protected from infiltration by converts (Behar *et al.* 2003: 777).

Mass media responses

All these studies were publicised in the mainstream mass media and in various Jewish periodicals, where geneticists were asked to interpret their results in a more accessible form. Thus, Michael Hammer was reported to have said in an interview to *Jewish News of Greater Phoenix* that his work shows that ‘we [Jews] really are a single ethnic group coming from the Middle East’ (Garifo 2000). A *New York Times* article by Nicholas Wade also stressed that the results of the study accorded with Jewish tradition and helped to refute theories that Jewish communities of the world derived mainly from converts or that Ashkenazi Jews are descended from the Khazars. Hammer is said to have suggested here that ‘wherever the Jews were, they were very much isolated’ (Wade 2000). Mark Jobling of Leicester University, UK, told the BBC that ‘[t]he fact that we don’t see it (signals of genetic mixture between Jews and non-Jews) suggests that after the Diaspora these populations really have managed to maintain their Jewish heritage’ (Jobling 2000).

At the same time, geneticists have insisted in the mass media on showing as much caution as possible when making generalisations about Jewish identity on the basis of their research. Neil Bradman and Mark Thomas from UCL have declared that this sort of genetic tests provides just another tool for the study of migration routes and of relationships between populations and does not in fact address any individual per se. Referring to their study on the Jewish priests they stressed that ‘notwithstanding the identification of the CMH it is not possible to say that those are the markers of a “true” Cohen or whether, indeed, there was a “first Cohen” – be it Aaron or someone else’. Similarly they have warned against using genetics as a means of identifying an individual or a community as Jewish or non-Jewish: ‘What may be possible is to demonstrate either movement between or a common origin for two or more communities which may be known from other data to qualify for the epithet *Jewish* or as an ancient progenitor of such communities’ (Bradman and Thomas 1998b: 6). Harry Ostrer, a geneticist from the New York University School of Medicine, stressed that ‘Who is a Jew is a matter of rabbis, not the scientists’ (Epstein 2001). Skorecki in an interview

with *The Jerusalem Report* suggested that

being Jewish is a spiritual, metaphysical state and DNA is a physical characteristic, like nose size... But we wouldn't dare go around saying we're going to determine who is Jewish by the length of their nose. Similarly we're not going to determine who is Jewish by the sequence of their DNA.

(Quoted in Epstein 2001)

However, on a number of occasions, the results of the tests were, if not misused, at least misrepresented. For instance, even the web page of the Division of Public Affairs and Resource Development at the Haifa Technion, where Skorecki, one of the main participants of the 'Cohanim' project, is based, in the rubric listing major academic achievements of the Institute declared: 'Professor Karl Skorecki discovered genetic proof that all Jews belonging to the Cohen family are descendants of the biblical high priest Aaron Hacoheh' (Technion 2002). Similar statements have been made in the mass media. For instance, an opening paragraph of an article in *The Independent* reads: 'A study of Jewish men has found evidence to support the Old Testament account of how Aaron, the brother of Moses, fathered a line of priestly descendants' (Connor 1998).

The studies on the Levites and the 'founding mothers' of different Jewish communities did not excite the media as Hammer's study and the research on the Cohanim had done. Thomas's study was discussed in the *Jerusalem Post* (Siegel-Itzkovich 2002) and the *New York Times*, which quoted David Goldstein, one of the geneticists who contributed to it, saying that its results may mean that most Jewish communities were formed by Jewish men and local women, whose origin could not be determined (Wade 2002). As this study seemed to turn a central Jewish tradition on its head it is surprising that it was not more widely covered. It may of course have something to do with the personalities concerned. The Levite study also attracted an article in the *New York Times* discussing mainly the Khazar hypothesis (Wade 2003). This did not make further waves, perhaps because few people know either about the Khazars or about the hypotheses that have been based upon them.

Jewish responses

What was the response of various Jewish periodicals, communities and organisations to the tests? A contributor to the *Forward*, a respected Jewish newspaper published in New York, argued that the genetic research on the Cohanim could raise questions about who is a Jew (Oransky 2000). A similar observation was made by Dr Lawrence H. Schiffman, chairman of the department of Hebrew and Judaic Studies at New York University, who said that the study would generate 'a lot of discussion of the relationship of

scientific evidence to the manner in which we evaluate long-held academic and personal religious positions' (Wade 2000). Nadine Epstein, a Washington-based writer, argued in *Hadassah Magazine*, an organ of the Women's Zionist Organisation of America, that though in the beginning she was 'troubled by the idea of a genetic elite among Jews who could trace themselves back to Abraham, Moses thanks to their Y chromosome', she concluded that the positive aspects of this sort of research far outweighed the possible negative outcomes. In fact she declared that this study provided a good tool for the reconstruction of Jewish history. As she put it: 'there is no hiding from DNA research; it is one of the forces of our time' (Epstein 2001). A somewhat similar response to genetic research on the Jews was given by Hillel Halkin, an Israeli essayist, who observed that there are questions which DNA tests will never be able to answer due to statistical complications, however, 'the new Jewish genetic studies have added significantly to our knowledge' (Halkin 2000: 61).

Orthodox Jewish view

Genetic research has also generated a reaction from Orthodox Jewish circles. First, it is worth mentioning what the response of contemporary rabbinic authorities to genetic research in general has been. Medical genetic research has generated a lot of discussion of the rabbis. More often than not the value of genetic findings in this sphere is appreciated and taken into consideration in the life of the community. The best example here is probably Orthodox Jewish responses to the study of Tay–Sachs disease, a genetic condition found at a relatively high frequency among Ashkenazi Jews. A number of Jewish communities in the West recommend genetic screening of prospective couples for Tay–Sachs before arranging marriages. For example, in 1983 Rabbi Ekstein, a member of the Satmar Chassidim community of New York started the 'Association for an Upright Generation' with the aim of testing Jewish teenagers for the presence of the Tay–Sachs gene. The Association tested teenagers on a voluntary basis and gave each one a number recorded by the family. The number and status of the tested were stored in a computer database. Many marriages in this Orthodox group are arranged between families, which gives them a chance to check the numbers of prospective spouses against the records and drop the match should both partners be carriers (Jones 1996: 75–7).

Rabbi David Bleich supports the idea of DNA tests for Tay–Sachs with the aim of eventually eliminating it completely, but warns that the means by which this goal may be achieved should be in accordance with the *halakhah*. For instance, to advise those couples where both spouses are carriers of a Tay–Sachs gene not to have children is out of the question, as the obligation with respect to procreation must not be suspended even if the statistical probability that their children will be ill is high. Artificial insemination is also halahically unacceptable. Fetal monitoring and termination

of pregnancy should the fetus be found to be a victim of Tay–Sachs is not an option either. Hence, the only way out is to do the screening of both partners before the marriage and to advise them that a sterile marriage is not welcome. The idea of the necessity of some sort of ‘genetic counselling’ is found in the Talmud, which prohibits a man from marrying into a family of lepers or epileptics. However, once the marriage ceremony has been performed the obligation to ‘be fruitful and multiply’ may not be ignored (Bleich 1981: 105–7).

As far as various other cases involving genetic screening are concerned it appears that it was rather more difficult for the rabbis to reach a consensus. Robert Pollack in his study of ethical aspects of genetic research in the Jewish context observes that in the case of DNA, like in many other cases when contemporary rabbinic authorities need to adjust Jewish law to accommodate various new developments in science which could not be imagined thousands of years ago, they welcome new technologies as far as their usage does not override existing Orthodox interpretations of the Torah (Pollack 2000: 49–50). However, here as in many other cases rabbis may disagree. For instance, in most cases DNA analysis aimed at identifying a dead body is permitted, but some ultra-Orthodox rabbis will not accept it and would only rely on witnesses considered credible in the Talmud (Wahrman 2002: 163–4). Most rabbis agree that DNA tests should not be used to identify biological fathers, as there is a Jewish law which forbids any special effort to seek out facts which might lead to illegitimacy (Pollack 2000: 5). Quite apart from that, some rabbis argue that we should not use scientific data which contradict Talmudic views. For instance, some of them would not recognise blood testing as a paternity test at all on the grounds that the Talmud ascribes the inheritance of blood from the mother alone (Wahrman 2002: 158–9).

What about the possibility of using DNA to determine who is a Jew? Genetic research on the history of Jewish populations is a very recent phenomenon and the *poskim* clearly were not in a position to develop any detailed interpretations of it. None of the rabbinic authorities has so far agreed to use DNA for this purpose (Wahrman 2002: 157). However, as it will be shown in Chapter 6, some Orthodox rabbis in South Africa admitted that DNA evidence did make the Lembas’ claims more credible. As far as research on the Cohanim is concerned, it also generated some very enthusiastic rabbinic responses.

According to Hammer, a few days after the publication of the results of the research on the priests, geneticists started receiving phone calls from Orthodox Jews who wanted to be tested to prove ‘scientifically’ that they were Cohanim. In an interview with the *Jewish Bulletin of Northern California* Hammer expressed his concern about this response to his study and observed that he had conducted it for historical and scientific reasons and did not want the results to be misused. ‘We can’t prove or disprove very easily if someone is a Kohen from this data. Do we want to?’ he said. ‘If we

don't, will somebody else come along, a genetic testing company, and do it, or would the Orthodox rabbinate hire some company to do it for them?' According to the article, some rabbis expressed similar concern (Cohen 1997).

Both this study and Hammer's paper published in *PNAS* attracted the particular attention of an extremist Jewish organisation *Aish HaTorah*, which was founded in 1974 by an American-born Rabbi Noah Weinberg and which among other things is dedicated to restoring the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. The research on the priests was very well received by its members. Commenting on the 'Cohanim' study on the website of *Aish HaTorah* Rabbi Yaakov Kleiman observed that these findings 'support the Torah statements that the line of Aaron will last throughout history'.

That our Torah tradition is supported by these findings is an inspiration for many that God surely keeps His promises. May we soon see the Cohanim restored to their service, Levites on their Temple platform and Israelites at their places.

(Kleiman 2002a)

The statistical and technical data from the research was presented in the article in somewhat simplified form. According to Kleiman, the study 'has shown a clear genetic relationship amongst Cohanim and their direct lineage from a common ancestor'. He also quotes Michael Hammer saying that 'over 80% of self-identified Cohanim have a common set of markers' and David Goldstein of Oxford University saying that more than 90 per cent of the Jewish priests share the same markers. Apparently the reference here is to the first study which showed that 98.5 per cent of the researched priests had the YAP-DYS19 haplotype as opposed to about 82 per cent among lay Jews. However, the impression given is that this refers to the Cohen Modal Haplotype which appears among the Cohanim at a lower frequency of about 50 per cent, a figure which apparently Kleiman did not find impressive enough.

Hammer's study found an equally enthusiastic response on the *Aish HaTorah* website. According to the same author, the results of this research were 'a testimony to Jewish family faithfulness' proving that '[o]nly the Jewish people in the history of mankind has retained its genetic identity for over 100 generations, while being spread throughout the world' (Kleiman 2002b). The article bears a telling title 'Jewish Genes' and argues that DNA tests have proved that Jews all over the world have 'retained their genetic identity throughout exile'. Moreover, it is stated that the research has shown that 'Jewish men from communities which developed in the Near East... and European Jews have very similar, almost identical genetic profiles'. The author does not explain what is meant here by 'identical genetic profiles', a description which in popular perception suggests an MZ twin sort of affiliation. Elsewhere Kleiman observes that the genetic studies 'strongly

indicate the veracity of Biblical statements, validating the descriptions of genealogical relationships and historical events precisely as described in the Torah' (Kleiman 2004: 170).

Kleiman's article generated further discussions of genetic tests on Jews on the website of *Aish HaTorah*. Many contributors failed to share Kleiman's enthusiasm. One contributor argued that the negative side of genetic tests is that they highlight the ethnic dimension of Jewish identity, which is not necessarily the most important one.

Genetic relatedness is useful for tracing genetic origins such as where did a particular allele begin. However, it does not mean much more than that. It does not confirm anything Jewish, unless to be Jewish is to have descended from a Jew... Often, Jews and non-Jews alike think of Judaism as a genetic fact. Evidence like this may even superficially add support to such an idea, but one need only ask the obvious question to dispel that idea: how do genes make a cultural or religious identity? The answer is, they don't... Judaism is in cultural [*sic*], religion, and ultimately, one's self-identity. It is not in genes.

(Kleiman 2002b)

Another reader observed that 'the objective of such a study is to further promote division and separatism among Jews' (Kleiman 2002b), a concern, which on the face of it runs contrary to Hammer's conclusions of the genetic relatedness of Jewish communities throughout the world. However it may be understood from the perspective of Nadine Epstein's fear of the emergence of a 'genetic elite' among the Jews.

The results of the study on the Levites got a much more sober reception in Jewish periodicals, as it did in the mainstream Western media. *Forward* described them as implying that there has been 'a non-Jewish "skeleton" sitting quietly in the Jewish family closet' (Bloch 2004). The weekly quoted a number of geneticists involved in the project suggesting different explanations for this event (misidentified non-Levite ancestors of contemporary Levites, extramarital liaisons, rape). Hammer was cited as saying that he himself favoured the hypothesis that the 'founding father' of Ashkenazi Levites was after all a Jew from the Middle East who happened to have a Y chromosome shared by non-Jewish Eastern Europeans and whose genes were replicated and became overrepresented in his descendants, an explanation which Skorecki acknowledged as plausible but implying a 'remarkable coincidence'. Another geneticist, Neil Risch from Stanford University, is said to have not found any flaws in the study but stressed that it is never possible to prove completely 'where something came from'. In the end, the author of the *Forward* article pointed out that the researchers she interviewed 'emphasized that the aim of the Levite study was to illuminate an aspect of Jewish history, and not in any way to determine identity today'. The article concludes with a quotation from Lawrence Schiffman of New York University: 'People have to understand one thing. [The study] reflects

history and not some form of modernity. We are not going to go around testing to see who is a Levite and then suggest that people should be de-Levitized' (Bloch 2004). *The New York Times* interviewed Shaye Cohen, Professor of Hebrew Literature and Philosophy at Harvard University, who argued that even if the connection with the Khazars was correct, it would not have any practical implications for defining who is a Levite these days. 'Genetics is not a reality under rabbinic law', he said, 'Second, the function of Levites is so minimal it doesn't mean anything' (Wade 2003).

However, the idea of genetically determined 'Jewish' characteristics in general has been discussed by some Jewish religious authorities. For instance, in 1998 the General Assembly of the United Jewish Appeal (UJA) Federations of North America organised a session devoted to the subject of alleged Jewish traits and their possible genetic origin with the geneticist Robert Pollack of Columbia University and the eminent Talmudist Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz leading the discussion. The latter was convinced that generations of 'natural selection' had created in the Jewish people traits necessary for survival in a hostile world, such as intelligence and 'pushiness'. This point of view was countered by Pollack who argued that whatever traits may be widespread among the Jewish people they are not biologically transmitted from their parents but stem from cultural traditions of their ancestors (Rabinovich 1998). The debate was publicised in the *Jewish Bulletin of Northern California Online*, which expressed concern about Pollack's conclusions: 'The dismissal of specific "Jewish genes" as a formative factor has far-reaching implications, since it leaves the fate of the Jewish people hostage entirely to external factors rather than linking it as well to some inner, programmed destiny.' The author concludes that the 'argument for a Jewish gene is not absurd, since "ethnic" genes have indeed been identified that make Ashkenazi Jews highly prone to specific diseases like Tay-Sachs' (Rabinovich 1998). Needless to say, such statements are quite far from what geneticists argue, as the fact that Tay-Sachs is found among Ashkenazi Jews at a relatively higher frequency than among other populations does not turn it into an 'ethnic' disease, a phenomenon which simply does not exist (Jones 1996: 75).

Pollack developed his argument against looking for what he calls 'biological Judaism' in a contribution to *Forward* stressing that 'there are no DNA sequences common to all Jews and absent from all non-Jews' and that 'there is nothing in the human genome that makes or diagnoses a person as a Jew'. According to him, important as it is to study inherited diseases found at a higher frequency among some Jewish populations, they should only be given scientific and medical but not religious value (Pollack 2003). Moreover he even considered it surprising that Jews were so interested in genetic tests done on Jews:

Given the historical context of the Nazi 'experiment', it is all the more remarkable that Jews all over the world have been flocking to the new technology of DNA-based diagnosis, eager to lend their individual

genomes – each a surviving data point from the terrible experiment in negative selection – to a revisiting of this issue of biological Judaism.
(Pollack 2003)

Extremist Christian and white supremacist reaction

The study on the Cohanim also received the attention of American creationists, who saw it as scientific proof for biblical prophecies regarding the end of time and an argument in favour of the literal truth of the Bible. An article on the website of The Young Earth Creation Club from Ohio, an organisation aiming ‘to promote materials that refute evolution, and provide Biblical and scientific evidence that God created the universe, and that it is quite young (about 6,000 years old)’ (Martin 2005) hailed the genetic ‘evidence’ which supported this position:

It is fascinating that the Bible predicted the existence of this priestly line in the past and foretells the lineage is expected to persist today because of God’s everlasting covenant with his people... One of the central principles... that Amillennialists will argue against a literal interpretation of the endtime events written in Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Revelation, and Daniel has to do with the priests serving in the tribulation and/or millennial temple. Due to the exiles, Diaspora, and intermingling of the various Jewish tribes, the Amillennial argument is founded on the premise that there was no scientific means to genetically distinguish a Cohen from anyone else... The DNA data presented here demonstrates that the Cohen genetic line thrives today and is equipped to fulfil the priestly needs of any future temple.

(Young 2005)

Finally, as it could be expected, genetic research on the Jews fed into neo-Nazi anti-Semitic discourses. On one American neo-Nazi website the articles on Jewish priests and the Middle Eastern origin of Jews were shown to be a conclusive proof that the Jews *were* a race after all just as National Socialism had always maintained. The site starts with a quotation from Rabbi Stephen Wise, ‘Hitler was right in one thing. He calls the Jewish people a race, and we are a race’ (NY Herald-Tribune, 13 June 1938) and continued:

How often have you heard people repeat, zombie-like, the old mantra that Jews are not a race?... True, not all Jews are biologically distinct. Some non-Jews converted to Judaism, especially over the past 200 years. People in that category are not biological Jews. But the ones who have the classical Jewish appearance (hooked nose, swarthy complexion, etc.) are genetically and ancestrally different from Whites and every other racial group. This by definition makes the Jews a separate race from Whites, every bit as much as Orientals and Negroids are

separate races... To sum up the purpose of this section, the Jews are genetically different from the other racial groups, and the Jews have their genetic and ancestral origin in the Middle East. This, by definition, makes them a separate race. On the genetic level, it is irrelevant whether Jews consider themselves White or not.

The website of a white supremacist propagandist David Duke used Hammer's study for their ends too. In an online article called 'Studies of Jewish genetics and the racial double standard' it is pointed out that the researchers concerned were Jews and that the research served the interests of 'world Jewry' and will be used to discriminate against non-Jews. However, the author does not question the scientific validity of this research, but argues that 'scientists should perform more of these racial studies – without the hypocritical double standard that surrounds them', or in other words he calls on them to provide genetic 'proof' for the existence of human races biologically different from each other. As far as genetic studies on the Jews are concerned one of the implications is that 'Jewish people are somewhat different in a genetic sense from the Europeans they reside next to', hence 'not only is organised Jewry an alien cultural entity within western civilization, they are also somewhat alien in a biological sense' (Grubach 2005). Similarly, one George P., a contributor to the Vanguard News Network, an internet based group which describes its composition as 'disaffected writers driven out of academia and journalism by Political Correctness' and united 'to reclaim the American mind from the Jews', argues that 'the Jew's ancient secretive mask has finally forever been lifted by recent advances in genetic science, and the farce of the Jew masquerading as "White Man" ended once and for all' (George 2005). Other groups such as Anglo-Saxon supremacists who see themselves as the descendants of the lost Tribes of Israel derive sustenance from this kind of research. A website devoted to the Cohen Modal Haplotype states:

This Web site presents the **first complete report** about the CMH (the Cohanim Modal Haplotype). It presents the exclusive first report about how the CMH has found the lost Hebrew Tribes of ancient Israel. It continues, however, far beyond the basics of the CMH – and into the realm of the significance, implications, and the practical **applications** of the CMH. These practical **applications** of the CMH provide the solution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict (and lead to the building of the predicted Third Temple in Jerusalem). The CMH is thus shown to be one of the **keys** to the practical fulfillment of the ancient Biblical prophesies.

(Clark 2005)

There can hardly be a more sensitive topic than constructions of Jewish biological difference. As Gilman puts it, in European anti-Semitic propaganda

'the perversity of the Jew's nature in betraying Christ over and over again throughout history becomes the biologically determined quality of the Jew which leads to the Jew's heartless role in the rise of capitalism or communism' (Gilman 1991: 18). The representation of Jewish physicality in Nazi and other propaganda is well known; but this was not new – it was drawn from earlier European representations of Jews which in time covered the globe – to the point that Chinese or Japanese representations of Jewish physicality in our own time have much in common with nineteenth-century European ones (Zhou 1997: 55). Hence, many lay people are likely to be appalled at the idea that geneticists may appear to claim that Jews are genetically different from other people. To anyone with a knowledge of how Jews have suffered, at the hands of the false race sciences of fairly recent times, any such suggestion appears in itself to be racist.

Nevertheless genetic research on the origin of Jewish communities has generated a lot of positive interest in the mainstream and Jewish mass media. The degree of correctness of representation of the research varies widely from quite objective representation of the results to sheer distortion. A considerable number of newspaper articles published interviews with geneticists warning against making far-reaching generalisations on the basis of their research. Other publications, at the same time, ignore these warnings and speak about 'Jewish genes' and create the impression that it is possible to determine Jewishness on the basis of a DNA test. Some articles and Internet materials contain clear distortions of the results of the tests (see, ironically the Technion's website) and it is likely that there is an agenda behind these distortions (fund-raising for the Technion, interest in proving the biblical version of Jewish history for *Aish HaTorah* etc.).

The general Jewish response to the tests and their results was diverse. Some argued that it opened the window of opportunity for misuse, but is too good a tool for the reconstruction of Jewish history to ignore (Nadine Epstein, Hillel Halkin). Others stressed the possibility of negative outcomes of the research, which would outweigh the positive ones, such as tests on individuals and communities in order to determine their Jewishness. This concern proved to be not entirely unfounded (e.g. priests willing to be tested).

Genetic research has also contributed to the discussion of who is a Jew. Some sources speak of the 'genetic identity' of the Jews, which is linked to their ethnic identity, stressing that it is important to be born Jewish to become a full member of the Jewish community. Others argue that 'genetic identity' should have no bearing on one's Jewishness, as it is rather religion and culture that determine it.

The discussion of genetic tests on the Jews has revealed that the old notions of the Jews having certain specific traits and behavioural predispositions determined biologically have not died out (e.g. the debate between the Jewish Talmudic authority Steinsaltz and Pollack), and can be and are being widely misused. The tests appear to buttress extreme positions such as those

of the fundamentalist *Aish HaTorah* on the one hand as it does neo-Nazi groups or British Israelites on the other. Even more important, however, is the near certainty that the impact of these 'scientific' findings, somewhat difficult of analysis, is bound to have an impact upon wider Jewish identities and other people's perceptions of the 'Jews'. Overall the supposed objectivity of genetics linked with increased access to information technology throughout the world is likely to give future DNA research on group origins an explosive ability to affect group consciousness.

What steps could be taken in order to diminish the potential risks associated with this research? Enormous care must be taken to interpret sensitively the much more nuanced conclusions of contemporary genetics. We would suggest that one *desideratum* may be that there should be increased collaboration between geneticists and historians, anthropologists, philosophers and the like. Given the public interest in genetics-related news scientists immediately involved in this work should use the access that they have to the mass media to explain the objectives of their studies and to counteract and expose their misrepresentations. The alternative is that increasing genetic studies will help to buttress and even create essentialist constructions of ethnic minorities and a multitude of 'others' rather than contributing to a sane realisation that important genetic or biological differences between peoples and groups simply do not exist.

4 Are Jews black?

The question of Jews and blackness seems to be of some importance for a number of aspects of this work. Jewish attitudes to people of colour and both Gentiles' and Jews' constructions of Jewish colour may well have some relevance for any discussion of Jewish and other attitudes towards black Jews.

By and large, the attitude of the Bible, the primary Jewish source, is not particularly negative with respect to black people. The term for a black in Hebrew is *cushi* which in fact designates not skin colour but rather ethnicity and place of origin. The *Cushim* were the descendants of Cush, son of Ham, son of Noah, and Cush becomes the Hebrew term first for Nubia and then for Africa in general. Throughout the Bible the Cushites are never described as black but sometimes are depicted as having a shining complexion. The term is indeed neutral (Melamed 2003: 61–221). The Rabbinic authorities responsible in post-Biblical times for the creation of Jewish law (*halakhah*), on the other hand, do have, in many cases, a negative perspective on black people and the overall view is that *Cushim* are black, different from other people and inferior as well (Melamed 2003: 53–9). Such negative perspectives are sometimes reflected in modern Rabbinic sources. Thus Rabbi Abraham Isaac ha-Cohen Kook in 1962 argued that in black people

baser qualities grew great while spiritual qualities dwindled, and so it actually happened that most slaves have always been the children of Ham....and in the best interests of morality it is fitting that baser human beings should submit to the superior ones.

(Quoted in Melamed 2003: 6–121, 206)

If other peoples' colour was of significance to Jews so was Jews' colour significant to gentiles. A long European and North American tradition maintains that the Jews in general are 'black' metaphorically as well as literally. There are certainly comparisons between the Jews and the devil, traditionally represented as black. Mediaeval anti-Jewish polemic maintained that Jews were at the very least swarthy and often Jews accepted this

as being the case (Melamed 2003: 201). Some accepted the position of Abarbanel that once long ago the Jews had indeed been light skinned as the Mishnah (Taharot, Negaim 2:1) maintains but they had grown dark as part of the punishment of exile (Melamed 2003: 26).

Robert Knox (1791–1862) the first conservator of the College Museum, Edinburgh, in the mid-nineteenth century commented on ‘the African character of the Jew, his muzzle-shaped mouth and face removing him from other races’ (Gilman 1999: 89). Nineteenth-century anthropologists assumed that Jews had a close racial connection with blacks. According to Gilman, the ‘general consensus of the ethnological literature of the late nineteenth century was that the Jews were “black” or, at least, “swarthy”’. One late nineteenth-century anthropologist explained the ‘predominant mouth of some Jews being the result of the presence of black blood’ and that ‘brown skin, thick lips and prognathism’ were typical of Jews (Gilman 1999: 89). One of the key physical indicators of race was the nose: for the Encyclopaedists all ‘deviant noses’ were put together – ‘the blacks, the Hottentots and various peoples of Asia, such as the Jews’ (Gilman 1999: 90). Elsewhere Gilman argues that the Jews were considered black because they were of mixed race but that the Blackness of the skin of the African like the Jew was in part due to the effect of diseases such as syphilis (Gilman 1991: 99). The ‘negritude’ of the Jew was thus not only a mark of racial inferiority, but also an indicator of his unhealthy nature. The Bavarian writer Johann Pezzl, who visited Vienna in the 1780s, described the Jewishness of the Viennese Jew as a particularly nasty affliction:

There are about five hundred Jews in Vienna. Their sole and only occupation is to counterfeit, salvage trade in coins, and cheat Christians, Turks, heathens, indeed themselves... This is only the beggarly filth of Canaan which can only be exceeded in filth, uncleanness, stench, disgust, poverty, dishonesty, pushiness and other things by the trash of the twelve tribes from Galicia. Excluding the Indian fakirs, there is no category of supposed human beings which come closer to the Orang-Utang than does a Polish Jew... Covered from foot to head in filth, dirt and rags, covered in a type of black sack... their necks exposed the colour of a Black, their faces covered up to the eyes with a beard, which would have given the High Priest in the Temple chills, the hair turned and knotted as if they all suffered from the *plica polonica*.
(Quoted in Gilman 1992: 4)

The Viennese Jew’s disease is stamped on their skin. The Jewish physician of the Enlightenment, Elcan Isaac Wolf, saw this ‘black-yellow’ skin colour as a pathological mark of the sickly Jew (Gilman 1992: 5). According to the humoral theory of the period, James Cowles Pritchard (1808) commented on ‘the choleric and melancholic constitution of the Jews, such that they usually have a skin colour somewhat darker than the English

people...’ (quoted in Gilman 1992: 5). All races, according to the ethnology of the period, were described as ‘ugly’ or ‘beautiful’. Being black, Jewish, sickly and ugly became almost coterminous. Black Africans, specifically the Hottentots, as Gilman also observes, became the pinnacle of the ‘ugly race’ (Gilman 1992: 10) and as we see later on, Hottentots were also regarded by some as Jewish. These notions were supported by the theories of Houston Stewart Chamberlain, according to whom the Jews were a mongrel race that had hybridised with the Africans during the time they were exiled in Alexandria. Nazi anti-Semitic propaganda was full of references to swarthy Jews with big noses as illustrations in *Der Stürmer* which contrast hideous, dark Jews with white, noble Aryans makes amply clear (Gilman 1986: 8, 366). It could be that such images reflect Renaissance images of the Last Supper where Judas is frequently portrayed apart and as dark in colour or surrounded by a black nimbus. In neo-Nazi propaganda the non-whiteness of Jews is regularly implied. Thus on one website we read ‘many good White people have died for the Jews...’ (Strikeforce 2005).

If in some discourses Jews were thought to be black and African, so were Africans in the nineteenth century in a vast number of cases thought to be Jews even though this does not necessarily imply that Jews are black (Melamed 2003: 210). Ethnographers, missionaries and travellers time and time again concluded that African tribes including the Masai, the Zulus, the Xhosa, the Hottentots, the Tutsis, the Ashanti and many more were of Jewish origin (Parfitt 2002: 205). The idea that Jews were to be found in central Africa has a long pedigree. It is clearly a part of early Jewish tradition in which they are perceived probably as a separate ethnic group which waged war against the blacks and generally attempted to improve their ways (Parfitt 2002: 205).¹ The idea was also part of a more general European and Arab discourse. The best known of the Arab historians and geographers of Africa was Leo Africanus (c.1492–1550). He was born of Arab Muslim parents in Granada and was originally called Hassan ibn Muhammad al-Wazzân al-Zayyâtî. His most important work was the remarkable *Description of Africa*² which was written around 1528–29 and which was for many years the only source on sub-Saharan Africa (he also wrote an Arabic grammar and a manual of Arabic rhetoric).³ *Description of Africa* at once became an essential part of the rapidly expanding body of sixteenth century European geographical knowledge. Translated in 1556 into both Latin and French, it went through a number of editions in several European languages. An English translation was done in 1600. In *Description* there are frequent mentions of Jews in Africa: he notes that once Jewish law was widely observed, that there were warrior tribes in the Atlas claiming descent from King David, that the Canaanites travelled to Africa followed later by the Sabeans and that the ruler of Timbuktu could not stand the sight of Jews (Williams 1930: 208, 224, 232, 281, 292).

As the major source on Africa, *Description* carried great authority. The translator of the English edition, John Pory, added a piece entitled

‘A summarised discourse of the manifold religions professed in Africa’ where he noted:

At this day also the Abassins affirm that upon the Nilus towards the west there inhabiteth a most populous nation of the Jewish stock under a mightie king. And some of our modern cosmographers set down a province in those quarters which they call the land of the Hebrews, placed as it were under the equinoctial, in certain unknown mountains, between the confines of Abassin and Congo.

(Pory 1600: 379)

In 1705 a German scholar, Peter Kolb, was sent to the Cape to make astronomical observations. Subsequently Kolb wrote a book, the German edition of which was published in 1719 and was subsequently translated into Dutch, English and French. *The Present State of the Cape of Good Hope* reached a very wide audience and for the next fifty years was the definitive account of the religion of the Hottentots. Kolb claimed that the general customs and traditions of the Hottentots were similar to those of the Jews. He enumerated what he saw as the similarities between their sacrificial customs, their moon festivals, circumcision rites and so on. But he also asserted that the Hottentots could be counted among the children of Abraham, that they were of Jewish descent. Many indigenous peoples simply reminded Europeans of Jews in some way or another. Thus, writing of Ankole, south east of Lake Albert, Johnson observed:

The Banyankole, as the people of Ankole are called are an exceedingly interesting race, the purest, least mixed branch of the great Baima stock which constitutes the ruling caste in all the kingdoms around. In figure they are tall and lithe, and their long thin faces, with a very Jewish nose and lips, suggest a Semitic origin and strongly mark off their features from the bullet head, flat nose and thick lips of their neighbours.

(Johnson 1908: 184–5)

And there are many more examples. These ideas may feed into modern concepts to some extent – though only in extreme White supremacist and Nazi circles – but in the general discourse of today’s western world the Jews, despite some confusion in the past, are by and large considered to be White.

Ethiopian Jews

A challenge to this assumption was the arrival in Israel from the mid-1980s of the Ethiopian Jews⁴ otherwise known as the *Beta Israel*.⁵ Since the Second World War great efforts have been made to dismantle the idea that there is a Jewish ‘race’ and that there are phenotypical elements which link Jews wherever they are. In other words you cannot tell a Jew from his

external appearance. On the other hand it is clear that the *Beta Israel* are strikingly different in colour and in other respects from the rest of the Jewish population of Israel and this difference is repeatedly remarked upon.

It is interesting to note that in only one of the mediaeval Jewish treatments of the *Beta Israel* was the question of their 'blackness' mentioned at all. Their colour or 'race' was not considered to be important (Corinaldi 1998: 95–107). But by the nineteenth century when 'scientific racism' ruled the roost new criteria pertained: if the Ethiopian Jews wanted to be taken seriously as Jews they would have to be shown to have Jewish racial characteristics and soon enough Jewish features were discovered and remarked upon: as Henry Aaron Stern a Jewish convert to Christianity who worked as a missionary to the *Beta Israel* observed: 'there were some whose Jewish features no one could have mistaken who had ever seen the descendants of Abraham either in London or Berlin' (Kaplan 2003). Later, Jewish noses were observed among them and others opined that in time, as they were Jews, and once they moved to the more temperate climate of the land of Israel their skin colour would soon revert to an appropriately Jewish white (Kaplan 2003). Attempts to discover phenotypical features among the *Beta Israel* which distinguish them from other Ethiopians and which usually suggest that their skin colour and shape of face are different continue to this day (Kaplan 2003).

One should also refer in this context to the question of Ethiopian Jewish descent. In overall terms Zohar and Sagi have suggested that '(ethnic) origins are the necessary basis in the determination of the Jewish collective' (Kaplan 2003). Even though we may now suspect that the origins of the *Beta Israel* do not lie either in the Lost Tribe of Dan, nor in the Jewish colony of Elephantine, nor yet in wandering Karaites but rather in the evolution of a kind of Judaism in Ethiopia, the vast majority of scholarly work until very recently indeed, has been devoted to demonstrating (despite a truly impressive lack of evidence) that the *Beta Israel* were blood relatives of other Jews – that they were descended from Abraham (Kaplan 1992; Quirin 1992).

Black Jews and the Halakhah

Has the question of the possibility of Jewish blackness or black Jewishness ever been raised by Orthodox rabbis? Rabbi David Bleich in his comprehensive study of the responses of the *poskim* to the challenges of modernity devoted a whole chapter to the halakhic perspective on black Jews. The author straightaway states that

Judaism is colourblind; skin pigmentation is unknown as a halakhic concept. The problem of determining the status of the various communities of black Jews is totally unrelated to colour.

(Bleich 1977: 297)

Bleich then continues to argue that in order to determine whether a particular Black community is Jewish or not one would first need to answer the question of 'Who is a Jew?' To be accepted as Jewish any community

must establish a valid claim to Jewishness either by virtue of birth or conversion. The claims of each black community then must be examined separately as there is no overall ruling based on colour. The question of black Jews was raised for the first time in respect to the Falashas, whose claims to Jewish identity, as Bleich confirms, were accepted by the rabbis in the Middle Ages and in modern times on the basis of the report of Eldad Ha-Dani (Bleich 1977: 298–306).

Bleich argues that unlike the Falashas, all other black Jews, are acknowledged to have been descended from non-Jews and their claims to being from the Ten Lost Tribes or to being the only authentic descendants of the original Jewish community should be dismissed as fabrication. Any claim of their Jewishness can be taken seriously only if based on prior conversion. Those who argue that they are ‘born’ Jews find the very idea of converting insulting. However, claims of those black Jews in the United States and elsewhere who say that they are the descendants of converted slaves owned by Jewish slave-owners Bleich also finds to be without factual basis (Bleich 1977: 309).

The author divides various black Jewish communities into three groups. Some groups maintain that they are the original Jews and that European Jews are Edomites, that is that they usurped Jewish identity. Hence, these black groups see no need to convert to Judaism. According to Bleich, there is nothing to say in response to such groups, as they and historical Jews agree that the two communities differ both ethnically and religiously and it would be best for them to go their separate ways. The second group is represented by those who agree that in order to be accepted in the Jewish community they need to undergo the process of conversion. This group, he feels should be welcomed as righteous proselytes.

The third type of black Jewish communities comprises mainly individuals rather than organised groups who for one reason or another feel an affinity to Judaism and even observe some or all of its practices but refuse to convert, because they either consider themselves to be born Jews or reckon that they have been practising Judaism long enough to have to convert. The case of this group, he feels, is the most complicated one. Bleich writes that it is represented mainly by individuals, but we would argue that this group also includes groups such as the Lemba and some other communities, such as the Bnei Menashe, the Gogodala tribe of Papua New Guinea (and other Papuan tribes too) (Parfitt 2004) and Telugu Jews.⁶ The author argues that to recognise such groups is absolutely out of the question although such groups may be urged to accept the Noachide Code as a minimum level of observance and even to be encouraged to accept other *mitzvoth* as well, though

since it will be clearly recognized by them and by the Jewish community that they are in fact neither Jews nor candidates for conversion, there is no reason why their commitment to the acceptance of the yoke of the commandments should be total and all-embracing.

(Bleich 1977: 315–6)

The rabbi ends the chapter by stressing again that though Jews should be careful not to accept those black communities whose claims of Jewishness are false, true proselytes regardless of colour should be welcomed (Bleich 1977: 324).

The position of this Orthodox rabbi seems then to be colour-blind and applicable to all groups claiming Jewish identity. We shall see in Chapter 6 that an almost identical view will be expressed by the Chief Rabbi of South Africa in respect to the Lemba. What is interesting here is that Bleich decided to concentrate on contemporary halakhic perspective on black Jews, rather than, for instance, on various groups (of any ethnic origin) claiming the status of the Lost Tribes of Israel or Jewish roots of some sort. Perhaps yet again it is the newsworthiness of the topic of black Jews which prompted Bleich to address this issue and to warn his co-religionists against the majority of black Jews on the grounds that they had not undergone a proper conversion.

5 The Lemba

The Lemba are a black tribe whose heartland is the Mberengwe/Mposi area of Zimbabwe but who are to be found in small groups throughout north-east South Africa and in central and eastern Zimbabwe. Notwithstanding the fact that this tribe is in many respects indistinguishable from neighbouring tribes, and as far as any uninitiated traveller is concerned totally indistinguishable from other people in the area, for much of the twentieth century a number of Lemba and particularly those of South Africa have claimed to be of Jewish or Semitic ancestry, and a number of outside European observers have made similar claims for them for an even longer period.

According to an insistent and consistent oral tradition of origins the Lemba claim to come from a place in the remote north which they frequently call Sena (sometimes Sena One). Among some of our informants this Sena seems to signify heaven or the afterlife, among others a vague place somewhere in the north. While in some discourses it is a simple historical locus – in others it has a meta-historical signification. To this day the Lemba habitually refer to themselves as ‘the white men who came from Sena’ although they are not noticeably less Black than any of their Bantu neighbours (or indeed physically different in any way as far as we can see). According to what appears to be the dominant tradition – at least in South Africa – having left the historical Sena the Lemba crossed ‘Pusela’ – although they have no idea what the term means – until finally they came to Africa where they rebuilt Sena. Sometimes the rebuilt Sena is identified as the small but not historically unimportant town of Sena on the Zambesi.¹ Subsequently they made their way from the coast inland where they constructed another city – sometimes identified as the Great Zimbabwe – before being dispersed over a large area of southern Africa, frequently living in small groups among other tribes. There are a number of variants of this myth of origin which have been collected over the last century. A further version of the tribal tradition has it that the Lemba came from across the sea, that the boat which brought them was split in two, that half of the people stayed with one half of the boat and disappeared while the rest were saved, climbed the mountains, joined the ‘Banyai’ and settled with them.

According to another Lemba tradition when they arrived in Africa they fled to Vuhindi and only later went to Sena. It has been noted that when the Lemba invoked their ancestors they would cite all the sacred mountains where their ancestors had been buried and at the end of each phrase of the incantation the Lemba would say 'Hundji'. The same phrase was used during the ritual slaughter of sacrificial animals: the Lemba would kneel down and the man officiating would say 'Hundji' (Junod 1927: 424).

The legend about the destruction of the boat and the division of the tribe is perhaps a way of explaining the fact that Lemba tribes are to be found in several quite separate *loci* but it could equally, and I think not too fancifully, be taken as an expression of a fractured sense of identity. The tradition of an origin far away – outside Africa or in the remote north of the continent – notwithstanding that it takes a number of somewhat different forms is widespread among the Lemba. However a detailed study by the senior curator of Ethnography at the Museum of Human Sciences, Harare, has categorically rejected any suggestion that the Lemba came from outside Africa. According to this paper, which contains a detailed review of the sparse literature on the subject, the Lemba are purely African and the idea that they came from elsewhere has been 'invented' by outsiders who have created 'a false Remba identity' (Ruwitah 1997: 53ff.).²

There are, however some cogent grounds for believing that at some time in the relatively remote past the Lemba indeed came from South Arabia and perhaps more precisely from a town in the Hadramaut called Sena which has preserved traditions of ancient migrations to Africa to this day. If this is indeed the case it is remarkable, but not at all unprecedented, that the Lemba have preserved the name of their home town for many centuries in their oral tradition. Thereafter the history of the Lemba was perhaps linked with the Islamisation of the east coast of Africa by the Arabs. They may have been connected with a coastal civilisation based on a city, called Sayuna by the mediaeval Arab geographers, in which religious syncretism ran riot – as we can tell from the various references in the literature (Malecka 1962: 331ff.; Lewicki 1974; Cuoq 1985).³ After the coming of the Portuguese at the end of the sixteenth century the Lemba, now settled inland, far away from Islamic or other coastal influences, developed their identity and religious system independently. We can see that throughout this period of their history that exclusiveness and separation were the benchmark of the Lemba: they did not intermarry, they did not interdine. They had strict laws of purity and severe food taboos. The eating of pork was punished by death. They would only eat meat that had been ritually slaughtered by a Lemba.⁴

The first clear reference to the Lemba is provided in a Dutch report written by an official of the short-lived Dutch East India Company trading centre at Delagoa Bay in what is today Mozambique. The report noted that in the vicinity of Vendaland a number of different tribes were under one ruler: 'The Walemba, Inthowelle, Paraotte...were under one chief who

lived in the province of Inthowelle and to all the above-mentioned countries they gave the name Beesa'. A further report 'made by the Negro called Hoeman or Mahoemane, who went there with a group of Inthowellers' in February 1727 and returned in 1728 gave further information about the Lemba:

the Walembers who are always coming here with those of Inthowelle ... are a nation which lives at the top of the country of Inthowelle, and they are a nation which some years ago got the worst of a struggle with those from Gole and then part of them went under the protection of the Inthowellers while the other part submitted to the victor. The aforementioned Walembers were said to be rich in gold, too, and this nation was also doing trade with the Portuguese in the direction of the aforementioned Sena.

(Smith 1970: 275-6)

Quite what happened to the Lemba after this is unclear; but they appear to have joined other tribes in small groups often working in specific roles including those of goldsmith, medicine man of war, ritual experts and so on.

Estimates of the tribe's size vary considerably; they are scattered over a very wide area and no census has been conducted but probably they number something over 50,000 people.⁵ Recently hitherto unknown Lemba or Lemba-like communities have been identified in the mountainous regions on the border between Mozambique and Zimbabwe. Another Lemba-like group known as *Mwenye* which has no knowledge of the Lemba of Zimbabwe and South Africa but which also claims Jewish origins is to be found in southern Malawi (*Mwenye* is the preferred name of the Lemba both in South Africa and Zimbabwe) (Price 1954: 31ff.).

Today the religious life of the Lemba is highly syncretistic. Many of them belong to various Christian churches (e.g. the Zion Christian Church and Pentecostal groups), whereas some in Zimbabwe are Muslims. Islam, however, has made no significant inroads into the districts of great Lemba concentration in Zimbabwe such as the Mberengwe/Mposi areas. Some Lemba, however, claim to be Lemba by religious practice as well as by ethnic identification. The religious practices of these Lemba do not have much, if anything, in common with Judaism as it is practised elsewhere. Those Lemba who perceive themselves as ethnically 'Jewish' find no contradiction in regularly attending a Christian church. Indeed by and large the Lemba who are most stridently 'Jewish' are often those with the closest Christian attachments. The Lemba Muslims we have interviewed were more reticent about their 'Israelite' origins.

For many years the Lemba have tried without much success to attract the interest and support of the affluent white Jewish community of South Africa. Thus in 1993 Professor Mathivha the president of the Lemba Cultural Association wrote to the Board of Deputies explaining that the

Lemba were Black Jews and the descendants of the 'Senaa who are a part of the Jewish community of long ago'. The chief reason for his letter was to ask for money for the construction of a Lemba cultural hall. The money was not forthcoming and the hall still has not been completed.⁶

In the early days of the colonisation of present-day Zimbabwe a great deal hung on certain historical issues. It was firmly in the colonial interest to be able to prove that white supremacy was a fact and that subjugation of native peoples was legitimate. One issue of great importance was the Great Zimbabwe constructions and similar ones throughout the newly conquered territories. These massive stone-built ruins were considered to be far beyond the capacities of black people: it was believed by the majority of white settlers that they had been built by the ancient Phoenicians and that they had some kind of a connection with King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. In some sense this theory helped to legitimise the British presence: if the country had once been controlled by a small maritime nation (the Phoenicians) why should it not now be controlled by another small maritime nation (the British). Clearly if traces could be found of these ancient colonizers it would serve this particular historical vision. The Lemba with their Semitic customs and apparently Judaic habits fitted the bill admirably and their identification as Jews thus suited imperial needs. On the other hand the great interest that missionaries and others had in their traditions in the early days of colonisation served the interests of the Lemba too: it gave them enhanced access to education and conferred other social benefits.

It is worth noting that in recent times White racists found this tradition appealing: the Scottish laird Gayre of Gayre and Nigg was the editor of the racist journal called *Mankind Quarterly*. In 1967 he wrote a short article in which he posited the connection of the Lemba with the monolithic stone building culture of Great Zimbabwe and in 1972 wrote a book, published in Rhodesia and widely believed to have been commissioned by the Rhodesian Government (although when Tudor Parfitt asked Ian Smith he hotly denied it) which claimed that the Lemba had been involved in the Great Zimbabwe construction. He further argued the Lemba had Jewish cultural and genetic traits and that their 'Armenoid' genes must have been acquired from Judaised Sabeans who, he maintained, had settled in the area thousands of years ago. The book's clear objective was to show that black people had never been capable of building in stone or of governing themselves. There is not the slightest evidence that 'Sabeans' or any other Middle Eastern people settled in the area thousands of years ago – and there is every evidence that Great Zimbabwe was built in something less than a thousand years over a considerable number of centuries by local people (Peters 1902: 127; Hall 1905: 101; Chiciga 1972: 15; Garlake 1973). However the fact that Gayre and Nigg got most, if not all, of his facts wrong does not in itself vitiate the claims of the Lemba to have been involved in the Great Zimbabwe civilisation. Indeed in recent times Lemba claims have received some support from the Zimbabwean academic

community: Dr Ken Mufuka, a black Zimbabwean archeologist, like a number of his colleagues, sees the Zimbabwe civilisation as the work of two tribes: the Venda and the Lemba (Mufuka 1983: 22).

By and large the Lemba as we have noted are more or less indistinguishable from their Venda or Shona neighbours. This did not prevent those few intrepid travellers who ventured into Lemba areas in the past and acquired a conviction that they were Jewish, from systematically finding phenotypical aspects which proved their racial origin. One German observer said

How absolutely Jewish is the type of this people! They have faces cut exactly like those of ancient Jews who live around Aden. Also the way they wear their hair . . . gives them the appearance of Aden – or of Polish Jews – of the good old type.

An English writer in the 1880s spoke of ‘the lighter skin and Jewish appearance’ of the Lemba (Parfitt 1997: 265). Another in 1893 described a group near Umyali who

are, for the most part, tall and slim, with gentle and even dignified ways. Their skins are as dark as any of the natives I had yet met with, but their noses are straight, and not flattened out at the base like those of the true Ethiopian [*sic.*] Their lips, too, though broader than those of the European, are quite Caucasian when compared with the blubber excrescences carried about by the ordinary Zulu or Basuto. The Umyali boys have rather long crinkly hair, very soft looking, well shaped eyes and looking at their physiognomies as a whole, and, leaving out the question of colour, it was easy to believe that they were descended from some scattered remnant of the great Hebrew race.

(Finlason 1970: 129–30)

A.A. Jaques noted in 1931 that the whites of the Northern Transvaal could distinguish a Lemba from his features and agreed that

many Lemba have straight noses, rather fine features and an intelligent expression which distinguish them from the ordinary run of natives . . . one does occasionally meet with a Lemba who possesses strikingly Semitic features. One of my informants, old Mosheh, even had what might be termed a typical Jewish nose, a rare occurrence in any real Bantu.

(1931: 245)

Some of the early ethnographic work on the Lemba include profile photographs of Lemba to establish that they do indeed have ‘Jewish’ noses (Stayt 1931: plate XXI). In 1942 an article by Louis Thompson which included a profile photograph showing ‘the Semitic features of the Lemba’

(essentially a prominent nose) noted: 'As the blood of the Semite became more diluted with that of the Bantu, so did their arts decrease...' (Thompson 1942: 86). The last citation is significant: it showed that for the writer, and no doubt the feeling was widely shared, Jewish blood was better than Black blood. The Lemba were regularly put in a higher category than other tribes for this very reason. In other words as the Lemba – even as marginal Jews – challenged existing ideas about what Jews were supposed to look like – 'Jewish' physical attributes had to be found for them. These ideas were soon internalised by the Lemba themselves. In a South African compilation of 'vernacular accounts' M.M. Motenda observed: 'The Vhalemba in respect of their faces and noses are well known to have been very handsome people, their noses were exactly like those of Europeans'. Plate IV on this work again shows a profile of a Lemba with a prominent 'semitic-looking' nose (Warmelo 1940: 63). An article in the *Jerusalem Post* (26 July 1986) similarly observed that among the Lemba 'some lack the Negroid features of their indigenous neighbours'.

When Tudor Parfitt was doing his fieldwork in Lemba villages in Zimbabwe he was urged to meet a man who everyone said was a typical Lemba: he had a prominent nose and what they said was a 'European face'. They were very proud of this man's look. In reality he was rather atypical but presented as typical. The illustrations in the small ethnographic literature follow this principle. The Lemba were expected to look Semitic: if they were to be thought of as Jews or Semites they had to correspond to the stereotype. It was fascinating to discover in our recent field work that in one Zimbabwe village the majority of respondents maintained that their 'Jewish' noses were one of the most important things about them.

6 The Lemba tests

Media and responses

Tests on the Lemba

In the mid-1990s a study was conducted by Spurdle and Jenkins to determine whether the Lemba may have had any genetic markers which would indeed point to a partly non-African origin. Such markers were found and indicated that there was a general Semitic contribution to the Lemba gene pool; however it was not possible to say whether this contribution could be Jewish (Spurdle and Jenkins 1996). To provide a more detailed account of the Lemba genetic heritage a further study building upon the Cohanim research and led by Mark Thomas was conducted later, which analysed 399 Y chromosomes for 6 microsatellites and 6 biallelic markers in 6 populations including the Lemba, Bantu, Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews. The study discovered that Lemba Y chromosomes were divided into Semitic and Bantu clades and interestingly, the allegedly most senior and allegedly most important for ritual purposes Lemba clan, the Buba, carried the Cohen Modal Haplotype at a high frequency (Thomas *et al.* 2000: 674). In other words, the genetic evidence turned out to be consistent with the oral tradition of the Lemba. Both Bantu, Jewish communities and other Semitic populations could have formed founding groups for some Lemba clans, though the CMH could have a purely Judaic origin (Thomas *et al.* 2000: 685).

Media coverage

When Tudor Parfitt first got interested in the Lemba in the late 1980s no one save a small handful of specialists had ever heard of them: they did not even figure in South African encyclopaedias. Now a Google search reveals some 26,300 (up from 5,000 in 1999) (admittedly not all of them to do with them – there is for instance a Latvian musician called Lemba who is responsible for some – but the great majority).

More often than not the popular literature promotes the idea of geneticists having discovered a ‘Jewish gene’ in the Lemba. If one takes a hard view of the data produced above it is clear that the Lemba indeed did substantially

originate via the male line – outside Africa. The presence of a haplotype which may be associated with the Jewish priesthood is to say the least intriguing in historical terms because we know of no Jewish incursion into central Africa. However in itself this evidence hardly justifies the conclusion proclaimed with such enthusiasm in for instance *Science et Vie* (August 1999, and August 2000) that the Lemba are actually Jewish. Indeed that conclusion is now more or less standard in the popular academic discourse. Steve Olson's book *Mapping Human History* includes a chapter entitled 'God's People' which devotes a couple of pages to the Lemba. 'At this point' he affirms 'their Jewish ancestry on the male side seems assured' (Olson 2002: 114). Again the truth is more ambiguous. As Olson himself points out the CMH is found fairly widely in the Middle East: all one can really say, as we have already mentioned, is that the Lemba may be shown to be of Middle Eastern extraction genetically and that the presence of the CMH is indeed surprising and fascinating and may point to a Jewish contribution at some time in history.

The story got itself on to the front page of the *New York Times* (Wade 1999) as well as countless newspapers throughout the world, and was the subject of two documentary films (a Channel 4 film *The Children of Abraham*, 1999 and the NOVA film *The Lost Tribes of Israel*, 2000) and a number of other TV reports and shows including the CBS '60 Minutes' show (23 April 2000).

The colonial fantasies we have mentioned earlier were unknown to the majority of the readership of the *New York Times* (Wade 1999) and other Western newspapers when the news of apparent genetic affinities between the Lemba and Jews broke. For them no doubt the idea that a Bantu-looking central African tribe were apparently Jewish came as something of a shock. When the news of the genetic studies linking the Lemba with the Jews became public the media headlines stressed the fact that the Lemba are black and the accompanying image often demonstrated what *kind* of black population was in question. Very often the image would feature the late Professor M.E.R. Mathivha, the spiritual and intellectual head of the South African Lemba, whose physical characteristics have nothing at all in common with what is perceived as a Jewish or 'Semitic' 'look'.

Using various resources of their own the films on the Lemba developed the issues picked up by the press. '60 Minutes' clearly stresses the blackness of the Lemba and poses the question of the possibility of Jewish 'blackness' at the centre of its report. In the beginning the presenter introduces the topic and we see the portrait of Professor Mathivha in the background. The commentary states that the Lemba look black but argue that they are Jewish. Right after that the camera shows the presenter asking the daughter of Professor Mathivha about the response she gets when she tells somebody about her Jewishness. She answers that the people's first reaction is: 'There are no black Jews.' Scepticism about the Lemba's Jewishness is expressed also in the interview with Tudor Parfitt, which follows the interview with

Mathivha's daughter. So, the message is that it is not only that Jewish 'blackness' is considered to be odd by the general public but that it is outside of the general consensus in Jewish Studies. The South African show 'Tobias's Bodies' (South African Broadcasting Corporation, 2002, episode 2) which investigates amongst other things constructions of race, uses the Lemba as an example of the inconsistencies of the concept of race. The presenter, a white person of European Jewish origin, as a part of his critique of apartheid, says that he shares genetic markers with the Lemba, a Jewish though Black group.

All the films emphasise the Jewish attributes of the Lemba. They are shown wearing Jewish skullcaps, Jewish prayer shawls or blowing a horn of some sort. In both documentaries we are made to believe that the latter is a *shofar*, as it follows the image of a Jew blowing a *shofar* in Jerusalem at the Wailing Wall.

The scientific part of the story is presented everywhere in a very engaging way. '60 minutes' features the main geneticists who participated in the research on the Cohanim and on the Lemba (Karl Skorecki, Michael Hammer, David Goldstein, Mark Thomas) who explain their work in accessible language. Presentation of the 'proof' of the Lemba affiliation to the Jews culminates in David Goldstein's showing the commentator and the audience two almost identical graphs, one relating to the priests and the other to the Lemba. The diagrams of course are meaningless for the layman, but we can indeed see that the two are very similar.

The description of the research on the Cohanim leaves in the mind of the viewer no shadow of a doubt that what was discovered was a particular 'priestly marker' and that it may be important for the Jewish community. Closer to the end of the report the commentator says that it is not just the Lemba who have been affected by the study. The very next shot shows David Goldstein who says that he discovered that he himself had the CMH. The impression is that the knowledge of his 'genetic priesthood' really matters to him, which is not necessarily the case. This impression is entirely due to the way the film-makers constructed the report. The viewer is left to wonder about the eligibility of those Cohanim who are known to be priests but do not have the CMH. And indeed the commentator had stated shortly before that to see whether the Lemba had the CMH was the way to test their claim.

At the end of the programme the presenter asks a prominent Lemba Samuel Moeti how it feels 'to have the outside world acknowledge what they have believed'. The results are directly referred to as 'scientific proof', which has rekindled the Lemba interest in their Jewish heritage. We learn that having found out about the results of the tests the Lemba decided to build a synagogue and to find a teacher of Hebrew. The only 'problem' with their religious identity which puzzles the presenter is that many Lemba are observant Christians. The answer is provided by Samuel Moeti and the daughter of Professor Mathivha: they are Jewish, but also Christian,

which is something that the Western audience can still relate to in the context of the 'Jews for Jesus' movement.

The idea of the scientific infallibility of genetic tests used to discover the origin of the Lemba and of the Cohanim is promoted quite actively in the NOVA programme *The Lost Tribes of Israel* which goes into detail describing the technicalities of the genetic work. At the very beginning of the film the narrator briefly introduces the story of the Lemba and argues that '[h]owever unlikely the Lemba's claims may seem, modern science is finding a way to test them.' Later he states that

Until recently, there has been no way to test the Lemba's belief in a Jewish heritage. But now a new key has been discovered that may unlock ancient mysteries: a key as basic as blood and bone, and infallible as a fingerprint – genetic markers that may confirm age-old Jewish belief.

DNA tests may indeed be described almost 'as infallible as a fingerprint', for instance, in some cases of paternity tests, but no geneticist would agree that it is the case with respect to testing the origin of communities.

As in the '60 Minutes' report, in *The Lost Tribes of Israel* the idea that DNA tests can determine one's Jewish origin is not really challenged and the question of how important the cultural aspect of Jewish identity is in comparison with 'biological' factors is not raised at all. It is not just the text but the way the film is constructed that attempts to convince the viewer that the results of the tests on the priests and on the Lemba do have an important bearing on Jewish history. For instance, when the narrator describes the results of the tests on the Cohanim, we see some graphs corresponding to the CMH juxtaposed with images of priests by the Wailing Wall and hear Jewish music. The message this image is trying to convey is clearly that this is the 'portrait' of the priestly gene. Later similar graphs are juxtaposed with the images of the Lemba, as if trying to say that though the Lemba are different in their looks from other Jews, they have a very similar genetic 'portrait' inside them.

It is interesting to note that all the three shows depict the research on the Cohanim at some length, though the main topic in all three films is the Lemba and it is only after the research on the Lemba that the film-makers became interested in the previous studies. The Cohen story has many exciting elements and yet was relatively well covered in the media only thanks to the research on the Lemba. We would suggest that it is the quixotic idea of black Jewishness that made the Lemba (and the Cohanim) a big story.

In the mass media the Lemba tests are discussed both by racist and anti-racist commentators. For instance, Mark Schoofs, a contributor to an online magazine *Village Voice* is among those who argue that the genetic research on the Lemba helps to deconstruct the very idea of race, as it proves that no matter what you look like you may have genes associated with very different groups (Schoofs 2002). Bettyann Holtzmann Kevles and

Marilyn Nissenson in their book *Picturing DNA*, published online, put forward the same argument:

The Lemba are Black. They believe that their ancestors came from the land of Israel, probably passed through southern Arabia and, centuries ago, crossed over into Africa. But they certainly don't look 'Jewish', and the mainstream Jewish community has not taken their claim of kinship to heart. If they really are Jews, what does this tell us about our assumptions of racial identity ...

This [research] provides validation for the Lemba and important news to the worldwide Jewish community about their far-flung cousins. But it is equally fascinating for what it tells everyone about race. This surprising genetic link between a tribe of black Africans and their European and Middle Eastern cousins suggests that if there is such a thing as race, it isn't a matter of skin color or a prominent nose.

(Kevles and Nissenson 2002)

Sadly, the theme of genetic research on the Lemba deconstructing the traditional perceptions of race based on phenotypical characteristics appears also in contemporary racist discourse. In 2002 *The Edgefield Journal*, a racist periodical of the American South hailed the research on the Lemba with joy, saying that it has proved what their 'colleagues' have always argued, that is that the Great Zimbabwe was built by Semites and not black Africans. Interestingly, they even revive the myth about the Lemba having lighter skin than their 'non-Jewish' neighbours:

Well, it turns out that the Lemba tribe that lives in and around the Zimbabwe ruins is of Semitic descent just as the Falashas are. Of course no one would have guessed it by looking at them, despite the fact that they are of considerably lighter skin tone than their Negro neighbors, but of Semitic descent they are. In fact, the Lembas have argued for years that they, too, are a lost tribe of Israel, but almost nobody paid them any attention because they were in the lowest part of Africa and they just didn't look the part.

(*The Edgefield Journal* 2002)

The author refers to the legends of the Lemba as 'remarkably accurate verbal histories' which have been confirmed now by 'serious scientists' and argues that there is certainly a connection between the Lemba and the Yemen. He does not have a shadow of a doubt that the tests have challenged 'the official politically correct line' about the origin of the Great Zimbabwe, but nevertheless he does not mind offending the alleged Jewish constructors of the Zimbabwe complex by saying that it is 'nothing more than a number of stone huts outside of an 800-foot oval stone wall constructed without any mortar'.

He refers also to an infamous article about the Lemba by Gayre of Gayre published in the *Mankind Quarterly* and argues that the genetic findings reported by the NOVA film prove that Gayre was right. However, he acknowledges that the company which produced the film probably would not agree with his interpretation of the story:

In fact, leftists are still maintaining the party line on Zimbabwe. On the PBS website they have a section on Zimbabwe where they still insist it was built by Negroes despite their own TV show demonstrating that the Lembas descend from Semites.

The idea that genetic tests on the Lemba actually prove their Jewish origin is not challenged here at all. The contributor constantly refers to the research as true, infallible science and that it finally helped 'to get at the truth'. The article finishes with an advertisement of *The Mankind Quarterly* recommending the readers to write to this journal if they wanted 'to read about race and ethnology from real scientists and not the liars who control the leftist media and academia'. Needless to say such statements do not embellish the image of genetics and encourage some to associate it with eugenics (see Chapter 2).

Missions to the Lemba

Even though no responsible Jewish religious authority has yet argued that any specific DNA could affect the question of who is or who is not a Jew, a number of groups throughout the world and particularly in the United States have taken the genetic research on the Lemba as an indication that they are indeed Jewish and should be admitted as a matter of course and urgency into *Kelal Israel*, the family of Israel.

The groups concerned may be labelled strongly liberal both in political and religious terms (although often to the right in strictly Israeli terms). The DNA results appeared to them as a vindication of the efforts made by the Lemba to have themselves recognised by other Jews as Jews: the results were taken as a weapon against what such groups perceive to be racist and exclusive attitudes in Israel and among Jewry in general. (It is broadly speaking the case that no Jewish organisation had previously shown any great interest in the Lemba.)

Since 1999 – which is to say since the DNA work on the Lemba became widely known in the United States, there have been a number of Jewish missions to the Lemba – in themselves fairly remarkable events as Jews are not known for proselytism. The first was Yaakov Levi, a Jewish educator who left the United States for South Africa in December 1999 under the auspices of *Kulanu*, an American organisation devoted to an inclusive view of who is a Jew and the discovery and reintegration of lost Jewish groups.¹ His mission was to bring normative Judaism to the Lemba. Kulanu's president,

Jack Zeller, called Levi's mission 'Kulanu's most creative outreach in our short six-year history' and observed 'Levi has, in a few months, "roughed out" the prospects for the next 100 years of a diaspora renaissance' (Kulanu 2000: 1). In January and August 2002 two further missions led by Rev. Léo Abrami, an American rabbi of French background, supported in the second case by rabbis from Johannesburg brought the message of normative Judaism to the Lemba: on the first occasion Tudor Parfitt was present and witnessed the passionate attempts on the part of the rabbi to wean the Lemba away from their Christian affiliations. In his report on the trip to be found on the Kulanu website Rabbi Abrami noted that he had taken the Lemba

laptop computers, many books for the library which is being created and which will become part of the Lemba Cultural Center and Synagogue in construction, copies of *What is a Jew* by Kerzer, *This is My God* by Herman Wouk, a copy of the new JPS Hebrew-English Bible and dozens of other books on Jewish theology, several manuals of Jewish history, Hebrew textbooks, over a hundred small Shabbat manuals, talitot and other educational material.

(Abrami 2001)

The same people in the United States who identify with what they perceive as the aspirations of the Lemba are also likely to be involved in the welfare of the Ethiopian Jews. The relationship of American Jews with African Americans has become painfully difficult over the last few decades. Notwithstanding impressive Jewish involvement in the civil rights movements and other anti-racist causes in the United States there has been severe criticism of it. Andrew Hacker, a political scientist, has argued that such involvement amounted to not much more than an 'ego trip' in which the blacks were the junior partners (Forman 1998: 12). Others have attacked Jewish involvement as that of assimilationist elites. In fact Jews of all social strata were uniquely sympathetic to blacks over most of the last century and are an inconvenience to those who try and construct a monolith of white racism. Indeed the Jews in the United States who historically have been neither black nor white, in race terms represent as Seth Forman has put it 'a threat to the crude dichotomy of white "sin" and "black" virtue' promoted by black extremists and certain white radicals. Forman goes on to observe that it is precisely the 'whiteness' of Jews which is stressed in the discourse of black anti-Semites as they construct the Jewish control over Hollywood, the federal government or the slave trade.

The forging of intimate relationships with distant black communities with Jewish aspirations (not only the *Beta Israel* and the Lemba but also among others, the Abayudaya community of Mbale in Uganda (Oded 1974: 173; Twaddle 1993; Primack 1998: 168-244) and a group in the village of Sefwi Wiawso in Ghana (Kulanu 2003) may be an attempt to

traverse barriers with more closely situated black communities which may appear insurmountable at home in New York, Washington and elsewhere. For them then the genetic studies on the Lemba may be presumed to have great ideological value as they may be used to prove that Zionism or Judaism are not, as claimed by their detractors, racist.

The Lemba response

Did all these efforts and the mediatisation of the results of the genetic research make any impact on the Lemba community? We have tried to assess the Lemba response through about two dozen in-depth conversations and through 100 fairly detailed questionnaires conducted in 2003 in Zimbabwe and South Africa. The questionnaires were distributed as widely as possible throughout the areas of Lemba settlement. Some were taken from areas where many Lemba have taken up Islam in Zimbabwe, others were from the rural Mposi chieftainship in Zimbabwe, others yet from urban and rural areas of South Africa, mainly areas around Louis Trichardt and Pretoria. In both Zimbabwe and South Africa English is an official language, usually the language of education and *lingua franca*. Not all Lemba are literate but those that are are probably literate in English. Illiterate Lemba are no doubt poorly represented in this sample. It is difficult to imagine a situation in either Zimbabwe or South Africa where an English-speaking Lemba is very far away. Therefore it was always possible to have someone translate the questionnaire for the rare individual who was incapable of reading it in English. We tried to ensure that women were equally represented as respondents; this was difficult in a society where matters pertaining to tradition and history have always been deemed a completely male preserve. However these notions are now being eroded and among younger Lemba and particularly among younger urban Lemba it was easier to find female respondents. The constraints of time, geography and tradition all militated against our Lemba sample being a fully representative cross section of the population but it is close to being so. One caveat is that those parts of the Lemba population who are vehemently against the idea that the Lemba are Jews were much more reluctant to participate in the survey and the remoter the community and the further away from the beaten track the less likely they were to be visited by us.² When we refer to the observations of respondents these are taken either from notes taken as the questionnaires were being filled out (some of the questions were quite revealing) or from more formal extended interviews or in some cases directly from the questionnaire. The language of the interviews was almost always English and by and large the respondents were known to Tudor Parfitt, who has been working with the Lemba on and off for about 15 years, or related to someone known to him. He has visited very many of the Lemba villages throughout South Africa

and Zimbabwe collecting ethnographic material, filming, recording and collecting DNA samples. With few exceptions people were happy and willing to talk to us.

Interviews

Rudo Mathivha

Dr Rudo Mathivha is the daughter of Professor Mathivha. A doctor at an academic hospital in Johannesburg, she is a very well-educated and articulate woman. We asked whether anything changed in her life after the tests and, in her opinion, in the life of the community and particularly in their interactions with South African Jewry. Rudo was somewhat bitter about the latter. Her opening remark was that there was no communication between the Johannesburg Jews and the Lemba, although by her own admission later in the interview it was clear that she at least had some contacts both social and official. She occasionally attends a Reform synagogue, where she admitted she and her son were made welcome and were not interrogated about the nature of their Jewish affiliation. She has a number of Jewish friends, for instance among the doctors at the hospital where she works who accepted her Jewishness. Rudo had some resentment about the treatment she and the Lemba in general had received from the Orthodox Jews. When she had tried to attend an Orthodox synagogue she was questioned in what she took to be a hostile way by its members. She agreed that in the apartheid era regulations enforced were an impediment to the relations between the South African Jewish community and the Lemba.

Rudo expressed great indignation at what appears to be the official position of South African Jewry, some of whom would not want even to convert the Lemba to say nothing about accepting them as Jews without conversion. As far as Dr Mathivha is concerned any suggestion of conversion is taken as an insult. 'We were born Jewish, we were brought up Jewish, how can we possibly convert to Judaism?', she said. This indignant response was echoed by many other Lemba interviewed and indeed was not dissimilar to the indignation expressed so vocally by Ethiopian Jews, *mutatis mutandis*, when faced with the similar demands.

Rudo was particularly critical of those who argue that the main motive behind the Lemba's aspirations to be considered Jewish was economic. She countered this by saying she herself was obviously not in need of charity, nor were the rest. None of them wanted to go to Israel. They were happy to remain South Africans. Later she observed that none of the Lemba ever benefited from being associated with the Jews. For instance, nobody was getting any places in local Jewish firms.

One of the chief promoters of the Lemba in Johannesburg, a vocal Kulanu member Rufina Silva Mausenbaum, is a good friend of Rudo's.

She sees her fairly regularly and travelled with her to Portugal with a group of ex-conversos seeking their roots in the Iberian peninsula. This group too she found to be accepting of her Jewishness. Mausenbaum's activities aimed at educating the Lemba youth were allegedly disapproved of by Chief Rabbi Harris.

It is interesting to note that on her occasional visits to the United States and specifically to San Francisco she encountered Reform Jews who had no difficulty in accepting her as a Jewess. Rabbi Rosen of one of the local synagogues said *kaddish* for her father. They were perfectly well aware of the existence of the Lemba when she arrived. Overall her conversation supported the view that whereas the Lemba's narrative has been affected in a number of ways by the genetic news, it was even more true for the narrative of foreign Jews, and she cited particularly American and British Jewish response as much more radically transformed. Many people got in touch with her in the wake of the '60 minutes' programme in which she featured.

We asked her whether the news of the genetic research had had any impact on the way she perceived her own colour. Her initial and perhaps overhasty response was to exclaim that she was a black South African 'fullstop' and that she was a human being. But later she went on to assert that in fact she did think that Lemba by and large were paler than their neighbours and that that was particularly true of the older people. She made the same claim with respect to Semitic features and 'Jewish noses' stressing that these features were particularly prevalent among the older members of the tribe. Perhaps the implication was that there was more intermarriage now than before or it could be that in the same way that the elders were always thought of as custodians of authentic Jewish traditions that as such they might be expected to share phenotypical elements with Jews.

As far as black South Africans are concerned, in her experience the Jewishness of the Lemba had never been called into question, although she readily agreed that since the media coverage of the genetic research, the Lemba had become much more visible among blacks than among whites. In the past most black South Africans would not have known anything about this small tribe, while now they are quite well known. President Mbeki had promised the Lemba to come and inaugurate the so-called synagogue which they plan to open in an area near Elim hospital in the Northern Province.

She stressed that for the Lemba themselves the impact of the DNA research had not been overwhelming, but it simply confirmed an oral tradition which they had always considered to be true. A recently formed women's group which gets together once a year and discusses different issues relating to social, cultural and religious life of the Lemba had discussed the issue and their view was that the genetics had simply provided added proof for the narrative with which they had been brought up. It is interesting to note that this group, which among other things tries to bring their religious practice closer to more regular Judaism was formed only two years ago, that is after the publication of the results of the DNA tests.

The argument that the genetics news was no more than a confirmation of what they already knew contrasts with her belief that since the genetics news Lemba religious practice has been substantially affected. She is one of several who now attempt to lead an 'Orthodox' Jewish life. We met for lunch one Friday and she was anxious to get back before the beginning of Sabbath. She plans to *bar mitzvah* her son. Her brother Getszu is now leading, according to her, an orthodox life. Infant circumcision has not yet been introduced. She did mention one Lemba boy, her nephew, who had been circumcised at four years of age which is much younger than the norm among the Lemba who usually carry it out at the time of puberty.

One of the great stumbling blocks for the Jewish community as was confirmed by the local rabbis was that the Lemba's claim to Jewishness hardly tallied with their religious practice which is largely Christian. Dr Mathivha's view was that this was irrelevant. She and people like her, so she said, were not accepting the divinity of Jesus, but were happy to perceive him as perhaps the greatest prophet. 'We can be viewed as Hebrew Christians', she said. She also maintained as do many Lemba that when she was growing up, notwithstanding that they practised a kind of Judaism at home, at school they were required to be Christian and to be baptised. She claimed that the community elders were now leading the way to introducing the young people to 'authentic' Jewish practice. Her conversation was peppered with Hebrew and Yiddish expressions, *shlep* and *Shabat* being two.

The Soweto Lemba

An extended conversation with a group of Lemba from Soweto also cast some interesting light on the impact of the genetic research on the community. In the first place the research was warmly welcomed. The results moreover had had what was clearly a life enhancing effect upon all those present. 'Now we know that we are related to the Jews,' they said. They all stressed that they felt more Jewish and closer to the Jewish people since the results had been published. We asked them to assess the number of those Lemba who knew about the tests and the answer was that many Lemba knew about them and only those who had married outside of the Lemba community were not aware of them. In addition they went to some length to explain how the knowledge of the results had had the effect of making the Lemba tribe more cohesive. They said that these days Lemba funerals were much better attended than they had been in the past, and that thousands of people would come to these occasions. In fact they thought that the publicity had made the true size of the community evident for the first time. 'There are probably more Lemba now than there are Venda,' they said. Recently there had been a Lemba and a Venda funeral side by side and the Lemba had so much outnumbered the Venda that the Lemba had had to help the Venda bury their dead.

They had certainly been fully aware of television, radio and newspaper accounts of the genetic research. Professor Mathivha had, they said, gone to great lengths to circulate such films as Steve Jones's BBC series *In the Blood*, which featured the Lemba and what was then known of their genetic peculiarities.

In the past partly for reason of apartheid-led politics they had had to be somewhat cautious about revealing themselves as Lemba. Back in 1958, so they recalled, a delegation had gone to Dr Verwoerd and whereas he apparently had had no objection to their proclaiming themselves Lemba in their passbooks, the traditional leadership in Vendaleland where Lemba lived for the most part and the Venda chiefs were against it. The Venda they said were never prepared to accept that they were already different. They insisted that they were simply a subsection of Venda. What the publicity around the genetic research had done was to make the Lemba visible in South African terms. Their Venda neighbours had also read the reports in the newspapers and had been aware of the radio and television documentaries. The genetic research as it was relayed had had the effect of giving them enhanced status both in Venda circles as well as among other groups such as Zulus and Xhosa in Soweto. The fact of having the same blood, as they put it, as Jews, who are widely perceived as being rich and powerful was very empowering in the wider society. The tests not only made them more visible but confirmed their claim to Jewishness for their neighbours. They said astonishingly that some Venda these days try to pass for Lemba.

Our informants' comprehension of the tests was articulated through the metaphor of blood. They insisted that they had the same blood as Jews. This fact confirmed what they had always said: that they were phenotypically different from their non-Lemba neighbours. They insisted that the Lemba 'look' involved paler skin and long noses. In the past, of course, many many generations ago they had been white and this fact formed part of their oral tradition, 'We always used to call ourselves the white men who came from Sena' and now 'we have the proof.' In their own account the fact that they had been shown to have Jewish blood had indeed opened doors to the Jewish community. According to them, they were now frequent social exchanges, numerous Lemba had visited Jewish homes and Jews in general were now much more open towards them. That this had not been true in the past they attributed to the divisions between black and white created by apartheid.

It had also impacted upon their religious sensibilities. Though they still attended church (they were Catholics and Lutherans), church attendance no longer had the same meaning for them. They were aware that their priests or pastors were not very enthusiastic about their recently revealed history but they attributed this to their desire to hang on to their congregation. But increasingly they felt a gulf between them and Christian belief and praxis. The rest of the congregation of which they formed a part of believed that the Messiah had come. They now believed that the Messiah

was yet to come. The reasons for continuing to go to church were expressed as habit and even laziness. They had gone all their lives and it was difficult to break out of it. In addition, there was no institutional alternative. There had been, they told us, attempts to found a synagogue in Pretoria which came to nothing. They deeply desired a synagogue to be constructed in Soweto. As they said, there were no funds available for this purpose. They said with some pride that at the recent funeral of Professor Mathivha the ceremony had been conducted in a purely 'Jewish' way at Professor Mathivha's request. He had been buried as a Jew and the name of Jesus was not mentioned at all during the funeral service. A young man of about twenty-four who officially belonged to the Lutheran church explained that he did not go to church anymore: he was deeply confused between what he knew now to be the authentic Lemba tradition and the claims of the church. They also observed that at home they introduced a number of Jewish practices, like lighting candles and the wearing of skull caps.

For this group from Soweto the effect of the publicity had been to confirm their oral tradition, to confirm a traditional belief in their physical difference to bring them closer to Jews and Jews to them, to make the overall tribe more cohesive, better known and more respected and to give them a new and substantially higher status than they had hitherto enjoyed.

Frederick C. Raulinga Hamisi and William M. Masala Mhani

Both William and Frederick are leading lights in the Lemba Cultural Association (LCA) and William indeed is its chaplain. According to them, the results of the genetic tests had an extremely positive effect on the status of the community. They pointed out that they had always known that they were foreigners in southern Africa, but that the tests gave them more exact knowledge about their ancestry. Quite apart from that, they argued that the publication of the results of the tests had raised their status among their Venda neighbours. Like our respondents from Soweto, Frederick and William confirmed that it was only after the tests that the Venda believed that they were a separate group and not just a subdivision of the Venda. They both also argued that the tests had confirmed that the Lemba had different blood.

It is interesting to consider the way they perceived the results of the tests. According to them, what was proven was that about 50 per cent of the Lemba had Jewish blood or a Jewish gene and the frequency of this gene among the Buba was even higher than among Israeli Jews. Our respondents argued that this was not surprising given that the Lemba had always kept aloof from their neighbours and did not encourage strangers to enter their group. According to them, the physical features of the Lemba were also rather different from those of the Venda, who had darker skin and flatter noses. These differences, they felt, were particularly pronounced in the past

when the Lemba had fewer intermarriages with Venda girls, who could enter the community only after a difficult initiation rite.

We asked them whether the religious identity of the Lemba has changed since the publication of the results of the tests. Frederick felt that only very few Lemba started practising Judaism and even those who did so did not know much about it. Our informants were both Christian and argued that their beliefs had not changed. They believed that Jesus was the Messiah and insisted that they were Jewish Christians. When we pointed that this may generate questions from the Jews they said, that despite the long history of Christian persecution of the Jews, animosity could be transcended and the two religions could co-exist. They founded these views on precise passages from the New Testament. In other words they created for themselves a theology which enabled them to consider themselves both Jewish and Christian, but at the same time, it seemed to us that the discussion of Christianity was somewhat painful for them.

William for some years now, and we think since the earlier reports of Jenkins's study on the genetics of the Lemba, has tried as he put it to find a middle way when he conducts prayers on the occasion of the annual LCA get together. The middle way for him implies not mentioning the name of Christ or quoting from the New Testament. The reason for this was that in the past such Christological references had been deemed offensive by some of the membership. Frederick stressed that it was not possible to move directly from Christianity to Judaism because there was such a total absence of information about Jewish belief and practice and the three missions which have taken place over the last year or so (the first in January 2002) were simply not sufficient to fill the vacuum that would be left by the mass abandonment of the Christian faith. He did, however, confirm that there were a significant number of Lemba who practice Judaism in their own way.

They kept coming to the word 'culture', which they used in a very specific way maintaining that being a Lemba is a question of birth and blood and does not necessarily imply the practice of any particular religion: one could be a Christian, Jewish or Muslim Lemba. Lemba culture is something apart from religion. Lemba culture is simply what Lemba people do and it is significant that their one communal organisation, the LCA, stresses in its name this particular reading of what the word culture might mean.

In any case he said he would welcome foreign Jews who would come to teach the Lemba and particularly the Lemba youth about normative Judaism, because this would give them the occasion to choose between one religion and the other. For the moment they could not do that.

Questionnaires

There was very little hesitation on the part of the Lemba in consenting to give their DNA. In Zimbabwe some of the young men refused on the grounds that they thought Parfitt would be making money out of 'their blood' and they wanted their share. Others harboured suspicions that it had

something to do with AIDS and they were fearful. Others yet wanted to know who was sufficiently interested in this kind of research to finance a long journey from London and there was a vague suspicion about motives. But by and large the vast majority wanted to participate and were prepared to stand in queue for a long time to play their part. It later emerged that a major source of complaint was that everyone should have been tested, that everyone should have had the opportunity to participate in this unravelling of the past. As Parfitt went through the process of gaining consent for the study he explained that everyone had a 'document' within them which was of value. This contrasts with other types of historical evidence which he had tried to collect from both groups in the past. In the case of the Lemba there are no written sources before the advent of colonialism: the Lemba however have strong oral traditions and these have always been the principal source of information sought by scholars. Not everyone in the past felt able to contribute traditions: it was always considered to be the function of the chief or other well-informed elders. In the case of the DNA collections it was clear that everyone was of equal value.

The main aims of our Lemba questionnaire were to assess the degree to which the Lemba were aware of the tests conducted among the community, to find out how they got to know about the tests, what they made of the results and whether there was any relationship between their religious identity and their perception of the tests. We got back 100 copies of questionnaires filled in by the Lemba of different parts of South Africa and the southern part of Zimbabwe.

One set of questions was aimed at assessing the degree to which our respondents identified as Jews/Israelites and what their knowledge of Judaism was. About 65 per cent of our respondents in answer to the question about their religious affiliation identified themselves as Christians (about one third of them did not specify the denomination of Christianity they belonged to, another third said they belonged to the Zion Christian Church (ZCC), a black South African denomination, and among the rest there were those belonging to the Church of Christ, Lutherans, Roman Catholics and others). Two people identified themselves as black Jews. These and practically all those who identified themselves as Christians said 'yes' when asked whether they believe in the idea of the Israelite/Jewish origin of the Lemba. There were 11 respondents who identified themselves as Muslims and only 2 of them thought that Lemba were Jewish. The idea of the Lembas' Jewishness was popular mainly among Christians.

Another question asked to assess the number of those Lemba who believed in the Lembas' Jewishness. Of these 37 per cent argued that those Lemba whom they were meeting through participation in various communal organisations seemed to believe in it (almost all of them were from the ZCC) and 25 per cent answered that all or almost all Lemba believed in this idea. Only 10 per cent responded that many or from 50 to 75 per cent of the Lemba thought that their community was of Israelite origin. Interestingly out of 12 respondents who did not believe in Lembas'

Jewishness themselves 10 answered that many other Lemba did. When asked what the religion of the Lemba generally was 42 people answered Judaism, 17 – Islam, 14 – Christianity and the rest defined it as ‘culture’, ‘tradition’, ‘both Christianity and Islam’, etc. Out of those who identified the religion of the Lemba as Judaism earlier 21 wrote that they belonged to the ZCC and the rest of them included individual answers identifying their own religious affiliation as Lemba, black Jews, Lutherans, etc. We would suggest that the fact that many of those who did not identify their religion as Judaism still wrote that that was the religion of the Lemba and that many thought that a large part of their community believed in Lembas’ Israelite origin clearly indicates that our respondents were very well acquainted with the idea of the Lembas’ Jewishness and that it was discussed in their immediate milieu. However, we should not forget that we had a chance to distribute questionnaires mainly among those Lemba who could be expected to know about the discourse on their Israelite origin (like, for instance, among those who attended the meetings of the LCA).

Another question asked whether their community had any contacts with other Jewish groups in the world. Here 54 respondents said yes and those who chose to specify with which groups exactly mentioned Israelis, American Jews (some named Kulanu), Jews in Yemen (probably meaning historical contacts) and Jews in Zimbabwe (maybe meaning other Lemba or other black Jewish groups). In response to the question about the links between Israel and the Lemba, 40 out of 77 people who gave an answer said that they were ‘blood’ links, or that the Lemba themselves were a part of Israel, or that they had common ancestors with the Israelis.

The majority of the respondents demonstrated a rather Biblical understanding of who the Jews were and what Judaism was. About 80 per cent described Jews as the children of Abraham, Israel or Judah. There were 4 people who identified Jews with the Lemba and one person with the Israelis. Judaism was defined by 63 per cent as Jewish religion, 5 people said they did not know what it was and 5 described it as the religion of the Old Testament. Another question asked the respondents to define anti-Semitism and 54 per cent gave an adequate answer (hatred of the Jews, discrimination against the Jews, etc.). Other individual answers included ‘hatred of Semites’, ‘hatred of Jews and Arabs’, ‘hatred of Jews, Arabs and the Lemba’. The community who gave predominantly adequate answers were Zion Christians (22 out of 24 answered ‘discrimination against the Jews’). Another question asked where it was good and where it was bad to be a Jew. The most popular answer (28 people) was that it was good to be a Jew in business, however, otherwise it was generally ‘bad’, as Jews were ‘hated everywhere’.

When asked about the most important feature of their traditions, 32 respondents named trade, 15 said that it was their dietary laws, and 15 thought it was the custom of circumcising their male children. Among the rest of them there were only individual answers including, for instance,

'fishing', 'drums', 'brick laying', 'arranging marriages', etc. Practically nobody made a reference to any specific religion. One person said that the most important feature of his tradition was celebrating Christmas. Another question asked to determine what the most important feature of their heritage was. Again 38 defined it as trading, 8 as circumcision and 7 said that it was that the Lemba were unique. Other responses did not refer to any particular religion. Was there any correlation between the Lemba answers to these questions and the questions about their own or their community's religious identity? It appears that those who identified themselves as Muslims and Christians (without specifying the denomination of Christianity) tended to stress diet and circumcision. ZCC followers stressed mainly trade. Out of 42 people who argued that the religion of the Lemba was Judaism, 29 named trade as the most important feature of their tradition and 31 as the best feature of their heritage.

The most popular answer to the question 'What does it mean to be a Lemba for you?' was 'to know where I come from' (21 respondents). The second popular answer was 'to be unique' (10 respondents) and the third was 'to be chosen' (8 respondents). Interestingly, 20 out of those who gave the first answer when asked where it was good and bad to be a Jew thought that it was good in business and bad generally, because Jews were hated and 17 of them had identified the Lemba religion with Judaism. In answer to the question 'What are the most important aspects of your identity?' 17 people gave a surprising response of 'long nose' (the most popular answer) and 7 said 'trade and long nose'. Of those 17, 13 had said that Lembas' religion was Judaism and they all identified themselves as ZCC. In other words, interestingly, those who thought the religion of the Lemba was Judaism (though most of them did not name it as their own religion) stressed the importance of their origin to their identity and came up with a Western, more often than not anti-Semitic, stereotype about Jewish physicality.

Another question asked the respondents whether being a Lemba was to do with religion, blood or history: 42 people said blood, 27 – all three, 15 – history and 4 – religion. Other individual answers maintained that it was a combination of two. Some people explicitly said 'not religion'. Interestingly, 18 of those 21 who in answer to the question 'What does it mean to be a Lemba for you?' said 'to know where I come from' in this question chose 'blood'. In other words their biological make up was the essential ingredient of their identity.

Let us see now whether there was any relationship between religious identity or attitude towards Lemba Jewishness and their knowledge and perception of the genetic tests. We know that 80 per cent of the Lemba respondents knew about the tests. Interestingly, the percentage of those who knew about the *results* was rather low – only about 25 per cent of those who knew about the tests. Many respondents were under the impression that the results had not been published yet and were still forthcoming. How did they learn about the tests? The majority of the respondents had

difficulties with answering this question and the main source of knowledge for those who did answer it was 'newspapers'. They mentioned mainly the South African press and the Kulanu journal.

One of the questions asked the respondents to define genetics. Of these respondents 57 per cent described it as a study of genes or heredity, 17 per cent thought that it was a blood test, and 9 per cent out of those reckoned that it was a blood test with the aim of identifying origin. Five people said they did not know what it was and one person thought that it was a test to identify the origin of the Lemba. In answer to the question, 'When was the first time you heard about genetic tests?', almost everybody answered that it was in the 1990s, which probably indicates that they learnt about genetics when tests were conducted on the Lemba.

A number of questions looked at the respondents' perception of the purpose of the tests. Only about 30 per cent answered this question and all of them thought that it was to check whether there was a connection between Jews and Lemba. Interestingly, 11 of them said that the purpose was to see if 'Lemba *still* had Jewish genes/blood' [emphasis added]. The second popular answer (11 respondents) was that it was to find out whether they were still 'real Lemba'. There is a correlation between answers to this question and to a question assessing the perceived changes in Lemba identity – 7 out of 11 people who had said that the purpose of the test was to see if they were still 'real' Lemba argued that these days members of their community did not know anymore whether they were real Lemba or not.

Were there any other links between answers about the purpose of the tests and those about religious identity? As was shown earlier, there was a significant discrepancy between the respondents' answers to the question about their own religious affiliation and the religion of the Lemba (42 people who named Judaism had identified themselves as Christians). The answer that the geneticists were testing Lembas' Jewishness was quite popular both among those who thought that the religion of the Lemba was Judaism and those who thought that it was Christianity, which is not surprising given the way the tests had been portrayed in the mass media. None of those who named Islam (16 people altogether) spoke of the genetic research testing the Jewishness of their community. The reason may be explained by the fact that they do not support the idea of Lembas' Jewishness. In response to the question about the purpose of the tests 9 out of 11 people who gave the rather unusual answer that it was to see whether the community were still 'real' Lemba had named Judaism as the Lemba religion. In other words, this very specific answer indicating the concern of those who gave it about their origin comes from those whose sense of affiliation to the Jews is stronger. It should be noted also that 10 out of these 11 when asked 'What does it mean to be a Lemba for you?' answered that it was to know where they came from. Apart from that, the same people when asked about the recent changes in the meaning of being Lemba also expressed concern over members of their community no longer knowing whether they were Lemba.

In response to a question about what the object of the tests was, 59 respondents replied: the most popular answer was 'blood' (25 people). Some of them argued that the Lemba blood or genes in the blood were to be compared with 'Jewish genes'. What's more, 11 said that the scientists were trying to find out what the real blood of the Lemba was, 7 people said that what was researched was saliva and only a few individuals offered answers like 'genes', DNA or chromosomes. It is surprising that the most popular answer was 'blood' given that it was collected only in the very first tests conducted by Trefor Jenkins while in the late 1990s it was saliva. Apparently 'blood' is better remembered by the respondents because they knew that the tests were about the origin of the Lemba and it is blood that in popular imagination is 'in charge' of the origin of and differences between peoples. Apart from that, as answers to one of the questions showed, some were acquainted with the documentary based on Steve Jones's book *In the Blood*, which among other things dealt with the tests on the Lemba.

What was the attitude of the respondents towards the tests and their results? All those who gave an answer to this question were very positive about them. There was not a single negative or sceptical answer. The question asking the respondents what in their view other members of their community thought about the tests produced very diverse answers. The majority of them were positive, some stressed that they had consolidated the community and that now the Lemba would be better known. However some complained that not many Lemba were aware of the tests and particularly the results.

Several questions asked whether they thought the Lemba were properly consulted, whether they were happy with the way the tests had been conducted and what better ways of organising them they envisaged. In answer to the first question 37 people said 'yes' and 18 said 'no'. Others did not answer. The suggestions for a better organisation of this type of tests included informing all the Lemba about the tests in advance, testing more/or all the Lemba and employing Lemba researchers to conduct the tests so that they could indicate who should be tested. Apparently the implication here is that Lemba know better who would make suitable ('pure-blooded') candidates in their communities for this research. Some people wished that they had been tested as well, as due to their involvement in the tests the Lemba had acquired some sort of power. When asked whether it was right for the Europeans to be involved in this research, 40 per cent did not answer, 50 per cent said yes. Others said either that it did not matter who conducted the research or that it was wrong and 8 per cent out of those who answered the question in the affirmative explained that they thought it was right for the Europeans to get involved in the tests either because there were Jews also among the Europeans or because there were Jews among the researchers who conducted the tests. Hence it may be that this positive attitude towards European involvement in the tests was determined by the respondents' feeling of affiliation to the Jews. In other words,

they trusted the Europeans only as far as there was this bridge between them and the Lemba.

A number of questions asked the respondents whether they thought the knowledge of the results of the tests had affected the life of their community. The majority did not answer the question, some explained that they were not acquainted with the results. Of those who did, 16 people answered in the affirmative. Some of them explained that since the tests the Lemba had felt more confident in their beliefs, that their claim had been confirmed. One person said that they had always known that they were Jewish, so the knowledge of the tests could not have affected their life. Another question asked whether Lemba were more Jewish since after the tests. Out of 52 people who answered this question 27 said yes and 16 said no.

Several questions looked at the possible effect the tests could have had on the relations between the Lemba and others. In answer to the question if the attitude of the Lemba towards their neighbours had changed since the tests 14 people said that it was definitely the case. More elaborate answers among them included the following: there is a scientific difference between the Lemba and other people around them, now they knew for sure that they were Jewish, the tests were purifying and set the Lemba apart from the others.

When asked whether their non-Lemba neighbours knew about the tests only 14 people said yes. Only 3 people added that now they knew that the Lemba were real Jews, one person argued that they began to realise the real power of the Lemba and one person observed that they were jealous that they had not been tested. As mentioned earlier, we heard remarks similar to this one also in our interviews with individual Lemba, who would mention that after the tests the Venda finally believed that the Lemba were Jewish and that they were different.

Another set of questions looked at the way the respondents perceived the image of the Lemba in South Africa in general. In answer to the question whether the Lemba were a popular group in South Africa 72 respondents said yes and only 3 said no. Others did not know for sure. When asked whether the Lemba were liked more or less after the tests or if any changes had occurred in the image of the Lemba 26 people out of 56 who gave an answer thought that the Lemba were liked more, 3 that they are liked less and 2 thought that they had always been liked. The rest thought that the others did not know about the tests. One person argued that the rest of South Africans were convinced that the Lemba just wanted to go to Israel.

Finally, did the tests in the view of our respondents affect their relations with South African Jews and with the rest of the Jewish community? Here 15 people felt that the Lemba became better known to South African Jews. Others thought the relations had not been affected. As far as the relations with the Jews in general were concerned 16 people thought that they became closer. The responses did not demonstrate any bitterness towards Western Jews. The problem of 'recognition' appeared only in a couple of responses. The majority of those who thought that the relations between

the Lemba and the Jews had changed since after the tests reckoned that they became better. Those who thought that nothing had changed did not make any negative remarks about the attitude of the wider Jewish community towards the Lemba and many explained the absence of any change by the fact that Western and South African Jews did not know about the tests. As was mentioned above more than one half of the respondents argued that the Lemba had contacts with Jews in Israel and the United States.

Finally, the last question asked whether the meaning of being Lemba had changed recently and if so, why? Here, 33 respondents answered no, 13 – yes, without further explanation and 11 answered yes explaining that now they were more proud to be Lemba or that others now wanted to be considered Lemba and that these changes were brought about by the tests.

It is difficult to overestimate the importance of the media coverage of the tests on the Lemba and the impact that they had on the outside world. Geneticists and those who reported their activities almost ‘invented’ the Lemba as a Jewish community for ‘outsiders’ who would have never learnt about the ‘Jewishness’ of the Lemba but for the media coverage of the tests. The effect that the tests had on the Lemba is visible though not widespread. In September 2002 Tudor Parfitt attended the annual meeting of the LCA and observed that for the first time they were connecting this event with the Jewish New Year and were using the Hebrew formula *Shanah Tovah* – which again they had never done before as well as a number of other Hebrew expressions. Among some of the elite, though not generally among the Lemba, one can see the beginnings of a revival of a non-Christian Semitic/Judaic looking religion which again did not exist before – or which more precisely had been destroyed leaving little coherent trace. It is difficult to overestimate the efforts of one person, Professor Mathivha, to keep the Lemba elite abreast of affairs by sending them video cassettes of films and copies of articles that had appeared in the press.

It appears that it was the elite which derived most value from the media reports. It was the elite which had in the past attempted to present the Lemba as Jews to the various organs of South African Jewry. They had no evidence at that time to support their claims: the DNA research could now be used as evidence and it was extremely effective in opening new channels of communication with South African Jews and also with Jews elsewhere, particularly in the United States. As a result the Lemba leadership was increasingly drawn into a wide range of networks which were closed to them before.

But the results may have done something for the wider community simply in the context of their Christian practice: now after all they could reasonably present themselves to other non-Lemba Christians, which they know in many cases very intimately, as members of the Chosen People so often referred to in the Bible. The scattered nature of the tribe however and the

inaccessibility of the rural areas in which many of them live have meant that the information has reached them in a very approximate form. The direct impact of the media coverage on the totality of the Lemba in Zimbabwe as in South Africa was probably quantitatively slight. Even though there were quite a few reports in South Africa on TV, radio and in the press, few of these got directly to the rural populations concerned. Word of mouth accounted for more of the impact but probably in the majority of cases the rural Lemba were ignorant of the DNA results. A much greater impact of the Lemba story is discernible in the West where the media coverage of the issue created a new geography of Jewish populations in the perceptions of many Jews and non-Jews.

Finally, one should not forget about the influence of local realities on the reactions to the tests. South Africa is of course a society where colour gradations have had pre-eminent importance in the classification of groups. The Lemba who had always maintained that despite their blackness they were the 'white men who came from Sena' and who thought of themselves as having Western traits such as 'Jewish' noses could now point to the genetic results as a proof of a shared physicality with the white Jewish elite of the great South African cities.

The response of South African Jews

The relations between the Lemba and South African Jewry have proven to be rather complicated and have raised a number of issues relating to the context of South African society. Gideon Shimoni in his study of the relationship between local Jews and the apartheid system has noted that over the years different black groups in South Africa have claimed Jewish descent. They all were rejected by local Jewry on the grounds that these claims were halakhically unacceptable. However, apparently one of the reasons why the South African Jewish establishment preferred to keep aloof from such groups was that they did not want to involve their community in contravention of the apartheid system (Shimoni 2003).

There were some cases when black South Africans tried to convert to Judaism like, for instance, Vuyisile Msitshana who decided to practice Judaism after he met Jews in a prisoner-of-war camp in Poland at the end of the Second World War. Later, in South Africa, he established a black community practising Judaism in Soweto. The size of the community at the end of the 1970s is alleged at one point to have reached 600. The self-styled Rabbi Msitshana was never recognised by the local white Jewish community, though he managed to establish some contact with Jews from Cape Town. Apparently, the Soweto community disappeared after Msitshana was sent to Robben Island in 1977 for his political activities, where he spent five years (Whitehead 1982).

There were individual cases of black people converting to Judaism at white Orthodox synagogues. The most prominent and widely publicised case was that of Geoff Ramokgadi, the first convert who succeeded in

acquiring the support of the South African Orthodox Jewish community. He decided to convert in 1990 and it took him more than eight years of practising Judaism *de facto* and undergoing the necessary training in Judaism in Johannesburg.

Ramokgadi was born in Rustenburg, a town north west of Johannesburg and is a member of a Tswana tribe. His interest in the Jewish religion was mainly due to the fact that when he was a child his mother worked in the house of a Johannesburg Jewish family, with whom Geoff would spend his summer holidays and who helped him with his education. During this period he got acquainted with literature about the Holocaust. According to Geoff, it was this that influenced his decision to convert:

Nothing struck me more forcibly than the horrors of the Holocaust and the oppression of Jews over the ages. I empathised with what they had to endure, having also been the victim of oppression under apartheid and having the insult *kaffir* (black) hurled at me when I was a member of the first multi-racial South African pop group.

(Belling 1998b)

His musical career brought him to Swaziland, where he married a member of the local royal family. The couple visited the State of Israel and were fascinated by the country. Geoff was delighted to discover Ethiopian Jews and decided that if they could be Jewish so could he. He turned to the *Beth Din* in Johannesburg with a request that they help him to convert. Rabbi Barney Bender, who was in charge of conversions, is reported to have said that since the end of apartheid it became possible to convert non-whites and that he had had several applicants. The case of Ramokgadi was rather difficult as he lived in Swaziland where there were no facilities which would enable him to be a fully practicing Jew. However he was not discouraged and started learning Hebrew, commuting on a weekly basis together with his wife between Swaziland, where he became a prominent businessman, and Johannesburg, where he was preparing for conversion. More than that, in Swaziland he arranged Passover *seders* with the Israeli ambassador, before the Israeli diplomatic mission transferred to South Africa in 1994, negotiated with the Swazi authorities for a Jewish section in the cemetery, and arranged *minyanim* for the festivals.

Was his blackness an impediment to his desire to become a Jew? According to Ramokgadi, to Rabbi Bender it did not matter. The Chief Rabbi, Cyril Harris, helped him to buy a flat in Berea in Johannesburg near a synagogue in the days of the Group Areas Act. However, he also had to face some negative responses: 'When people see this,' he points to his *yarmulke*, 'they ask if I'm mad.' Geoff was always upset with this reaction and explains that it is precisely this attitude that discouraged his wife from converting with him. As far as the attitudes of black people towards him are concerned, he has maintained that it is in this sphere that he could be

particularly useful for South African Jewry: 'The black people listen to me when I explain about Judaism, the situation in Israel, and dispel all the fallacies floating around about Jews and the Middle East' (Belling 1998a).

Thus, the conversions of Ramokgadi and Msitshana were born out of their genuine interest in Judaism and sympathy with the Jewish people whose fate they compared to that of their own community, and viewed Judaism as a religion of the oppressed which would be appropriate for a black South African. Ramokgadi's desire to convert grew during his trip to Israel, where he encountered Ethiopian Jews and came to believe in the possibility of the existence of black Jews. It is difficult to suspect any materialistic motives behind these two cases, as neither Msitshana nor Ramokgadi needed charity and they were able and willing to bear the costs associated with the process of conversion.

The reaction of the Jewish community in South Africa to these two cases was quite different. In practical terms they rejected Msitshana but accepted Ramokgadi on condition that he found a way to observe Judaism properly. This is not surprising given that Ramokgadi applied for a formal conversion while Msitshana's Jewishness was more of a self-styled nature. It is also significant that Ramokgadi's case is rather more recent and most of its history developed after the abolition of apartheid. According to Ramokgadi, the rabbis did not have any reservations about his being black and were happy to convert him as long as he was prepared to convert in accordance with Orthodox Jewish law and to continue living according to the *halakhah*.

Did local white Jews occupy the same position when it came to the Lemba? Were they impressed by the results of the genetic research? Were Lemba interested in their recognition? Shimoni has observed that encouraged by the results of the tests in the late 1990s Professor Mathivha started seeking recognition of the Lembas as black Jews more actively and approached a number of local Jewish communal organisations. He even threatened local Jewry by accusing them of racism should they fail to recognise the Lemba as their co-religionists. In a letter to the Board of Deputies written in 1997 he stated that in this case the Lemba would have to conclude that they 'like many other non-European Jewish communities are simply the victims of racism at the hands of the European Jewish establishment worldwide' (Shimoni 2003). However, he never started an open confrontation, though neither the rabbinate of South Africa nor any Jewish organisation changed their position on this issue (Shimoni 2003). It appears that this confrontation is still fresh in the memory of the parties concerned. Some commentators (both Lemba and non-Lemba) who participated in the telephone discussion about the Lemba in the Tim Modise South African radio show in March 2002 argued that now, after the publication of the results of the DNA tests, the Ashkenazi Jews who have 'racist attitudes' should know that the Lemba are 'more Jewish than they are'.

We interviewed a number of prominent representatives of the local White Jewish community belonging to different denominations of Judaism. Even

informants from a single branch of Judaism demonstrated considerable differences in their views on the Lemba. The attitudes of people belonging to Orthodox and Reform synagogues were in many aspects almost diametrically opposite.

Rabbi Hecht

As an Orthodox rabbi, Rabbi Hecht of the Chabad Centre in Johannesburg may be taken as a typical representative of the rabbinate. He was quite willing to be engaged in the topic. His starting point, however, was that genetic news about the Lemba had failed to impact upon the Orthodox community in any meaningful way. He said that DNA tests on the Lemba had had less than a ripple effect on the Jewish community. According to him, this information 'passed like a cloud', and did not have any impact on anybody. He also noted that the response of the community was one of humour and nobody took it very seriously.

He and some of his congregation who were in the synagogue for morning prayers had heard about the genetic results and they had been discussed as a matter of some interest, but it had not transformed their view of what the Lemba, about whom they knew very little, might constitute in Jewish terms. Whereas Rabbi Hecht confirmed that anybody can of course convert to Judaism he felt that in this case the conversion for the Lemba would serve no useful purpose. In his view, to convert a Lemba who would then return to his home in the Northern Province, would be an irresponsible act as there would be no Jewish infrastructure to support his Judaism: there would be no *shohatim*, *mohalim*, rabbis, Jewish schools, etc. To encourage a Lemba to convert with the intention of forming part of his own community in Johannesburg would in his view be equally irresponsible on social grounds. He felt there would be constant jokes at the Lembas expense. People would say, 'Hey, who has brought his gardener to Shul' and jokes like that. Moreover, in social terms whom in the community would such an individual be able to marry? They would have nothing in common with the rest of the community. They would stick out and be uncomfortable. According to the rabbi, it is not a question of colour. If, for instance, a blond blue-eyed Viking from Scandinavia turned up willing to worship with them we would feel equally uncomfortable. To give an example of a convert not fitting in he told us about an Indian woman who converted to Judaism and was working as a teacher in a Jewish school. According to the rabbi, adaptation was quite difficult for her. He also gave an example of an attaché of the Israeli embassy who was of Indian-Jewish origin, who also 'looked odd' in the Jewish congregation and was often taken for an Indian South African. In other words, for someone to fit into the community one had to have a 'Jewish' (European) look. He pointed out again that all this had nothing to do with colour and he would discourage from converting not just blacks but those who looked Portuguese, Indian, Norwegian, etc.

As one of his congregants, Mr Berkowitz, pointed out, this is a very particular community; it is homogenous and it has lived through the apartheid period. It is unrealistic to think that the divisions and barriers which existed in the past and still exist will disappear immediately. It will take several generations. They both repeatedly assured us that there was nothing racist in it and explained that if somebody, for instance, a Lemba or a white stranger turned up at the synagogue people would be anxious to know where he was from: they would be afraid because security is such a big issue in Johannesburg. And not only that. The community is conservative, insular and simply does not want to engage in the wider society. So, the possibility of this kind of community engaging in outreach work with the Lemba following on the wide dissemination of the genetic research appears to be zero. Rabbi Hecht said, 'If this people really want to convert it has to be in a completely different context. They should go to Israel, or to the US where there is a much wider spectrum of Jewish life.' He definitely did not appear to be an advocate of an idea of a more pluralistic Jewish community in South Africa and did not conceive that it would be possible for a black convert to be received into and accepted by his congregation. Nor did he give any sign that he would encourage such a move.

We asked him how he thought the community would respond if a number of Ethiopian Jews were sent to work in the Israeli embassy. He replied curtly that it would not be a good idea. In defence of his own position with respect to the Lemba the rabbi frequently made references to halakhic issues. The question of *mamzerut* came up as did the issue of Orthodox conversion as opposed to reform conversion. In other words DNA or no DNA halakhically the Lemba were not Jews. However, in the case of the Cohanim, a large proportion of whom as we have seen above are known to carry a genetic signature, which may be perceived as a marker of the priesthood, he confessed that if a given Cohen were to provide proof of his ownership of the CMH he would have more respect for him than for a Cohen who did not have such a signature. But the fact that the Lemba or some of them have this signature as well was of no interest to him. He gave an example of a real life situation when a person brought up as a Jew suddenly discovers that he is not halakhically Jewish because his mother or maternal grandmother was not Jewish and never converted or was converted in a Reform synagogue. According to the rabbi, the conversion procedure for such a person should be easier, or would hardly be necessary. The whole issue could even be hushed up because he had been a practising Jew and, as Rabbi Hecht put it, he is 50 or 75 per cent *genetically* Jewish already [emphasis ours]. Paradoxically, as far as the Lemba were concerned, their 'genetic' affiliation to the Jewish people did not count. In other words, Rabbi Hecht was prepared to allow genetic considerations to influence his emotional and social response to a given situation (respect for the Cohen and the CMH and his readiness to ignore the background of the putative non-halakhic Jew in his congregation) but when it came to the Lemba the

genetic information had no impact at all. In conclusion it is not unfair to suggest that for this rabbi issues of colour constitute a prime value. Both in the case of the Lemba, and the possibility of visiting Ethiopian Jews, his response to the experience of the Indian convert to Judaism and his unwillingness to engage in issues of conversion with people (Portuguese, Indian or others) who looked different, he showed that phenotypicality was at the forefront of his mind.

Chief Rabbi Cyril Harris

For the Scottish Chief Rabbi of South Africa it was apparent that the Lemba represented something of a mild embarrassment. He did not know what to do with them and during the interview, which took place in his office, it was equally apparent that he was open to suggestions. As far as he knew the major stumbling block was the insuperable one that the Lemba appeared to be Christians. As he observed, it is impossible to be Jewish and Christian at the same time. However, when we mentioned that there was certainly a number of Lemba who appeared to have relinquished their Christian faith he readily agreed that there would be no impediment to their conversion in small numbers. He explained that it would be impossible to bring the Lemba to Judaism outside the context of a functioning Jewish community, which was one of the warnings that had been given to Ramokgadi. The idea therefore for mass conversion of the Lemba in Vendaland seemed to him impractical and impossible.

On the genetic front Rabbi Harris explained that the genetic results had indeed created a stir of interest. People were rather fascinated by what apparently the genetic results had indicated. He had checked the results with the geneticists at the University of Witwatersrand who had confirmed that chance alone could not begin to explain the results. And even though he recognised that in purely halakhic terms these results were meaningless he said that they had the effect nonetheless of making the door of acceptance that much wider and did bolster the Lemba case. He reiterated that the door was not closed to anyone who wished to convert and mentioned that seventy Talmudic rabbis had been of non-Jewish descent and it was only because of the Christian (and he might have added Islamic) bans on conversion to Judaism – punishable in both cases by death – that the Jewish impulse towards proselytisation had petered out.

When we noted that in the case of the Ethiopian Jews, the genetics was not ‘on their side’, Rabbi Harris argued that this did not matter as this community, according to him, was halakhically Jewish and traditionally had already been accepted by the Orthodox Jewish authorities. Another example of ‘ambiguous’ Jews who had been accepted that he put forward was that of the Bene Israel.

In general during the interview he appeared perplexed and fundamentally uncertain as to what course to take. On one occasion Rabbi Harris

suggested that he might himself take a trip to the North to where the Lemba principally lived but then faltered when he recognised what a media splash this would make. Modestly he admitted that whatever he did tended to have a high media profile and he feared that the effect of a visit to the North would be taken out of context and be used in ways that he could not predict. He asked repeatedly what we felt he could do. We both stressed that we were not advocates of the Lemba. However, after some pressure we mentioned the one thing that the Lemba had mentioned to us, that they would like a facility of their own. We also mentioned that one of the members of the community proposed sending a Lemba to England to study for the rabbinate. He seemed to be perfectly open to both suggestions and wanted to be put in touch with the people concerned. Rabbi Harris stressed that on a humanitarian level he could not help sympathising with the Lemba and even said that he may be able to provide jobs for a very limited number of the Lemba (about half a dozen). However, he was not in the position to extend this generosity to the entire Lemba tribe.

Rabbi Harris said that there were quite a number of black converts to Judaism who worshipped in synagogues in Johannesburg and elsewhere in South Africa. He stressed that these people felt comfortable in their respective communities. When we mentioned the rabbi who had expressed the view that the presence of the black members of the congregation would give rise to racist jokes he agreed with a shrug that some of his rabbis were pretty right-wing. However, he admitted that it would take a couple of generations for black–white Jewish mixed marriages to take place and expressed concern about the image of the black Jews in the black community, mainly due to the radical pro-Palestinian position of the latter. However, he added that he would not use it as a pretext to refuse to convert Black people.

When we mentioned the great interest that the Lemba story had generated in the United States and Canada he retorted that there the Jewish community was much more diverse than in South Africa. He also added, on what basis it was difficult to say, that probably North American Jews were more interested in scientific matters than his own congregants. When we suggested it might be a rather inward looking community he replied that the younger generation could not be characterised in this fashion.

Rabbi Harris noted that none of the ministers whom he knew had ever brought the matter up with him, that is, the wider society did not create any pressure upon him to give a specific response. It was a seven-day wonder. We mentioned that President Mbeki certainly knew about the Lemba and is known to have seen the NOVA documentary, but he said that Mbeki had never mentioned it to him.

Rabbi Charles Wallach

Rabbi Charles Wallach is the leader of the Temple Emanuel Reform synagogue. He had very little knowledge of the Lemba. He observed that their

story of origin may well be true, however as far as he was concerned halakhically they were not Jewish and therefore would need to convert in order to become Jews. For him the genetic composition of the Lemba made no difference.

The rabbi's own view was that in the present circumstances of his synagogue and South African Jewry in general it would be impossible to envisage the introduction en masse into his synagogue of a large group of Lemba. He felt perfectly sure that his community would not stand for it and he pointed out that his salary and position depended substantially on his doing the bidding of the congregation. On the other hand he was perfectly well inclined to convert individual Lemba should they request him to do so and to welcome them as individuals into his synagogue should they wish to be affiliated with it. But again he had little enthusiasm for the project. First, he pointed out that a Reform conversion would not be recognised by the rabbinic authorities in Israel. Second, he too felt it would cause dissent within his synagogue, which consisted largely of Jews of Lithuanian background and which was pretty homogeneous in character. In a way the fierce animosity which pertains between the Orthodox synagogues and the Reform movement might well have encouraged him to go down the path of converting Lembas given that the Orthodox had no interest in this initiative.

Hylton Applebaum

Hylton Applebaum is a wealthy South African Jewish businessman, who is one of the chief funders for a variety of projects within the community. As a committed Liberal he made it clear that he was neither racist nor personally disinclined to making overtures towards the black community in general. In the specific case of the Lemba he made it equally clear that he knew next to nothing about them. He pointed out that in the present circumstances of South Africa he thought the chances of any outreach programme to the Lemba would be most unlikely to materialise. Nonetheless while fearing that any such initiative might bring opprobrium upon him, he was prepared to at least think about offering some financial assistance through his charitable foundation. One of the things he suggested was setting up a scholarship to send some worthy Lemba to study to be a rabbi at the Leo Baeck College in London, a liberal institution which trains students for the Reform rabbinate. He was fully aware that this would be both an expensive and in some ways provocative action. When he asked us what we felt he might be able to do through his foundation we suggested a purchase of property in Soweto, which could be used by those Lemba who wanted their own place of worship. Again he agreed to think about this.

In his experience the Lemba have not provided the dinner tables of Johannesburg Jewry with much conversational matter. The Middle East situation was endlessly discussed, the DNA results on the Lemba not at all.

He confirmed that in his view the South African community was insular and had little interest in the wider community. He did report one conversation he had had, in which mention was made of a High School in Sibasa in the vicinity of Thohoyandou, which apparently achieved the highest marks for a black school in the whole of South Africa. It had been suggested to him that the reason for this was that there was a large concentration of black Jews living in the neighbourhood. In other words, the usual stereotypical assumption of Jewish intelligence had been transferred by some to the Lemba presumably in the wake of genetic information. But he was clearly not impassioned by the subject in any way.

Rufina Bernadetti Silva Mausenbaum

One of the few members of the Jewish community of Johannesburg to show any interest in the Lemba is a woman of conversos background who formally converted to Judaism when she was eighteen and who was therefore perhaps a somewhat marginal member of the community. Mrs Mausenbaum has found her involvement with the Lemba a troublesome business. On the one hand she thinks of them as Jews in some sense and certainly believes the genetic evidence supports this. She made a number of well-meaning attempts to bring South African Jewish young people together with Lemba young people through the auspices of the BETAR (Brit Trumpeldor) Jewish youth movement. In 1999–2000 there were three or four occasions when the young Lemba from Soweto were brought into contact with white Jewish people of their own age. But suddenly this stopped. There was pressure from on-high, as she put it, by which we took it to mean that she was referring to the Chief Rabbi of South Africa. Apart from that, the on-going second *intifada* in Israel and the way that it was received in South Africa seemed to absorb the community's energies. But she thought that it was unlikely in the future that there would be any greater enthusiasm for engaging in outreach programmes.

Genetic research, according to her, *was* discussed in the community. Mrs Mausenbaum argued that without the DNA connection the Lemba would not be less Jewish for her, however, this was added 'confirmation' for those who rejected them.

Steven Friedman

Another clearly positive response to the issue came from Steven Friedman, a member of the local Reform movement and an ardent supporter of the idea of including the Lemba in the South African Jewish community. In an article published in a South African Jewish periodical he raised the question of the Lemba and Jewish blackness. Interestingly, he argued that the genetic evidence really supports Lemba claims and should be taken seriously by the white Jews. Friedman maintained that genetics makes them 'halakhically'

Jewish, as, according to the *halakhah*, anyone who is born Jewish remains so even if he converts to Christianity. Hence, the fact that most Lemba are practising Christians does not make their claims of Jewishness any weaker. He points out that rabbis often encourage white 'biological' Jews who practice Christianity to come back to Judaism, but surprisingly they would not try to reclaim the Lemba.

Why is that so? Friedman's answer to this question is that most of his community 'has an image of Jewry as a group of white, suburban people, preferably with Eastern European surnames' and the idea that 'Jewish genes may know no racial boundary is, to many, shocking' (Friedman 1999). And to some it is particularly true when they see black people in their synagogue, who to them stick out as 'clearly converts'.

The article argues that the South African Jewish community should welcome the Lemba and include them in their congregations at least because the number of white Jews is dwindling due to the emigration of their young people, which may lead to Jewish day schools closing down. So, the genetic evidence on the Lemba should be viewed as an opportunity to expand the local Jewish community and to make its life more vibrant. Friedman observes in this respect that white Jews from the 'Jews for Jesus' movement would be admitted to local Jewish institutions which has not happened to the Lemba yet. On what grounds, he asks, can local Jews argue that the Lemba are not Jewish, if they themselves can hardly give a definition of what a Jew is and as the culture of Ashkenazi Jews differs so greatly from that of the Sepharadim? Friedman argues that 'if we move beyond Eastern European prejudices, we are probably unsure enough of what makes us Jews to warn against rejecting anyone who can make a convincing case for their Jewishness'. In addition, Friedman reminds us that the strict laws of conversion in Judaism were developed as devices to protect persecuted Jewish communities of the past from Christian accusations. Hence, if it is no longer a crime to convert, why would Judaism need to stick to these outdated laws?

Another interesting argument that Friedman puts forward in support of his view is that the existence of both the Lemba and the Ethiopian Jews may make it easier for the white Jews of Africa to claim their right to be on the continent and similarly it proves that Jews 'belong' to Africa. This is the position of a person with the most liberal attitudes towards Judaism, who interprets the definition of a Jew and the regulations regarding conversion on the basis of the concept of progressive revelation. He also obviously has a very liberal stand in the context of South African politics. What is interesting to consider here is his attitude towards DNA tests. He appears to argue that DNA makes one Jewish and even uses the expression 'Jewish genes' without challenging this concept or going into any detail at all. However, there is no suggestion that he would determine who is a Jew and who is not, just on the basis of DNA. For instance, he does not challenge the status of the Ethiopian Jews. Apparently, he uses DNA just as an added

argument to advocate the idea of including the Lemba into his community and would probably accept them anyway.

The 'Other' response

The local white South African Jews are aware of the tests but only very few of them are prepared to use genetics as a means of proving Lembas Jewishness and they are those who recognise the Lemba as Jews anyway. However, in the Southern African context it is already clear that other black groups who subscribe to some sort of Jewish identification are encouraged by these genetic research projects. A black Judaising community in Rusape in Zimbabwe with links to other similar non-affiliated Judaising groups in South Africa, Zambia, Botswana and Malawi have become aware of the research, as Kosintahi Nyathi Mbolekwa, a Xhosa member of this Judaising movement noted in a recent article:

I am so pleased and proud to see such great efforts finally being made in addressing the significant genetic finds made by Parfitt and others. These are rather interesting and ground-shaking discoveries, but this information has been known for centuries...I have relatives and friends from the Lemba tribe and we have always known that not all Bantus are Israelites but many more than just the Lemba are Jews. The Lemba are just one major group of Jews that settled in southern Africa, but...a much larger picture can be drawn of our entire inheritance. The Yoruba, Hausa, Ashanti, Buganda and many other tribes in Africa have made public and open their Hebrew roots, but on deaf – or can I say outright racist – ears who find these claims outlandish.

(Mbolekwa 2005)

The same may be said of the black Israelite community in the United States. After the wide publicity given to the DNA findings the Minister of Shalom Hebrew Israelite Congregation of Jackson, Mississippi, Herman Taylor, wrote to Tudor Parfitt in 2001 expressing his satisfaction that his group's kinship with Israelite populations in Ethiopia, Rwanda and Burundi, the Sudan, Nigeria, Ghana, Uganda and Malawi had been 'so conclusively proven'. The topic of the impact of the Lemba tests on the development of other black Judaising movements requires further research and demands investigation.

7 The Bene Israel

In 1997 DNA research on the Bene Israel Indian Jewish group was initiated mainly in and around Mumbai (Bombay). The first tentative results of the analysis of these data were communicated to a group of scholars of Indian Jewry at a conference in the Oxford Centre in 2002.¹ According to these data it seemed possible for the first time to make some substantive comments on the origins of this mysterious community. The preliminary data were picked up by the London correspondent of the *Times of India*. Unlike the Lemba, the Bene Israel are very confident of their Jewish identity and have been practising a recognisable form of Judaism for about 200 years. However, like the Lemba, they have not always been recognised as Jews by Western Jews and by religious authorities in Israel. The idea of these DNA tests was to throw some light on the vexed question of their origin. The preliminary results of the tests suggest that genetically the Bene Israel can be differentiated from other Indian groups from which we have samples including neighbouring populations in Maharashtra, Goa and Gujarat. The DNA material of the Bene Israel was compared with DNA collected from other parts of India. It transpires that a particular combination of polymorphisms – haplogroup (hg) 28, which is very widespread in India, is hardly found among the Bene Israel. In fact only one singleton was found with hg28 among the Bene Israel. In addition the tests demonstrated that the Bene Israel have affinities with Ethiopian and Yemeni datasets. Furthermore, genetic diversity was significantly lower in the Bene Israel than in the other Indian groups examined.

Of the Indian datasets only the Bene Israel have the Cohen Modal Haplotype. Haplogroup 9, which comprises the CMH is present at high frequency among the Bene Israel, as well as among the Ethiopian and Yemeni groups, but at much lower frequency among the Indian groups. Finally hg21 which may be viewed as a North African and Mediterranean haplogroup was absent among the Bene Israel although it is present in Jewish populations. This might have suggested an Arabian origin for the community as the haplogroup is absent in Arabia. However the presence among the Bene Israel of the CMH which is absent in Arabian populations prevents this conclusion. It suggests rather that the Bene Israel were an

ancient Jewish population dating to a period before the hg21 entered the gene pool which may mean that the Bene Israel are a Middle Eastern, perhaps Jewish, group whose male founders migrated to India at some remote time in history.

This research was widely covered in the Indian media, which is why we decided to conduct a preliminary investigation of the immediate reaction of the Bene Israel and to discuss them here for comparative purposes. As we shall see, the tests generated an active response from the community indicating an impact on their religious and cultural identity whose further development will need to be explored in the future. This chapter sets the historical background for the problem of Bene Israel origins and demonstrates how the development of their religious life beginning in the nineteenth century and the mutual perceptions between the community and their neighbours, Western Jews and other Jewish groups of India may have preconditioned the interest contemporary Bene Israel have expressed in the DNA tests and the way they are interpreting their results.

Indian Jews

Indian Jewry is represented by three main communities – the Jews of Cochin, the Bene Israel and the so-called Baghdadi Jews. The Bene Israel are the most numerous group. The history of the formation and development of these three communities are radically different. Subsequently they never really identified with each other and never formed one homogeneous community.

The Cochin Jewish community appears to be the oldest of these communities and is certainly the one best known to Indians and to the outside world. It takes its name from the town of Cochin located on the Malabar coast of South India, where most of its members lived. One of the characteristic features of the Cochin Jewish community was that it was divided into several discrete groups. The most important of these were the so-called white Jews and black Jews. The white Jews argued that the black Jews were descendants of converts and manumitted slaves, while the black Jews maintained that *they* were the original Jewish settlers, who came to the Malabar coast after the destruction either of the First or the Second Temple (there are various conflicting legends), while the white Jews were newcomers.

The first more or less detailed account of the religious practices of the Cochin Jews appears in the report on this community written by Mosseh Pereyra de Paiva, a Sephardic Jew from Holland who visited Cochin in 1686 as a member of a commission sent by the Jewish community of Amsterdam to enquire about Cochin Jewry.² Pereyra observed that the customs of the Cochin Jews were very similar to those accepted in his own community and that they had very few features of their own (Koder 1986: 127, 131–4). The Jewish travellers of the nineteenth century who visited Malabar also noted that the religious practice of the local Jewish congregations was consistent

with Jewish practice elsewhere and that there were links between the Jews of Cochin and Jewish communities elsewhere. I.J. Benjamin, a famous Jewish traveller from Moldavia who visited Cochin in the middle of the nineteenth century, observed that from the end of the eighteenth century the white Jews had maintained a correspondence in Hebrew with the Portuguese Jewish congregation of New York (Benjamin 1863: 185–92). Benjamin, as well as another Jewish traveller David D' Beth Hillel, who visited Cochin earlier in the nineteenth century, appear to have sympathised with the black Jews and criticised the attitude of the white Jews towards them. They both characterised the former as very observant Jews who were well acquainted with the Hebrew scriptures and followed Talmudic law (Beth Hillel 1832: 122; Benjamin 1863: 185).

In the nineteenth century the problem of the stratification of the Jews of Cochin became even more complicated when the freed slaves of the white Jews, the *meshubrarim* (Hebrew, manumitted), broke away from the community of their former masters and formed a group of their own. Though the *meshubrarim* had converted to Judaism according to the Jewish laws regulating conversion, they were still not considered to be 'full' Jews in the synagogue of the white Jews and did not enjoy all the rights of community members (Bar-Giora 1956: 252). The existence of the *meshubrarim* as a separate congregation did not last long, as soon after the breakaway their community was stricken by an epidemic and many of them died. The survivors, who could not maintain a full community life any longer, had to return to the synagogue of their former masters (Segal 1993: 77–80).

Though there were many disputes among the members of the three groups relating to their origin and status as Jews, it appears that their religious observances were uniform. David Mandelbaum, who carried out field work among the Jews of Cochin in 1937, noted that in the major aspects of Jewish practices and belief all three groups were equally observant (Mandelbaum 1939: 91). All three groups supported the Zionist movement from the first years of its emergence and within a few years of the establishment of Israel in 1948, most of them left for the Jewish State (Johnson 1995: 33). By 1948 the Jews of Malabar accounted for about 3,000 people. At the moment there are around sixty Cochini Jews left in India. The division into white and black is still characteristic of this small remnant of the community, though all Jews pray together in the only existing synagogue in Cochin.³ The majority of the community now resides in Israel where the old divisions between white and black are still maintained.⁴ To this day we have no clear idea of the historical origins of the three communities.

The Baghdadi Indian Jewish community was formed much later and their life is much better documented than that of their other Indian co-religionists (Elias and Cooper 1974; Musleah 1975; Hyman 1995). The main centres of Baghdadi Jews in India were Calcutta and Bombay. The name of the community does not reflect the origin of all of its members adequately, as it

consisted not only of migrants from Baghdad but also of those Jews who moved to India from different parts of the Middle East. The earliest settlement of this group in Calcutta was comprised mostly of Syrian Jews, while the first Middle Eastern Jews in Bombay were from Baghdad and Yemen (Musleah 1975: 189). The first Arabic-speaking Jews who settled in India were individual merchants, while the persecutions of the Jews in Baghdad by Daud Pasha (1817–31) accelerated the influx of the Jews of this city to India and thus eventually stamped a Baghdadi character on the community (Timberg 1985a: 29, 1985b: 273).

Lower-class Indian Baghdadi Jews consisted mainly of shopkeepers, artisans and clerks working for the trading houses of the prominent merchant Jewish families, such as the Sassoons of Bombay and the Ezras of Calcutta. The heads of the largest mercantile families dominated the community life of the Baghdadi Jews, a pattern of community self-government that became particularly well established in Bombay, where the Sassoon mills and other enterprises provided extensive employment (Timberg 1985b: 274).

With very few exceptions, practically all the religious rites and liturgy of the Arabic-speaking Jews in India were those followed by the Jews of Baghdad with whom they maintained close links and to whom they turned to when they needed an authoritative opinion on the questions of Jewish law (Musleah 1975: 188–255). It appears that the Middle Eastern Jews of India, who had no rabbis until the first half of the twentieth century, were concerned more with guarding and preserving the religious traditions they had brought from Baghdad than with allowing them to develop locally (Hyman 1995: 131). The position of the Baghdadi Jews in British India and their self-image differed greatly from those of their other Indian co-religionists. Socially and economically they were closer to other small communities of non-Indian origin than to Hindus and Muslims or even other Indian Jews and fully identified their interests with those of the British, never ceasing to display their loyalty to Great Britain (Roland 1998).

The emigration of Baghdadi Jews to Israel, the Americas and Great Britain started right after India's Independence. Ezekiel Musleah observes that members of his community did not know what to expect, as they feared economic changes, Hindu–Muslim clashes and uncertainty about the kind of government that would emerge in the country (Musleah 1975: 448). The community is still concentrated in Bombay and Calcutta but now numbers no more than about seventy or eighty people in each city.

Judaising movements in India

The second half of the twentieth century witnessed the emergence of Judaising movements among two tribal communities.⁵ One of them, the movement of the group who are often referred to as the Shinlung or Bnei Menashe, began about fifty years ago among the Christianised tribes of Chin, Kuki, Lushai and Mizo, who are often collectively referred to as

Chikim. They are scattered throughout Mizoram, Manipur, Assam and the plains of Burma. Their conversion to Christianity began soon after 1894, when missionaries settled in the area three years after the British Chin–Lushai Expedition and the Anglo-Manipur War (Samra 1996: 112; Weil 1997: 88).

Having been introduced to the Bible, the Mizos found parallels between practices described in it and their indigenous tribal traditions, which led some of them to the conclusion that they were of Israelite origin, though it is not clear when exactly this idea arose among them. It has been suggested that the missionaries themselves stressed these similarities (Samra 1992: 10–11). By 1936 the revivalist Saichhunga was arguing that the Mizos were one of the Lost Tribes of Israel. In 1951 this idea was developed by Mela Chala, the Head Deacon of the United Pentacostal Church in Buallawn village north of Aizawl, who asserted that he had a vision that the Mizos were a Lost Tribe of Israel and that in order to escape the annihilation in the war of Armageddon they had to return to the land of Israel (Samra 1996: 113).

When Chala revealed his vision he did not indicate to which of the Ten Lost Tribes the Chikim belonged; however, by 1972 one group was arguing that they were descendants of Menasseh and soon other groups accepted this view. It may be that Menasseh was chosen as it was possible to equate it with the name of *Manasia* or *Manase* which is mentioned in many chants used in different sacrifices. Hence some Chikim groups adopted a collective name of Bnei Menashe, the Hebrew for the ‘Children of Menasseh’ (Samra 1992: 16).

In the 1970s the Shinlung started seeking contact with the Israelis. They approached the Israeli Consulate and the Jewish Agency in Bombay and asked for more information about the Jewish religion. Some requested permission to emigrate to Israel, which was not granted though the Israeli officials expressed their fascination with the story (Samra 1996: 123; Weil 1997: 94). The position of the Shinlung was strengthened by their connection with Rabbi Avichail, the head of the Amishav organisation aimed at seeking the Lost Tribes of Israel and assisting them in repatriating to Israel (Avichail 1998). Rabbi Avichail succeeded in helping some Bnei Menashe to come to Israel (Sheleg 2005). It should be noted though that not all Shinlung who have converted to Judaism want to emigrate to Israel and not even all Shinlung who claim Israelite origin have started practising the Jewish religion. According to a recent article devoted to them in *Haaretz*, at the moment there are about 800 Bnei Menashe in Israel (Sheleg 2005). As for their numbers in India, it appears that it is difficult to give a definitive answer. According to Samra, in the mid-1990s there were 1,000 of them in Mizoram and 2,900 in Manipur (Samra 1996: 110).⁶ In 2004 a team of first Indian and then Israeli geneticists conducted DNA tests on the Bnei Menashe which were similar to those done on the Bene Israel and other Jewish populations. The preliminary results of some of them suggest that

they may be of partly Near Eastern origin and this will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 9.

Another Indian community who like the Shinlung 'converted' themselves to Judaism was that of the so-called 'Telugu Jews', who come from the Christianised Madiga untouchables of the Guntur district in Andhra Pradesh. This community appears to have been first 'discovered' by Jason Francisco, a photographer and a writer who got acquainted with them during his stay in Andhra Pradesh in 1994. He met his first 'Telugu Jewish' family in the town of Nandigama in Krishna district. They were among the thirty or so families who in 1992 dedicated the Synagogue of the Children of Yacob in the village of Kottareddipalam near Chebrolu in Guntur district. None of them had ever been to a synagogue before and had never met any Jews.

According to Francisco, their leader who was a Christian preacher, in the early 1980s became interested in the Jewish people as they were depicted in the Bible and started to study the Old Testament with particular attention. He went on a trip to Jerusalem, where he attended a conference of Evangelical Christians and for the first time in his life got a chance to see living Judaism. Francisco suggests that the solidarity of the Israelis combined with their relative material prosperity convinced him of the efficacy of worshipping the God of Israel and that this seemed like the fulfilment of the promises of the Hebrew Bible. Back at home he renamed himself Shmuel Yacobi and together with his brother, who started calling himself Sadok Yacobi, undertook an in-depth study of the Old Testament. The brothers considered it in the light of their own socio-economic situation which was quite difficult: their community had no land and depended on manual labour, the lowest status and lowest paid work in the countryside. This developed into what Jason Francisco has called a Jewish liberation theology. In the view of one of the brothers it was God who led the Jews from Egypt but not Jesus that will help his community (Francisco 1997). When we visited Kottareddipalam in January 2001 and got acquainted with the head of the 'Telugu' synagogue Sadok Yacobi, he told us that there were about 50 families practising Judaism in his village plus about 70 more families of Telugu Jews living in other villages of the district. His brother Shmuel was in Vijayawada working as a rabbi for another 20–25 families. Later, in his recent correspondence to Yulia Egorova, Sadok Yacobi asserted that the number of those families who had 'returned to Judaism' had reached 150.⁷

The Bene Israel in the later British period

Who were the Bene Israel, the most numerous Indian Jewish group, and what was their place on the subcontinent *vis-à-vis* both their co-religionists and other communities? The early accounts of many peoples, as Arthur Koestler noted, often leave historians 'famished for facts'. Historians have to content themselves with 'a few bleached bones to gnaw at, like starving

bloodhounds, in the forlorn hope of finding some hidden morsel to sustain them' (Koestler 1976: 160). The history of the Bene Israel of western India is one such example: it is almost totally obscure before the eighteenth century. According to the most widespread Bene Israel tradition which was recorded by the historian of the community and one of its members Haim Samuel Kehimkar, their ancestors had been shipwrecked near the village of Navgaon on the Konkan coast of western India in 175 BCE after they had fled Palestine during the persecutions of Antiochus Epiphanes.⁸ Only seven men and seven women survived and became the forefathers of the community. The survivors settled in the area and gradually became known there as *Shanwar Teli* (Marathi, 'Saturday oilmen'), because they were traditionally engaged in oil-pressing and abstained from work on Saturdays (Isenberg 1988: 3). At the end of the eighteenth century they must have begun moving from the villages to the towns of Pen, Panvel, Thana and Bombay, and became artisans of all kinds (Roland 1998: 13).

The first sources that cast light on the religious practices and beliefs of the Bene Israel in some detail are writings by Christian missionaries and Jewish travellers who visited the community in the nineteenth century. The second half of the nineteenth century witnessed the emergence of Bene Israel publications reflecting different aspects of the life of the community, including its religious life, which was also described in the gazetteers and caste-dictionaries of the Bombay Presidency. It appears that the earliest source that offers a relatively detailed account of the religious practices and beliefs of the Bene Israel are the writings by the Rev. Dr John Wilson, a missionary of the Church of Scotland who lived and worked in Bombay from 1829 until his death in 1875 (Smith 1878). According to Wilson, the Bene Israel 'professed to adore' Jehovah, but some of them in the past, publicly and in Wilson's time, secretly worshipped Hindu gods. They had become familiar with the names of the majority of biblical prophets not long before that and a considerable number of the community did not observe the Sabbath. As for religious authorities among the Bene Israel, Wilson mentions the *kazi*, whom he describes as 'the president in religious matters, and the conductor of public worship' (Wilson 1840).

The emergence of the institution of the *kazi* is related in the Bene Israel tradition as described by Kehimkar to the activities of one David Rahabi, a Jew who discovered the Bene Israel on the Konkan coast (Kehimkar 1937).⁹ The origins and dates of David Rahabi are obscure. According to Bene Israel tradition, he became convinced that the Bene Israel were Jews, because some of their customs corresponded to those practised in Judaism (Kehimkar 1937: 41). The legend goes that Rahabi proceeded to enlighten the Bene Israel about the full and proper observances of Judaism and after his death three of his disciples started officiating as religious leaders or *kazis* of the community.

The name of David Rahabi is also mentioned by Solomon Reinemann, a Jewish traveller, who visited the Bene Israel in the Konkan in the middle of

the nineteenth century. According to Reinemann, the first synagogue of the community was built by one Bene Israel after he had visited a synagogue and Jewish community in Cochin (Reinemann 1884: 102–3). It is in the context of the encounters of the Bene Israel with Cochin Jews that Reinemann mentions the name of David Ezekiel Rahabi, allegedly the head of a prominent Jewish family in Cochin, who had learnt about the Bene Israel and the lamentable state of their religious education and had sent learned men from his community to teach the Bene Israel the law of Moses and to ‘warn their wives against the idols’ (Reinemann 1884: 104). Reinemann argues that when the ancestors of the Bene Israel came to India they initially married women from the indigenous population on condition that the latter would observe their husbands’ religion. However, the women continued to worship idols (Reinemann 1884: 100). As far as more contemporary ‘malpractice’ of the Bene Israel was concerned Reinemann complained that not all members of the community could refrain from work on Saturdays and other holidays, as many of them served in the army or had administrative jobs (Reinemann 1884: 108–9) and that *kazis* rather than qualified functionaries performed circumcisions, attended to wedding ceremonies and acted as slaughterers (Reinemann 1884: 101).

The Bene Israel appeared to have stopped using *kazis* as *shohatim* and to officiate at weddings, as a result of their encounter with Shelomo Shurrabi, another Jew from Cochin, who taught them the Torah and the main Jewish customs (Reinemann 1884: 105–6). However, according to the *Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency* published in 1885, in rural areas where there were no synagogues, *kazis* continued to perform religious ceremonies and *inter alia* to act as slaughterers (*Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency* 1885: 536). It appears that *kazis* attended at weddings in the community as late as 1917 which is indicated in the Report of the First Bene Israel Conference convened that year (Report of the First Bene Israel Conference 1918: 7).

As Isenberg notes, it is difficult to separate the ‘pristine’ traditions of the Bene Israel and what they knew about themselves from theories of their origin and descriptions of their practices proffered by Western observers (Isenberg 1988: 3). How objective, for instance, were Wilson’s observations about the Bene Israel? What were his sources for the religious life of the Bene Israel? What was the audience that he was writing for? And what was his motivation? His main motivation was no doubt his desire to convert this ‘Jewish’ community to Christianity although his endeavours were not crowned with much success (Isenberg 1988: 3). Among other things his agenda might have been served by exaggerating the degree to which the Bene Israel had adhered to Hindu practices in order to present their renunciation of idolatry as a result of his activities.¹⁰

Uncertainty about the sources of information in Reinemann’s memoirs makes reliance upon them imprudent. According to the publisher, Reinemann did not write well and his material was disorganised. It was therefore necessary to invite Wolff Schur, another well-known traveller of

the time, to edit Reinemann's manuscript, after the task had been begun by the publisher himself. It appears from Schur's footnotes to the text that not only did he edit Reinemann's material, but he added to it details which he had seen with his own eyes, as well as some information provided by other travellers. Isenberg notes that one cannot be sure which information comes from Reinemann and which from Schur or elsewhere (Isenberg 1988: 81).

It appears that the religious life of the Bene Israel in the first half of the nineteenth century was indeed influenced by Cochin Jews, who must have introduced the community to the full practices of Judaism and to its ritual texts. Kehimkar mentions the names of Michael and Abraham Sargon, David Baruch Rahabi, Hacham Samuel and Judah David Ashkenazi, all Cochin Jews who came to Bombay in 1826 and worked there for the Bene Israel community as religious teachers for several years. The author argues that the work of these people contributed to a religious revival among the Bene Israel living in Bombay and small towns around it (Kehimkar 1937: 66). At the same time, it is difficult to say with certainty what practices the Bene Israel started observing as a result of their encounter with Cochin Jews and what customs they had previously been acquainted with.

Even in the later British period the Bene Israel were ready to admit that they might be ignorant of certain Jewish rites. For instance, in 1883 a contributor to one of the Bene Israel periodicals meekly noted in reply to Baghdadi accusations that the Bene Israel did not observe all Jewish customs, that they were willing to learn them and that it was the duty of their instructors, the Cochin and Baghdadi Jews, to guide them.¹¹

The problem of religious practices of the Bene Israel remained a burning issue in the twentieth century. The lack of religious education in the community was mentioned in many communal publications of the time and discussed at almost every meeting of their two main organisations, the Bene Israel Conference and the All-India Israelite League, which were convened every year in the period from 1917 until 1928.¹² The leaders of the community often pointed out that the Bene Israel had little or no knowledge of Jewish sacred texts¹³ and that they did not observe certain customs and rites of Judaism properly, for example, that the circumcision of boys, rather than being performed on the eighth day was often postponed for no good reason. Similarly Bene Israel women observed some birth rites which were common among Hindus, the *bar mitzvah* ceremony was not widespread in the community, marriage ceremonies had some Hindu features, not everybody observed the Sabbath, orthodox mourning practices were not strictly adhered to, etc.¹⁴

What the more 'enlightened' Bene Israel considered to be particularly worrying was that the community did not always observe customs relating to marriage and divorce and there was also the question of polygamy, which was practised in the community as late as the 1920s.¹⁵ Community leaders kept pointing to the fact that sometimes marriage ceremonies were performed by unauthorised individuals,¹⁶ which made them illegitimate

from the perspective of Jewish law. This and a lack of consistency in the way different synagogues functioned would no doubt aggravate the problem of the recognition of the Bene Israel by other Jewish communities.¹⁷

It is not surprising then that Bene Israel practices were viewed with suspicion by their Indian co-religionists and particularly by the Baghdadi Jews. There was a significant level of contact between the communities, as the majority of the Bene Israel and a significant proportion of the Baghdadis lived in Bombay. When the first Arabic-speaking Jews appeared in the city, they were welcomed by the Bene Israel, who invited them to use their synagogues and cemetery until they established facilities of their own. The newcomers very soon noticed that their hosts did not observe all the customs of Judaism as they did and started expressing doubts about the 'purity' of their descent (Roland 1998: 20) particularly because of concerns over marriage and divorce issues (Roland 1998: 67–8, 75–6).

It is difficult to pinpoint when exactly the two groups grew apart completely. By the beginning of the twentieth century in the Baghdadi synagogues of Bombay the Bene Israel were no longer included in the *minyán* nor were they being invited to read from the Torah (Roland 1998: 71–2). Baghdadi reservations about the purity of the descent of the Bene Israel led them to eschew marriage with the latter. There were nonetheless some instances of cooperation. For example, some Bene Israel worked for the Sassoon mills, some served as teachers and headmasters in the Baghdadi school (Strizower 1971: 69; Timberg 1985b: 277) and the Bene Israel used the services of Baghdadi cohanim (Isenberg 1988: 100). However, on the whole, the relationship with the Baghdadis was at best a client relationship and at worst a traumatising one. Kehimkar pointed out that the Baghdadis with the exception of some of the Sassoons had never done anything for the religious or educational welfare of the Bene Israel (Kehimkar 1937: 56), which was not entirely true, as Baghdadi readers and circumcisers officiated in the synagogues of the Bene Israel, together with their Cochini counterparts (Roland 1998: 77). Strizower, when examining the Bene Israel assessment of the activities of Christian missionaries among them, opined that the Bene Israel would prefer dealings with Christian missionaries rather than with Baghdadis (Strizower 1971: 131), which is not surprising given their condescending attitude.

Bene Israel among other Indian communities

What was the status of the Bene Israel in the society of the Konkan coast and how did they view their place among those neighbours who were members of other religious communities? The disputes between the Bene Israel and the Baghdadis on the issue of Bene Israel origins cast interesting light on this question. One of the arguments that the Bene Israel offered in support of their claim that there had been no intermarriage between their ancestors and Hindus was that there was no room for such marriages in

Indian society which of course was governed by the laws of the caste system. In 1919 in one of the community periodicals a Bene Israel writer named the main castes represented on the Konkan and maintained that in the local social pyramid the Bene Israel were 'higher' than the untouchables, but that there was 'a great social bar' between them and such castes as Kunbis (most of whom at that time were landholders and field labourers), Kolis and Bhandaris (whose hereditary occupation was palm-juice drawing). Clearly therefore their ancestors had no opportunity to marry into higher castes, as they would not have been allowed to take wives from these castes. Second, if the Bene Israel in their turn had taken women from untouchable groups, they themselves would have become ritually impure in the eyes of Hindu neighbours from higher castes, who would then have refused to consume the oil produced by the Bene Israel (*Israelite* September–October 1919: 118–9). Roland observes that farming and oil-pressing were not considered to be prestigious occupations on the Konkan and in the local hierarchy the Bene Israel must have been just above the purity level that divided the Hindu population into ritually pure castes and outcastes (Roland 1998: 13).

According to an informant of the *Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency* (1885: 508), a Bene Israel will drink from a vessel belonging to a Musalman or to a European and will eat from the hand of a Brahman or other high caste vegetarian. They do not eat with persons belonging to other communities, and hold that a Mahar's touch defiles. This informant also observed that if a Bene Israel committed adultery with a Mahar, Mang or other 'degraded' Hindu, he would be punished by excommunication (*Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency* 1885: 536).

This was how the Bene Israel themselves perceived their place in the local hierarchy. But how were they viewed by their neighbours? On the face of it by the turn of the century their occupations had become pretty diversified. The community periodicals frequently acknowledged that the establishment of British rule in India had provided scope for the Bene Israel to serve in the army in which many of them reached the highest ranks open to native officers¹⁸ and eventually, to change their traditional occupation of oil-pressing. A significant number of the future leaders of the community were drawn from those who had served in the army. This appears to have been a typical pattern among lower status groups in Western India. Eleanor Zelliott has observed that the first leaders of the Mahar untouchable group came as recruits to the British army. They then advanced through the ranks thereby acquiring both education and self-respect (Zelliott 1996: 36). By the turn of the century some Bene Israel started receiving university degrees and taking jobs as clerks in the British administration. The majority of them worked in the lower echelons of the departments of ports, railways, telegraphs and the post office, however some rose to the highest positions in these services. Individual Bene Israel became eminent specialists in the fields of medicine, engineering and law (Roland 1985: 286–7).

Despite the impressive ascent of the Bene Israel up the socio-economic ladder, they were often perceived as Telis or oil-pressers by their neighbours and their origins were questioned as late as the middle of the twentieth century. Ezekiel, a contemporary Bene Israel writer, observed that his family and friends were described on the Konkan as Telis though it was decades since they had abandoned this occupation (Ezekiel 1948: 26–7). Strizower, who carried out her fieldwork among the Bene Israel in the 1960s, notes that her informants complained that some twenty years before the Hindus still considered them to be Telis, who had a low status on the Konkan (Strizower 1971: 22–3).

It appears that though the Bene Israel were not Hindu and were not supposed to form part of the caste system, the rules regulating the relations between different castes did affect their status in the local hierarchy. It is not surprising then that the Bene Israel denied any theories positing descent from untouchables. No doubt when Baghdadi Jews queried the origin of the Bene Israel, not only did they influence the perceptions of the Bene Israel by world Jewry, but also inadvertently called into question their status in the society of the Konkan coast.

How did the Bene Israel seek to change the situation? Some members of the community attempted to raise their status in the local hierarchy by imitating the way of life of higher castes. Ezekiel observed that his co-religionists adopted many of the customs of the Agris, a Maharashtrian caste that was higher in status than the Telis (Ezekiel 1948: 27, 30–2). Some of them aimed much higher, and desired to be identified with the local Brahmans. Interestingly enough, the legend of origin of the Bene Israel which maintains that they are descendents of 7 men and 7 women who survived a shipwreck resembles that of the Chitpavans, a group of Maharashtra Brahmans, whose myth of origin has it that they are descended from 14 foreigners who perished in a shipwreck but were restored to life by Parashurama, one of Vishnu's incarnations, who taught them Brahman rites (Enthoven 1920: 242). In fact the Bene Israel had their own version of this legend, according to which both groups, the Chitpavans and themselves, had a common origin. According to this after the famous shipwreck, the founders of the community, the 7 men and 7 women, were washed ashore together with some other compatriots of theirs who at first appeared to be dead. The latter were discovered by local inhabitants who attempted to cremate them. However, when they were put on the funeral pyre they regained consciousness, were subsequently converted to Hinduism and eventually became known among the local population as Chitpavan Brahmans.

It is difficult to pinpoint when exactly this legend became popular among the Bene Israel but it certainly existed at the beginning of the twentieth century. David S. Erulkar, the editor of *The Israelite* and a supporter of the famous Indian nationalist Bal Gangadhar Tilak, in an eulogistic editorial after the latter's death in 1920 mentioned that Tilak was a Chitpavan Brahman and that, according to a Bene Israel tradition, the two groups had a common origin (*Israelite* July–August 1920: 96).

These two cases, in one of which the Bene Israel tried to imitate the way of life of the Agris, while in the other they claimed links with the prestigious Chitpavans, resemble the attempts of lower caste Hindus to raise their status along the lines of Sanskritisation.¹⁹ The Bene Israel were ready to imitate the style of life of higher castes, but adhered to their own theory of origin: they did not claim that their ancestors had been Chitpavan Brahmans but dwelt on the Jewish origin of the Chitpavans. This gave them a blood link with this high caste group.

Some Bene Israel did not attempt to change their position in the caste hierarchy but preferred to support the movements that challenged the dominance of higher castes and struggled for equal educational opportunities for everybody irrespective of caste affiliation. Zelliot has observed that there was a Bene Israel among the associates of the founder of Satya Shodak Samaj, the first local non-Brahman organisation established in Poona in 1873, which stressed education for the masses and the reduction of Brahman power in the region (Zelliot 1996: 37–40). Later, in the 1930s, Jacob B. Israel, a prominent member of the Bene Israel community, who contributed greatly to its development, joined a non-Brahman party opposing the Indian National Congress on the grounds that it represented only Brahmans and other high castes (Roland 1998: 102).

Some Bene Israel preferred to dissociate themselves from the caste system completely, arguing that as they were Jewish it had no relevance for them. They sometimes expressed their discontent with it in their disputes with the Baghdadi Jews of India. For instance, in 1931 I.A. Isaac, a Bene Israel journalist, in an article on relations between Baghdadi Jews and the Bene Israel, compared the former to Brahmans who looked down upon low castes, implying that this situation was unacceptable for a Jewish community (*The Jewish Advocate* April 1931: 152–3).

Some Bene Israel emphasised that Hindu religious culture as a whole was quite alien to them. For instance, *The Israelite* (November–December 1926: 133) criticised the Bene Israel of Poona for publishing Paul Goodman's *History of Israel* translated by a Brahman into Marathi. It asked community members to refrain from reading this book as it was translated by someone 'born in idolatry and bred up in religious atmosphere considered a contamination by Israel' and maintained that a Hindu could not interpret the religious history of the Jews. Another article published in the same periodical mentioned that some Brahmans were putting on a series of lectures for the Bene Israel and argued that 'a pagan, *whatever his status may be* [emphasis added] must be kept apart from preaching to Israel' (*Israelite* March–April 1926: 41).

The Indian perceptions of the Bene Israel in the later British period seem to have been rather complex. Their immediate neighbours of the Konkan coast associated them with their traditional occupational group and hardly had any knowledge at all about Jews and Judaism in general. If they did, there is no evidence to suggest that they identified the Bene Israel as a part of world Jewry. In any case, the attempts of the Bene Israel either to associate

themselves with higher castes or to challenge the influence of Brahmans in India and to dissociate the community from the Hindu majority indicates that they had suffered from caste discrimination at least to some extent.

Better educated Indians sometimes queried the Jewishness of the Bene Israel. One of the community's responses to this was to refute any possibility of their non-Jewish origin in their numerous periodicals and other publications. None the less it was admitted by Bene Israel leaders that the Judaism of the majority of the community was not completely orthodox and that concrete steps to counteract this needed to be taken.

It is also worth mentioning that the Bene Israel themselves (like the Jews of Cochin) had some caste-like patterns. Until well into the second half of the twentieth century they maintained a division into the Gora (white) and Kala (black) Bene Israel. The former maintained that they were 'pure' Bene Israel, whose ancestors never intermarried since the shipwreck, while the Kala were the offspring of liaisons between the Bene Israel and other Indians. The Gora were always more numerous than the Kala. Practically until the mid-twentieth-century the two groups would neither intermarry nor dine together, and the Kala would not even be allowed to touch the cooking utensils of the Gora. Kala Bene Israel would worship in the synagogues of the Gora, however they had to stay in a far corner. They were also buried in a separate corner of Bene Israel cemeteries (Isenberg 1988: 104–5).

Needless to say, the Gora and Kala never differed in physical appearance at all, though there was a view among some 'Gora' Bene Israel that their ancestors had a lighter complexion. According to one of the Gora informants of Strizower, who carried out her fieldwork among the Bene Israel in the 1960s, 'poverty and the excessive heat of India greatly affected the fair complexion of our ancestors' (Strizower 1971: 27). However, apparently there was also another view in the community suggesting that 'true' Jews were actually supposed to be black, just like the Bene Israel. For instance, one of Strizower's interviewees argued that 'colour is no index of admixture. My father always held that the "pure" Jew is dark. It is the white Jew who is mixed!' (Strizower 1971: 27). The statement reveals that the community was obviously traumatised by the lack of recognition on behalf of Western Jews and the Baghdadis and felt that one of the reasons for that was their physicality.

In any case it appears that in the later British period that would have been a 'minority view' among the Gora Bene Israel who clearly associated 'whiteness' with pure origins and Jewishness and 'blackness' with inter-marriage. According to Roland, they labelled as 'black Jews' all those who were the children of a Jewish male and a non-Jewish woman and possibly even distinguished between 'white' and 'black' Baghdadis, arguing that the latter were the progeny of 'genuine' Jewish Baghdadi men and non-Jewish women. It appears that the Baghdadis themselves had no knowledge of 'black' Baghdadis, nor were they convinced by the argument of the Gora that unlike the Kala Bene Israel they were of 'pure' Jewish descent

(Roland 1998: 66–7). It may be suggested that the division of the Bene Israel into two groups indicates that the community was both affected by the caste ideology of Indian society (the Gora clearly considered the Kala to be ‘less pure’ and treated them as a lower caste), but it was also a possible (though not a very efficient) means of defending the ‘purity’ of the Bene Israel descent in front of other Jews.

Are Jews a race? Indian Jews and the status of the European

Finally, what was the view of the colonial authorities regarding the origin of the Bene Israel? Were they perceived by the British as a part of world Jewry? Colonial position on this vexed issue is reflected in their responses to the attempts of Baghdadi Jews of Calcutta to secure the status of Europeans in India in the first half of the twentieth century. As noted above, the Baghdadis fully identified their interests with those of the British, were eager to enter the colonial elite of the subcontinent and by the end of the nineteenth century were becoming more and more Anglicised (Roland 1998: 65).

Up until 1885 the Baghdadi Jews were classified as ‘Europeans’ on the subcontinent, while the Jews of Cochin and the Bene Israel were assigned to the Indian section of the population. We cannot say with certainty what exactly led the British administration to single out the Baghdadis among Indian Jewry and what made them change their status in 1885. Apparently the British distinguished between Baghdadis and the Bene Israel, as the census of 1881 gives separate figures for ‘Beni Israel’ and ‘Jews proper’ of Bombay.²⁰ When defining the status of the Baghdadis they must have taken into consideration the fact that the Middle Eastern Jews were ‘newcomers’ and historically and culturally differed greatly both from the majority of the Indian population and from their Indian co-religionists. According to the Musleah, initially, unlike the Bene Israel and the Cochinis, the members of his community were classified as Europeans in British India because they had a lighter complexion, ‘showed greater ease in integrating and had little difficulty in conforming in their dress, language, education and social habits with European standards’ (Musleah 1975: 333), an explanation which is rather telling of the attitude of the Baghdadis towards other Indian Jewish communities.

Due to the fact that the Baghdadi Jews were initially classified as ‘Europeans’, their school, which opened in Calcutta in 1881 and had English as the medium for instruction, was put under the European Inspectorate, however as a result of the introduction of the new rules, in 1885 the Inspector for European Schools stopped visiting it. In 1886 the most prominent members of the community submitted a petition to the Governor of Bengal asking for their school to be put back under the European Inspectorate. This request was granted, though the status of the community

was not changed. This created a paradoxical situation, as after 1885 the Baghdadi Jews were considered to be 'Indian', while the school supported by them and attended by their children was 'European'. It has been suggested that the previous status was returned to the school due to the fact that the governor had visited it and had a good opinion of the level of its English education, and went to the limits of his power to help the Baghdadi Jews. The members of the community themselves observe that nothing changed in the actual attitude of the British towards them after 1885 and their loss of equality with the Europeans existed only on paper. The interactions of the Baghdadi Jews with statutory Europeans were not limited in any way and they would even be admitted to the exclusive European clubs, which was not the case with the Bene Israel (Musleah 1975: 333, 345–6).

The members of the community did not make any active attempts to change their status up until 1919, when they asked to be exempted from the operation of the Indian Arms Act of 1878, according to which, all the inhabitants of the subcontinent except Europeans, Armenians and Americans were forbidden to carry arms. In June 1919 several prominent members of the Calcutta Baghdadi Jewish community sent a memorial to the government arguing that they should be listed among those who were allowed to carry arms stressing that their community was loyal to the government and kept aloof from the political agitation of Indian nationalists and that their lifestyle, habits, customs, etc., were foreign to India. Writing about their position in India in general, the petitioners maintained that their 'status should be established in equality with the status of Jewish subjects in other parts of the British Empire'.²¹ The Baghdadis appear to have tried to associate themselves with Anglo-Jewry and thus to acquire the status that it enjoyed in Great Britain. They did not refer to other Jewish communities of British India, and clearly were not eager to be included in one group with their Indian co-religionists.

In 1919 the Montagu–Chelmsford reforms introduced special constituencies for a number of religious communities and socio-economic interest groups of India. According to the Bengal Electoral Rules, which were relevant to the Baghdadi Jews of Calcutta, four electoral groupings were established in the province: European, Muslim, Anglo-Indian and general. The Jews were assigned to the general, or the so-called 'non-Muhammadan' constituency, which included the majority of the population and was represented mainly by the Hindus. The 1919 reforms provided also for an inquiry into their operation after a period of ten years. In 1927, two years earlier than scheduled, the British government appointed a Commission of Inquiry under Sir John Simon (Brown 1994: 251). The Baghdadi Jews hoped that their status would be changed in the course of the revisions of the Central Legislative Assembly and the Bengal Legislative Council electoral rolls and D.J. Cohen, the vice-president of the Calcutta Jewish Association, directed a letter to the secretary of the Government of India through the chief secretary of the Government of Bengal, explaining

the political affiliations of his community. However his attempts did not bear fruit (Roland 1998: 117–18).

In 1929 David Ezra, the leader of Calcutta Jewry, sent a petition to the Government of Bengal, to John Simon and to the members of the Indian Statutory Commission with a request to submit it also to Lord Irwin, the then Viceroy. The petitioners again spoke about their Sephardi origin, maintained that they were foreigners in India, were not permanently domiciled there and argued that though they were not descended from Europeans, as they were Jews, they belonged to the ‘white race’ (Musleah 1975: 347), an argument which casts further light on the nature of their attitude towards the Bene Israel. As was shown earlier, the Baghdadis tended to deny the Bene Israel their Jewishness on the grounds that the latter were not fully acquainted with the proper observances of Judaism. It appears that in the last decades of the British period their attitude towards the Bene Israel also acquired a political flavour. Given that they intended to secure the status of ‘Europeans’ arguing that they were of the ‘white race’, it is not surprising that they were not keen on ‘taking aboard’ the Bene Israel, who in their appearance were very similar to the majority of the Indian population.

The position of the Baghdadi Jews of Bombay on this issue is not clear. They do not seem to have petitioned the government on their status, until they were persuaded by their co-religionists from Calcutta to support their letter to Lord Irwin. As a result, some prominent members of the Bombay Baghdadi community sent a similar memorial to the Viceroy. The reply of the Bengal government was negative, which prompted David Ezra to address it again:

The British section of the Jewish community considers it imperative that its political status be equitably established by the Government on a racial basis and that its race entitles it to be politically attached to the ‘European’ group despite the fact that its descent is not ‘European’.

(Quoted in Roland 1998: 119)

The Bengal government submitted the petition to Lord Irwin, but as he was occupied with the civil disobedience campaign, he passed the letter to the India Office, where it was shelved for four years (Musleah 1975: 347).

The Baghdadis resumed their negotiations with the colonial authorities during the period of the Round Table Conferences held in London between 1930 and 1932, where Indians were invited to take part in the discussion of a new constitution, which subsequently was introduced under the 1935 Government of India Act (Brown 1994: 264). The leaders of the Calcutta Jews wanted to obtain an assurance from the India Office that their status would be changed at least under the Government of India Act, if it could not be changed earlier. A new proposal was directed to the India Office through Edward Judah, a Baghdadi Jew who at that time was living in London and tried to secure the support of various prominent statesmen.

He appears to have been in touch with Lord Reading and Herbert Samuel, the first British High Commissioner in Palestine, who recommended him to seek the assistance of the Jewish Board of Deputies in London. The case of the Baghdadi community was presented for the consideration both of the Board and of the Anglo-Jewish Association in London whose representatives viewed it in a favourable light and sent a supporting letter to the Under-Secretary of State for India. Musleah argues that the discussion of the case in London was fruitless, as those who participated in it failed to find a clear definition of the term 'Sephardi Jewish community' and could never decide whether all Baghdadi Jews of India should be included in the European constituency, or only those of them who spoke English and dressed in European style. Eventually, the case reached Samuel Hoare, the Secretary of State for India, who in his turn referred the issue to the Government of Bengal (Musleah 1975: 348–9).

In 1934 the Government of Bengal directed an address to the Bengal Chamber of Commerce and to the European Association asking their authorities to express their views on the issue. At Judah's suggestion, the European Association's Executive Committee offered the following definition of the eligibility of the Calcutta Jews for European classification, which was supported by the Bengal Chamber of Commerce and subsequently sent to the Government of Bengal: 'British subjects of the Sephardic Jewish community including British subjects of mixed European and Sephardic Jewish descent but excluding Ben-Israelites [*sic*] Black Cochin Jews and persons of Indian or mixed Jewish and non-European descent' (Musleah 1975: 349–50). It is clear that the authors of this definition differentiated between members of different Jewish communities of the subcontinent, and even between the black and the white Jews of Cochin. The latter do not appear in this definition at all, though given that they lived mainly in the non-British part of India, the definition would not be applicable to them anyway. The reason why the black Jews of Cochin were mentioned was possibly because there was a sizeable number of them in Bombay.

Following the Round Table Conferences in January 1935 the Government of India introduced to the Parliament a bill reflecting the proposals for Indian self-government. To the disappointment of the leaders of Calcutta Jewry it contained no mention of its recommendation for European classification. However, this issue was discussed in the House of Commons in the course of the India Bill debate in the context of the discussion in the committee stage of the definition of the terms 'Anglo-Indian' and 'European'. Walter Smiles, an MP from the Conservative Party, moved an amendment relating to the classification of the Baghdadi Jews, which would correspond to the definition offered by the European Association and the Bengal Chamber of Commerce. Smiles suggested that 'British subjects of the Sephardi Jewish Community including those of mixed European–Sephardi descent but excluding Bene-Israelites and Black Cochin Jews should be entitled to vote as Europeans' (*Jewish Tribune* June 1935: 6). The reaction

of the committee members was diverse. Major James Milner supported Smiles and observed that the Sephardi Jews were ethnologically of the 'white race' and in Calcutta they were admitted to various European institutions. Earl Winterton opposed the amendment and stated that it was not fair to single out one Jewish community of the subcontinent from the others and that the principle of the amendment was contrary to the claim of the Jewish settlers of Palestine that they were a united people. William Ormsby-Gore, First Commissioner of Works, adopted a similar position and observed that the government felt it was impossible to single out one Jewish community. He also opened a discussion of the definition of Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews and stated that Britain's effort in Palestine was not to make distinctions between Jews. In addition, he stressed that the government could not treat those Jews who had a higher social position differently from other Jews.

Colonel Josiah Wedgwood sided with Smiles and argued that the inclusion of the Calcutta Jews, many of whom were wealthy businessmen, in the European constituency would only strengthen the European stratum of the population of the subcontinent. Barnett Janner, the only member of Parliament of Jewish origin who participated in this debate, refused to take a stand on the amendment. He stated that the case of the Calcutta Jews was strong and that it had to be considered, but at the same time observed that drawing distinctions between Jews and non-Jews was likely to lead to undesirable misunderstanding. In the end Ormsby-Gore's views prevailed, and Smiles withdrew his amendment (*Jewish Tribune* June 1935: 6; Roland 1998: 121–2).

This was the end of a long period of negotiations between the leaders of Calcutta Jewry and the colonial authorities. It is difficult to say what the outcome of the discussions of this issue would have been, if the Calcutta leaders had requested the inclusion of the entire Jewish population of the subcontinent in the European election rolls. This might have deflected the arguments of Earl Winterton and Ormsby-Gore, who seem to have been concerned in the debate on Smiles's amendment only about the question of distinguishing among different Jewish groups. At the same time, such an initiative may have not been supported by Smiles and Wedgwood, who stressed that the reason why Baghdadi Jews could be included in the European constituency was that they had more in common with the Europeans living in India than with their co-religionists from other Jewish communities of the subcontinent. In other words, the British were not ready to grant the Bene Israel (or all Cochin Jews) the status of the Europeans, as they thought they differed too much from them; however in the light of the Palestine issue they were not comfortable with stating that Jews may belong to different 'ethnic', 'cultural' or 'racial' groups either. When making the final decision on the status of the Baghdadis, they may have also taken into account the modest numerical size of the community and decided that it was easier to define all Jews of the subcontinent as 'Indian' altogether.

However, given that the Baghdadis were admitted into British clubs and their school had a 'European' status, it is quite clear that the British considered this group much closer to them on account of the way they looked, their style of life and the economic position of such families as the Sassoons.

The Bene Israel after independence

The numbers of the community significantly decreased in the second half of the twentieth century due to emigration to Israel, Europe and the Americas. At the moment the Bene Israel number about 4,000 people in India. The majority of them live in Mumbai, but there are also Bene Israel communities and functioning synagogues in Pune, Thane and Ahmedabad. Apart from the synagogues, the community runs a charitable institution, the Bene Israel Conference Education Fund, which provides Bene Israel students with scholarships for higher education, and benefits from two international Jewish organisations which have their branches in India: ORT (Organisation for Technological Training)²² and AJDC (American Joint Distribution Committee) (Roland 1998: 267–77).

As we have seen the particular obscurity of the origins of the Bene Israel contributed substantially to the difficulties they encountered in India before Independence. This was true of their struggle to gain recognition from the Baghdadis but also in the larger campaign to gain full recognition as Jews in the Jewish world as a whole. Rabbinical courts in Baghdad and Jerusalem ruled in 1914 that intermarriage between Jews and the Bene Israel was forbidden.²³ In 1944, however, one of the two Chief Rabbis of Palestine, Rabbi Meir Hai Uzziel, declared in a *responsum* that the Bene Israel were 'descended from Jewish seed, and I have found support in a responsum by Hai Gaon²⁴... and in a letter by Maimonides to the scholars of Lunel'.²⁵ In a 1951 *responsum* Rabbi Uzziel noted that whereas there was perhaps reason to believe that the Bene Israel had at some time intermarried with gentiles this should not be allowed to affect their status as Jews on the grounds 'that we have never rejected any Jew because of his gentile appearance or the colour of his skin'.²⁶ However in 1964 the controversy flared up when the Sephardi Chief Rabbi of Israel, Yitzhak Nissim, refused to allow Bene Israel individuals to marry other Jews, unless they were able to provide proof of Jewishness and no intermarriage over several generations. The main argument of the Chief Rabbi and of those who supported his point of view was that in the past the Bene Israel had been ignorant of Jewish laws relating to divorce and levirate marriage and their failure in the past to follow such laws would have led to *mamzerut* (more or less the same argument was to be used later against the Falashas). As a result of a campaign led by a number of Bene Israel organisations (which included a sit down strike in front of the Jewish Agency and the burning of an effigy of Yitzhak Nissim) which received the general support of the Knesset and other secular bodies the problem was resolved to the

satisfaction of the Bene Israel. As Prime Minister Eshkol put it, the rabbinate could not be allowed to be an obstacle in the way of the principle of the ingathering of the exiles (Eisenstadt 1967: 314). However, despite the support they received, the scars of this encounter remained (Weil 1977; Roland 1998: 249–51). The episode of the 1960s repeated itself relatively recently. In 1997 the Chief Rabbi of the town of Petah Tikvah raised doubts about the Jewishness of the Bene Israel and ordered his employees not to validate new marriages for them (*The Hindu*, 20 November 1997). The ongoing struggle in Israel to fully achieve legitimacy as Jews is no more than a continuation of the much older struggle to be recognised by their most ‘significant-other’ – the Baghdadis.

Has the image of the Bene Israel changed in India since 1947? It appears that the Indianness of this community is still one of the main issues which figures in the Indian discussion of them. Parasuram, the author of a book devoted to Indian Jewry (probably the only existing non-academic book on the subject by an Indian author) stresses the Indian features of the Bene Israel and even ridicules Kehimkar’s book on the history of his community for trying to prove that the Bene Israel were any different from their non-Jewish neighbours. The author does not question the legend of origin offered by Kehimkar but suggests that the Bene Israel were truly Indian ‘in every way except in religion and rituals’ (Parasuram 1982: 81). At the same time Parasuram sympathises with the Bene Israel who have had to contend with the skepticism of other Jews and argues that unlike their co-religionists in Europe the Bene Israel acquired so many physical characteristics reflecting the wider local population precisely because they were not persecuted in India:

[T]he Bene Israel, in their efforts to adapt themselves to their new environment, succeeded too well to the liking of those who survived in a different environment. Jews, like any other minority, feel compelled to assert their uniqueness when persecuted. When they are given complete equality, they are not under the same compulsion to underline the differences. They tend to be like their neighbours except for the obvious differences based on religion, rites and rituals.

(Parasuram 1982: 85–6)

As far as the general Indian perception of the Bene Israel is concerned, Parasuram suggests that an average Indian would not be able to tell them apart from any other native of the subcontinent:

Because of their Indian-sounding names, very few of the people they daily come in contact with are aware of their Jewish background. If they did, there would be some curiosity about their religion. There will be no other reaction, for they are accepted naturally as fellow-Indians.

(Parasuram 1982: 87)

And indeed, the Bene Israel have formed part of the local environment and were clearly influenced by many processes characteristic of Indian society. They were confident of their Jewish identity, but were not fully recognised as Jews either by their co-religionists living in India and abroad, or by other Indians. Though civil equality in Israel was eventually gained, the community has been traumatised. A question mark continues to hover over their heads with respect to their legitimacy as Jews. In India even today the Bene Israel in rural areas sometimes find it difficult to explain to their immediate neighbours that they are not a caste or that their religion is not a branch of Christianity. The residue of their experience in India, in the Jewish world and in the Jewish State was a feeling of ambivalence, of not fully belonging. This was due in large part to the lingering uncertainty about their origin.

8 Genetic research on the Bene Israel

Media response to the Bene Israel tests

News of the DNA analysis of the Bene Israel made first page banner headlines in the *Times of India* as well as being very prominently covered in other Indian newspapers including the tabloid press. According to the *Times of India* the genetic ‘carbon dating’ has revealed that the Bene Israel were carrying ‘the unusual Moses gene that would make them, literally, the original children of Israel’ (Ahmed 2002). One Mumbai tabloid *mid-day* trumpeted: ‘Thane Jews pass the blood test!’ and went on to say:

The news that recent DNA tests have linked India’s Bene Israel Jewish community to the patriarch Moses has delighted the small Jewish community in Thane. For hundreds of years, the Bene Israel, now largely concentrated in and around Thane had fought Western prejudice that denied them their claim as descendants of one of Israel’s twelve lost tribes. Now the Jews of Thane, home to 2,000 or 40 per cent of India’s Jewry, can hold their head high among the rest of the Jewish community.

(Nair 2002)

As in the media reports on the Lemba DNA tests none of the newspaper reports raised the question of a wider definition of Jewish identity or challenged the idea of ‘checking’ Jewishness using DNA tests. The only scepticism that was voiced in the press was in respect to the reaction of the Israelis. The *Times of India* interviewed a Bene Israel living in Israel, according to whom, the research that found the ‘Cohanim genes’ in ‘the blacks of Africa’ (presumably he meant the Lemba) did not convince many Israelis. Hence he was sceptical about the impact of the Bene Israel tests. The same article recalled the long struggle for recognition that the community had endured in Israel arguing that it was their ‘Indian appearance, cricket-playing, sari-wearing, curry-eating and Marathi-speaking habits’ that had got them into trouble. But now, after the tests, the article argues, the Bene Israel ‘could well claim to be the purest of the pure’ (Ahmed 2002).

The results of the tests did not receive much publicity in the Western media though the beginning of the research did (Karp 1998) – there was one rather sensationalist Reuters report which noted that ‘extensive DNA testing has found the Bene Israelis . . . are direct descendants of a hereditary Israelite priesthood that can be traced back 3000 years to Moses’ brother, Aaron’. It was in India itself that the media had something of a field day. Quite apart from anything else given that the Bene Israel community numbers about 4,000 out of an Indian population of over one billion it is remarkable that the Indian media took any interest at all. As we have seen the Bene Israel had a *Times of India* headline and this was followed up by a number of other reports in the press (Nadkarni 2002). Why did the Indian media become so interested in a story regarding such a tiny minority? Of course genetic findings are often considered to be newsworthy and this may be particularly true of reports on ‘Jewish genetics’. For the Bene Israel to make it to the front page of a major Indian newspaper it took a genetics story. It may also be suggested that in India, ‘that place obsessed by place, belonging-to-your-place, knowing-your-place’ as Salman Rushdie puts it, and equally obsessed by issues of purity, research on a group’s past could not pass unnoticed, particularly if it could be construed as dealing with issues of ‘the purity of blood’. It is perhaps not surprising that the idea of the Bene Israel carrying a marker supposedly characteristic of the Cohanim, who may be constructed as the ‘highest caste’ of the Jews did not fail to impress the Indian media which started calling the Bene Israel ‘the purest of the pure’.

The response of the Bene Israel

How did the community itself react to the publication of the results of the tests? A few months after the information of the tests appeared in the newspapers we visited the Bene Israel at the invitation of the Indian branch of the Jewish international aid organisation ORT. The head of ORT India, Mr Benjamin Isaac, and other formal and informal leaders of the community appeared to have been extremely enthusiastic about the results of the tests. Mr Isaac reported that the community was incredibly excited about them and that many people believed that the tests indeed could help them to bring an end to the controversy over the origin of the Bene Israel. Victor Sassoon, a Bene Israel and one of the executive members of ORT is a senior official at *The Times of India*. Sassoon too stressed that our visit was very important for the community. ‘You should have been here for the festivities in July’, he said. He explained that there had been spontaneous dancing in the street and outpourings of joy among the Bene Israel of Bombay on the Sunday following the publication of the *Times of India* article. He mentioned that he had sent the article to his relatives in Canada and Australia and that they too were ecstatically happy about the news. Others we spoke to saw the publication of the articles in the papers as being a critical

milestone in the history of the community. Many saw it in specifically Jewish terms describing it as a 'Messianic' occasion. But Victor Sassoon added that in local terms, the information had come too late. The most important 'others' for the Bene Israel had always been the Baghdadi Jews, the principal culprits for their past humiliations. Now there were hardly any of them left to show the results to.

The idea of the 'genetic Jewishness' and the 'priestly origin' of the Bene Israel was immediately picked up by the community. According to an enthusiastic article in the *Newsletter of the Jewish Religious Union*, an organisation of the Reform Bene Israel, 'The result of the genetic carbon dating... will sweep away the doubts and prejudices of the origin of this people who today number about 5000 souls, mostly in Mumbai and the suburbs'.

This then is the culminating miracle of the story of our ancestors who kept Judaism alive for over 2,000 years, built synagogues and prayer halls in India, honoured the sacred institutions of the Sabbath, Kashruth, bar mitzvah and circumcision, celebrated all the festivals and High Holy Days – could the Cohanim in India have done otherwise? (Rodef Shalom 2002).

As with the Lemba we distributed a questionnaire among 100 Bene Israel and got back 94 filled in copies. The majority of our respondents (68) were from Mumbai, 16 were from Ahmedabad, and the rest were individuals from Thane, Pune and from different villages of the Konkan coast.

As mentioned earlier, from the perspective of its religious affiliation the Bene Israel community in general is far more homogenous than the Lemba. Only 5 people among our respondents said that they were secular when they were asked to identify their religion and 2 gave no answer. Others stated affiliation to different branches of Judaism. There were 72 respondents who also indicated that they belonged to and/or attended regularly different communal institutions. When asked how one can tell a Bene Israel from a non-Bene Israel 30 people mentioned their physical appearance. Other answers were very diverse but all came down to Jewish customs and traditions. Only 6 respondents said that the Bene Israel were indistinguishable from their neighbours. In answer to the question about the origin of the community 53 people spoke about its Jewish roots, 17 mentioned the village of Navgaon or Konkan, and others gave less precise answers, like West Asia, Central Asia, the North. When asked to give a definition of 'Jews' and Judaism the respondents provided very 'adequate' elaborate answers, and at the same time about one half of all respondents found it rather difficult to reply to a question about anti-Semitism. Of this half, about 43 people did not answer at all, 2 came up with unexpected answers ('not believing in Judaism' and 'hatred of Jews and Arabs') and others produced rather adequate answers like 'hatred of the Jews', 'discrimination against the Jews', etc. One person argued that it was discrimination against the Jews in Europe. Our local assistants who were helping us to distribute and collect the questionnaires pointed out to us that many Bene Israel were not acquainted with this term, as there was no anti-Semitism in India.

Of the respondents, eighty-eight confirmed that they knew about the genetic tests and their results and almost all of them learnt about the tests from the media. Many recalled the titles of newspapers that published articles about the research, that is, *The Times of India* and *Midday*. In answer to the question 'If you learnt about the tests from the media... what exactly do you remember from it?', about a third of the respondents wrote that the tests had proved that the Bene Israel were Cohanim or related to the family of Moses. To give an example, one respondent maintained that 'It [the newspaper article] stated that the Bene Israel have a similar genetic structure to that of Cohens. This was true as the media had no reason to lie.' It appears that a significant number of the Bene Israel have perceived the results of the tests as proving that nearly all members of their community are of Jewish priestly origin. It should be noted in this respect that during our trip we were conducting further DNA tests among the Bene Israel for geneticists from the Haifa Technion working with Professor Karl Skorecki. One of the questions on the form which the tested were supposed to answer was asking them whether they were Cohens, Levites or Israelites. Interestingly, some Bene Israel asked to be marked as 'Cohens'. As one of them explained, 'Now we know that all Bene Israel are Cohens.'

This response is hardly surprising given the way the tests were represented in the *Sunday Times* article, which stated in its opening paragraph that the research had revealed that the Bene Israel carry 'the unusual Moses gene' and that they are the 'probable descendants of a small group of hereditary Israelite priests or Cohanim' (Ahmed 2002). The statement is very likely to be understood by a layman as an argument in support of the priestly origin of the entire Bene Israel population. Only eight people expressed their doubt about the research. One of them stressed his lack of knowledge and/or of understanding of the technicalities of the tests. 'They did not inform us [about] what exactly was the test or what proved that we were related to Aaron,' he wrote.

As with the Lemba we wanted to assess the respondents' perception of genetic research in general. One of our questions asked 'What is genetics?' It also has some bearing on the vexed question of informed consent. About one half of our respondents described genetics in a rather 'adequate' way. They defined it as 'science of heredity', 'science of genes', 'science of genetic structure'. Interestingly, about 10 per cent linked genetics to the study of origins, a phenomenon which we have already come across with the Lemba questionnaire: they described genetics as '(science) about classes of people', 'study of origin through body', '(science which) traces ancestors'. As it must have been true also for the Lemba, the perception of genetics of this part of the respondents was dominated by what they had learnt about the research on their community, so they construed it as a science which looks only at the origins of populations.

One question asked 'Why do you think they conducted these tests on the Bene Israel?' About one third replied that the scientists wanted to see 'how

Jewish the Bene Israel were'. Ten per cent argued that the idea behind the tests had been to prove that the Bene Israel were Jewish. This group included such answers as 'to confirm that the Bene Israel are from the Twelve Tribes', 'Bene Israel wanted better respect', 'to declare Bene Israel Jews', 'to prove we are Jews'. Here the assumption was that the geneticists were from the start 'on the side' of the Bene Israel, that they did not doubt their Jewish origin and wanted to provide scientific proof for it. One person gave an opposite response: 'They were under the impression that we are impure Jews'. When asked what was researched in the tests 26 people said that it was the 'Moses gene'. It is interesting in this respect to consider the answers to the question about the educational level of the respondents, which appears to be quite high. Of all those who filled in the questionnaire, 58 had a degree. Of the 26 who thought that the object of the research was the 'Moses gene' 17 were those who had undergone higher education. In other words, even well educated, though not necessarily science oriented, people did not question the assumption made in the press about the object of the research. There was even one medical doctor among them.

Another question looked at the way the Bene Israel perceived the way the research was conducted:

Do you think that the Bene Israel were properly consulted in the matter of the tests? If not, what would be a better way of organising this type of research? What do you think the researchers failed to do in conducting the tests? What do you think they did wrong?

About one third of the respondents made negative comments about the way the tests were conducted and only ten appeared to be entirely happy with the geneticists. The rest did not respond to this question at all. Those who were not satisfied with the tests had two main complaints. The first was that not all the Bene Israel were informed about the tests when they were being conducted and that they learnt about them only recently when the results appeared in the media. The second was that not all Bene Israel were tested. A number of people suggested that if the entire community had been tested the results would have been even more overwhelmingly 'positive'. Some individual responses reflected a negative attitude towards the very idea of such tests. One person argued that they should not have been conducted at all as the Bene Israel knew all along that they were Jewish. Another person maintained that the results of this study should not have been published because of the possibility of 'communal backlash' – although whether this would emanate from Hindus, Muslims or others was not made clear.

A number of questions specifically asked what the respondents thought about the tests and about their results. About one half of the respondents were positive about the idea of this research. Their replies ranged from direct affirmative answers to stressing the usefulness of the tests to the Bene

Israel and the general academic value of the tests ('very helpful', 'ended controversy', 'useful during migration to Israel', 'knowledge is always good'). About 20 per cent of the respondents were either clearly negative about the tests ('don't believe in such things', 'do it on AIDS, much more important', 'waste of time') or argued that there was no need conducting tests like that on the Bene Israel, as they had always known that they were Jews and did not need any further 'proof'.

When asked about their attitude towards the results of the tests fifty-six responded in a very positive way. Those who chose to explain why exactly they liked the results related them to the issue of the recognition of the Jewishness of the Bene Israel. Some stressed that it proved the 'purity' of the Bene Israel. One respondent in the same context also stressed that 'science is never wrong'. Five people were sceptical about the results and others either argued that the results had no importance for them or said that they were happy about the results as they were beneficial for the community, but made it clear that generally they had reservations about this sort of research. One respondent observed, 'We're lucky, what if the results had been negative?' When asked about the responses of other Bene Israel forty-two people said that the community was generally pleased about the tests and nine thought that some Bene Israel had either mixed feelings about them or simply did not like the idea of the tests. Others did not answer.

Several questions were aimed at looking at the way the Bene Israel viewed the actual or potential effects of the genetic research on their life and the community's self-perception. In response to the general question about whether the genetic results would affect the life of the Bene Israel and the way they think about themselves, about one half answered that they definitely would. Among more detailed answers there were the following explanations: 'We always knew we were Jewish, now we know we are Cohens', 'we no longer have to fight for recognition', 'they gave us status', 'the results will have an effect where Israel is concerned'. Many stressed that the results added to their self dignity. Sixteen argued that the tests would not affect the Bene Israel at all. As we have seen one response was particularly negative, saying that the research could cause unspecified communal problems.

When asked specifically whether the tests had affected the life of the Bene Israel in India only sixteen people answered in the affirmative. Some said that the Bene Israel had got more confidence and were more proud of their origin now. Forty-five were convinced that it was certainly not going to be the case and observed that the tests had importance only where Israel was concerned.

Another question asked to choose between the following answers: 'Some say these results confirm what the Bene Israel have always said about their history. But others say that they are not important or less important than what their grandparents taught them. What do you think?' While nine stressed that the tests were less important than the oral tradition of the

community, thirty-seven people replied that the tests had confirmed the foundation legend. The latter argued that they had never had any doubts about their origin. In answer to a more direct question 'Are the Bene Israel themselves more convinced that they are Jewish now than they were before the tests?' one half said no. Some made it clear that they found the question insulting (one person said, 'The question makes my blood boil'). Twenty-two said yes. The rest argued that though the tests did not make any difference to them, it was good for the Bene Israel that the world knew about the results. Another question asked 'Do you think that DNA tests prove that the Bene Israel are Jewish?' Fifty-four people said yes, though some of them again stressed that no proof was needed or that it was needed only to the outside world. Five people said no and eight respondents categorically said that they found the question insulting.

Three questions asked whether, in the view of our respondents, the Israelis, Western Jews and Baghdadi and Cochini Jews of India have changed their attitude towards and/or the way they think about the Bene Israel since the publication of the tests. As far as the Israelis are concerned, twenty-four people reckoned that their attitude towards the Bene Israel won't change, sixteen respondents thought it would and others did not answer. Both those who thought that the position of the Israelis was bound to change and those who thought that it would not spoke about the problem of recognition that the Bene Israel had in Israel. The former argued that now the Bene Israel would become more respected in Israel. Those who were sceptical about it also evoked the problem of Bene Israel status in the Jewish State. As one informant put it, 'Israel will never accept any change with respect to the Bene Israel.'

When asked about changes in relations with other foreign Jews, thirteen people said that they had improved already or that they would improve. As in the previous question, these people expressed hope that the Bene Israel would now be more respected and accepted by foreign Jews. Twenty-six thought that they would not. Some of those who were sceptical expressed bitterness at the way Western Jews had treated their community. As one person observed, 'European and American Jews may not like it [the result of the DNA tests], as it shows that we are the dominant sect.' He was among those who interpreted the results of the tests as proving that the entire community was of priestly origin. One respondent who thought that relations with Western Jewry were bound to change argued that now the 'main' Jewish communities of the world should also be tested. 'What happens if the DNA tests fail to prove [their] Jewish genes', he asked, 'will they have to undergo conversions as all non-Jewish followers do or will there be some other compromise or way found?'

As to the likely reaction of the Baghdadis and Cochini Jews the overwhelming majority said that they either did not know what it was or observed that there were too few members of these two communities still in India. Twenty-three people said categorically that they did not think

anything would change in these communities' perception of the Bene Israel. Two people indicated that the Baghdadi Jews even after the tests continued to humiliate the Bene Israel because the Baghdadis considered themselves to be 'genetically superior'. Only four respondents said that they expected some changes in this respect.

Finally, we asked whether they had had a chance to discuss the results of the tests with non-Bene Israel Indians. The majority either did not answer the question or said that they had not talked about the tests with non-Jewish Indians. Twenty-three people said that they had and that their Indian neighbours were very interested in hearing the news and were glad for the Bene Israel. As one of the respondents put it, 'They were very happy and excited about it and said, "Now it has been proved that you are the pure Jewish descendants of Moses."'

Purity and status

What generalisations can be made about the Bene Israel perception of the DNA tests on the basis of their responses? The majority of the respondents were positive about the tests. Their position was that the tests were much needed for the community and the publication of their results was certainly going to change things for the better with respect to their self-esteem and the full recognition of their Jewishness by others with the latter factor carrying more weight than the former, as apparently the Bene Israel were always utterly convinced of their Jewish identity. Indeed many argued that the tests did not have any significance for them, as they always knew that they were Jewish, even though they admitted that it was good for the 'outside world' to learn about their results. The questionnaire has shown very clearly that the community is still haunted by the traumatic experience of not being recognised as 'proper Jews'.

Did the tests have any significance for the Bene Israel in the Indian context? As we have seen, many respondents thought that what was discovered was that all the Bene Israel were the descendants of the priests and this is exactly what the *Sunday Times* reported. This response must be considered in the context of the social history and religious culture of the society in which the Bene Israel live. In traditional Indian society, of course, the concept of purity is vitally important and defines status in the caste hierarchy. The purer the origin of a caste, the higher its status. As was shown in the previous chapter the Bene Israel were acutely aware of caste in the context of their native villages and in the more recent context of their dealings with Jews. Some of them at the turn of the century even tried to become associated with the local Brahmans by imposing a Jewish identity on them. A century on, issues of caste, purity and to an extent colour are still of overriding importance for the community and the genetic results were interpreted by them in the light of these concerns. Very often in both the questionnaires and in oral discussions of the tests with us our informants

expressed great satisfaction that geneticists had proved that the Bene Israel were 'the purest of the pure' or 'the purest of the Jews'. In Jewish terms the purity of descent so long questioned by the Baghdadi Jews has now been established. Moreover they could now see themselves as not merely on a par with the Baghdadis or any other Jews for that matter but as superior to them, for now the newspapers had proclaimed them to be not just lay Jews but Cohanim.

In Indian terms the tests appeared to the Bene Israel to confer upon them caste dignity, priestly status and purity. In the light of their social situation in India it was not so surprising that the Bene Israel tended to construct the genetic results as proving the 'purity' of their Jewishness. Combined with their traditions, according to which the Brahmans of India were actually Jewish, the discovery of the connection of the Bene Israel with the Cohanim, the 'purest' of the Jews, made the Bene Israel even purer than the Brahmans.

9 Conclusion

How may we attempt to delineate the main differences and similarities in the impact that genetic research has had on the identities of the two groups and in their overall response to the tests? Both the Lemba and the Bene Israel have had historical experiences which are not dissimilar. They have been unable to prove that their own cherished narratives of origin are true. They have both been ridiculed and belittled because of them. Now they have what they regard as proof of the authenticity of their traditions. The outside interest in this genetic research on the Lemba and Indian Jews derives mainly from the fact that it helps to prove theories of origin profoundly important to both groups but about which historians had severe reservations. However, one should bear in mind that the two groups are organised quite differently. The Bene Israel, notwithstanding their mysterious origins, have developed into a Jewish community very much like any other in the world. In Bombay there is a full range of community organisations, synagogues, prayer halls, community journals etc. The Lemba on the other hand have but one specifically Lemba organisation the Lemba Cultural Association which is run by a small body of elders and which has very poor outreach to the bulk of the community. In addition the Bene Israel practice Judaism in a way which would be recognisable to Jews anywhere. The vast majority of the Lemba practice Christianity, often belong to well-organised churches and indeed many of them are extremely pious Christians. The differences in the way the genetic tests affected the narratives of origin of the two groups and the way they are perceived in the outside world in some measure derive from these factors.

In the case both of the Lemba and the Bene Israel, questions emerged at the time of the DNA collection. In Bombay the collection was carried out through the good offices of the ORT organisation which inspires trust and confidence in the Bene Israel community. There was no apparent opposition to the tests: people seemed co-operative and curious as to the outcome. In the case of the Lemba some of the collection was carried out at a large meeting of the Lemba Cultural Association which gave its support to the venture; other collections were carried out in various villages in Zimbabwe where Tudor Parfitt first acquired the approval of the traditional

source of authority – the tribal chief – and by then was well known to the community.

There was very little hesitation on the part of either group in consenting to give their DNA. It later emerged in both cases that a major source of complaint was that everyone should have been tested, that everyone should have had the opportunity to participate in this unravelling of the past.

In the case of the Lemba, geneticists and those who reported their activities almost ‘invented’ the Lemba as a Jewish community for ‘outsiders’. However, as was shown in Chapter 6, the direct impact of the media coverage on the totality of the Lemba in Zimbabwe as in South Africa was quantitatively not big, as due to the scattered nature of the tribe and the inaccessibility of the rural areas in which many of them, live, the information has reached them in a very approximate form. Though the percentage of those Lemba who answered the questionnaire and who were aware of the tests was quite high, one must bear in mind that the Lemba respondents tended to be the ones who were easiest to get hold of and they tended to be in relatively urban areas. In addition the genetic tests were done much longer ago and the story has had time to travel far and wide. It may be said though that the Lemba responses are less diverse than those of the Bene Israel: they probably knew something about the tests but when filling in the questionnaires did not really have much to say about them. In the West, however, the Lemba story had a much greater impact.

As was shown earlier, for the Lemba elite no doubt, the DNA evidence had some usefulness. As a result the Lemba leadership was increasingly drawn into a wide range of networks which were closed to them before. In the case of the Bene Israel it was also the elite who were most responsive to the tests. In the past by and large it was the elite who had dealings with organs of world Jewry and also the institutions of the Baghdadi Jews. However, in overall terms for the Bene Israel the question of use of the tests is more obvious than for the Lemba: most members of the community have been aware at some point in their lives of the disparaging remarks made about them by the Baghdadi Jewish community in Bombay and elsewhere, and are equally aware of the treatment meted out to the community by rabbis in Israel in the 1960s and since. The undisguised glee which accompanied their reception of the genetic results draws on this history. Quite apart from that, the level of English-language education among the Bene Israel is significantly higher than among the Lemba, they were better informed about the tests, had better understanding of their object and purpose, and had a better background knowledge about genetics.

The outside impact, on the contrary, has been slight. Practically nothing on the Bene Israel tests appeared in the Western press. This may be partly due to the fact that though the trauma of the fight for recognition was sufficiently fresh in the memory of the Bene Israel for them to be enthusiastic about the results of the tests, they are now too established as a Jewish community for the outside world to be equally excited about the news.

Second, the existence of a Jewish community in India in popular perceptions is less innately astonishing than the existence of black Jews in south-central Africa, as Indians themselves are considered to be in some ways closer to Europeans than Africans are. For a layman it is easier to accept Indian Jews (as he accepts Moroccan, Iranian, Russian, French or American Jews, that is, the wide variety among world Jewry) than to accept black Jews. ‘Scientific proof’ of the existence of the latter makes more news in the West.

It is difficult to overestimate the influence of local realities on the reactions to the tests. It was shown that the tests had a lot of significance for the Bene Israel in the Indian context and for the Lemba in the context of the history of the society they live in. Similarities are also found in the responses of the researched to the way the tests were conducted. In both cases the reaction to the collection of DNA was largely positive but critical at the same time. One of the often repeated complaints of the Bene Israel was that they should all have been tested. They felt that then the results would have been even more categorical concerning the purity of their descent. Some of the Lemba said the same thing: while they were happy about the results they felt that those conducting the tests should have been more careful in selecting only ‘pure’ Lemba. It was only the Lemba themselves who knew whose blood had been ‘contaminated’ by relationships outside the tribe. Both groups felt they had been left in the dark by the geneticists who should have made more efforts to keep them informed about the results. And in the case of the Lemba among whom DNA tests based upon blood samples were conducted some eight years ago (Spurdle and Jenkins 1996) the memory lingers on that the blood collected may have been used for improper purposes (the more recent collections were done by mouth swab). Thus, the positive responses to genetic tests in general and these tests in particular were due to the fact that for the researched they had produced favourable results and the criticisms were largely the product of a poor understanding of genetics.

Finally, it is perhaps worth making the point that for the liberal groups interested in the fringes of the Jewish world *negative* genetic results do not seem to make much difference. In the case of the *Beta Israel* (Ethiopian Jews) for instance genetic results have indicated that they have little if anything in common with other Jewish groups (Hammer 2000). These results have been reported in the press (Halkin 2000) but have not made any particular impact – certainly not upon the supporters of the Ethiopian community in the United States and elsewhere. Upon the Ethiopian Jews themselves the report made no discernible impact (private communication from Dr Shalva Weil, Hebrew University).

Another case is the Yemenite Jews who in Israel have always been viewed as somewhat different, phenotypically as well as in other respects. At the Second International Congress of Yemenite Jewish Studies held under the auspices of the Institute of Semitic Studies and the Committee for Jewish Studies, Princeton University, in 1992, general outrage was expressed by

Israeli scholars of Yemenite extraction and by Yemenite Jews in the audience when an Israeli scholar, Dr M.A. Weingarten, gave a paper entitled 'The Genetic Identity of Yemenite Jews' in which he showed that Yemenite Jews are genetically close to Yemeni Muslims and that they are genetically quite distant from other Jewish groups in the world' (Weingarten 1992: 20–3). It is not likely, however, that these findings (which have since been substantially revised by geneticists) had any effect on the standing of Yemenite Jews in Israel or elsewhere.

Similarly in the case of the Shinlung or Bnei Menasheh of eastern India it is unlikely that negative DNA results will have any impact upon those who support their claims of Jewish descent: Hillel Halkin, the author of a recent book on this group (Halkin 2002) who is convinced of their Jewishness, has stated that negative results (i.e. showing no link with Jewish populations) would not shake his convictions about their origins in any way at all (Sheleg 2005). It appears that the Bnei Menashe had been resisting DNA tests for some time thinking that they may deflate their story of origin. Rabbi Shimon Gangte, a Bnei Menashe leader who had lived in Israel, is reported to have said in 2002 that genetic research may make the efforts of some of the members of his community to come to Israel more difficult:

Over a number of years, Jewish blood has mixed with non-Jewish blood in our community. So would the DNA test show that we are Jewish? Maybe not. So are people then going to say that we are not Jewish and dash the hopes of the rest of the community to move here? Even if it is not proven according to a DNA test, we feel Jewish and we will still be Jewish.

(Gilmore 2002)

However, in 2004 some Bnei Menashe did agree to collaborate with a research team from the National DNA Analysis Centre in Kolkata, who conducted tests on mtDNA and Y chromosomes of 414 individuals belonging to five tribal communities in Mizoram and compared their genetic profiles to Jewish populations and local populations along the alleged route of migration of the Bnei Menashe ancestors. Their Y chromosome analyses revealed absence of the haplogroup predominant among Jewish populations and the presence of East and South-East Asian-specific lineages; however, intriguingly, the mtDNA analyses indicated traces of genetic relatedness between Mizoram tribes claiming Jewish ancestry and Near Eastern lineages. The study led its initiators to conclude the following

Migration of the lost tribes through China resulting in subsequent genetic admixture over a long period of time has probably diluted the extant gene pool of the Kuki-Chin-Mizo population. Although their paternal lineages do not exhibit any trace of Jewish ancestry, incidence

of maternal Near Eastern Lineages among the Mizoram tribals suggest their claim to Jewish ancestry cannot be excluded.

(Maity *et al.* 2004)

It should be noted that the results of this research were published in a non-peer-reviewed part of *Genome Biology*. Apart from that, according to Karl Skorecki, who recently started a parallel study on Bnei Menashe with colleagues from the Technion, it is hard to rely on the research of the Kolkata team (Calcutta), as in their study they had not done the complete sequencing of the DNA (Sheleg 2005). In an interview given to a leading Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*, Skorecki observed in April 2005 that his team had not reached the stage at which they would be able to make any conclusions but that whatever their findings they would not be able to say the final word about the origins of the Bnei Menashe:

The absence of a genetic match still does not say that the Kuki do not have origins in the Jewish people, as it is possible that after thousands of years it is difficult to identify the traces of the common genetic origin. However, a positive answer can give a significant indication.

(Sheleg 2005)

In April 2005, interestingly, the Chief Rabbi of the Sephardi Jews of Israel, Shlomo Amar, announced that he was ready to recognise the Bnei Menashe as a lost tribe of Israel and was going to investigate further the possibility of organising mass conversions for the community in Mizoram (BBC News 2005). In the *Canadian Jewish News* of 9 June 2005 Michael Freund, once an adviser to former Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, approved of the decision by Rabbi Amar to accept the Bnei Menashe as ‘Zera Israel’ (the seed of Israel):

This decision is a historic development that will open the door to aliyah for the remaining members of the community...I suggest there’s something mystical that’s going on here, something of some tremendous historical and theological significance. We’re beginning to see the fruition of what the prophets foretold, that those who were lost to Judaism will find their way back.

(Stutz 2005)

It is difficult to say whether the study of the Indian genetics team affected his position on the Bnei Menashe, as he had sent emissaries to India to reevaluate the position of the rabbinate on them back in August 2004 (Sheleg 2005). However the general media and Internet discourse about the Bnei Menashe has altered significantly since the publication of the genetics paper – even though it was somewhat ambiguous and indeed unsatisfactory

scientifically – and a good deal of the entirely justifiable scepticism about the origins of the groups has withered on the vine.

The data upon which this book is based, particularly in the case of the Bene Israel, has been generated in very recent times. It will be interesting to watch the long-term effects on both communities. However, now we can argue with a considerable degree of certainty that these ‘scientific’ findings will have an overwhelming impact upon the narratives of the Lemba community, and perhaps upon the Bene Israel, upon their sense of where they belong and indeed upon the way in which the communities are regarded by other people.

Notes

1 Introduction

- 1 Of two things we can be certain Eldad the Danite c.880 was not called Eldad and he was not of the tribe of Dan. He arrived in the great Islamic city of Kairouan in present-day Tunisia where he announced that he was a member of the lost tribe of Dan, which according to him was still flourishing along with Naphtali, Gad and Asher in the Land of Cush. See Parfitt (2002: 8ff.).
- 2 Rabbi Benjamin ben Jonah of Toledo in Navarre, the most famous of Jewish travellers, completed the journey he described in 1173.
- 3 On the conversion of the wealthy south Arabian state of Himyar to Judaism see Rubin (2000: 32ff.).
- 4 See for example Goldstein (1998). For a recent bibliography on the Jews of China see Shulman (2000). See also Pollack (1980). On Chinese attitudes towards Jews see Zhou (2001). On the Ethiopian Jews see Kaplan and Ben-Dor (1988); Salamon and Kaplan (1998), Quirin (1992), Kaplan (1992), Kessler (1996), Parfitt and Trevisan-Semi (2000), Parfitt and Trevisan-Semi (2002).
- 5 The first documented account of the Bene Israel took the form of a letter from the Danish missionary J.A. Sartorius in 1738. There are many conjectures on the origins of the Bene Israel but few, if any, facts. Having surveyed the various theories Roland concluded: 'But as there are no written records, inscriptions, or other evidence to confirm or disprove any of these conjectures, the origins of the Bene Israel remain shrouded in legend'. See Roland 1998: 11; Isenberg 1988: 3–19.
- 6 See Tutton (2002).

2 Between art and science: 'non-scientific' aspects of genetics

- 1 Mataatua Declaration is available online at <http://aotearoa.wellington.net.nz/imp/mata.htm> (accessed 14 March 2005).
- 2 For a recent discussion of the concept of race in science see Duster (2003).
- 3 For a discussion of the possible impact of 'ancient' DNA research on the identity of Native Americans see Kaestle (2003).
- 4 For a more detailed discussion, see Zelliott (1996).

3 Jews and genetics

- 1 For an assessable explanation of terminology and methodology involved in the study see Bradman and Thomas (1998a).

4 Are Jews black?

- 1 It is interesting to note that in Menasseh ben Israel's discussion of the origin of the American Indians he drew a clear distinction between the colour of the Indians he thought were descended from the Lost Tribes (who were white-skinned and bearded) and those who were not (who were dark-skinned and beardless). See Melamed (2003: 211).
- 2 The original manuscript of his work in the National Library at Rome is written in sixteenth century dialectal Italian with traces of Arabic and other Mediterranean languages. Ramusio's first edition transformed this manuscript into an elegant Venetian text. *The Description of Africa* was published in 1540 and subsequent editions of Giovanni Battista Ramusio's *Delle navigationi et viaggi*.
- 3 According to the 1588 edition of the *Description*, Leo died in Rome shortly before 1550, but there is some evidence to suggest that he may have returned to North Africa and to Islam.
- 4 Until recently the Ethiopian Jews were known as Falashas. This is now considered a pejorative term and the appellation *Beta Israel* is preferred.
- 5 Since about 1984 some 60,000 Ethiopian Jews have found their way to Israel.
- 6 For a more detailed discussion of the Bnei Menashe and Telugu Jews see Chapter 7. For genetic tests on Bnei Menashe see Chapter 9.

5 The Lemba

- 1 See Newitt (1995: 141–2).

Sena lay on the flat alluvial plain more or less opposite the confluence of the Zambesi and the Shire. It had been selected by Muslim traders doubtless because it was convenient for exploiting the trade of the Shire – especially that in *Machiras* (locally produced cotton cloth). In 1571 Sena was a 'town of straw huts' but there were twenty substantial Muslim merchants who did business in the town. The Portuguese had their own village at a gunshot distance. Barreto took over Sena following the massacre of the principal Muslim merchants, and it became the centre of the government of the Rivers.

- See also Rita-Ferreira (1982: 117ff.).
- 2 'Remba' is the Shona form of 'Lemba'.
- 3 Abu al-Fidah wrote of 'Seruna' which is certainly an error for Sayuna which looks similar in Arabic script. See Gregson (1973: 417) and Norris (1980).
- 4 A description of what can be constructed of this coastal civilisation is found in Parfitt (1997).
- 5 Cf. 'Some hundreds of adult males in the Union...in Southern Rhodesia...1,500 males' (Schapera 1946: 65); 'There are probably no more than about 2,000 Lemba living scattered or in little pockets among the Venda. A few others may be found in different parts of the Transvaal' (Blacking 1967: 41); 'South Africa's 250,000 "black Jews" the Lemba' (*Rand Daily Mail*, 15 September 1982). At a recent meeting of the Lemba in the Northern Transvaal more than eight thousand people were counted. This can serve as a minimum figure but clearly suggests a population many times greater.
- 6 M. Mathivha to Seymour Kopelowitz, 28.7.1993 (Board of Deputies S.A. Archives).

6 The Lemba tests: media and responses

- 1 A recent work gives an account of Kulanu's objectives and the scope of its interests. See Primack (1998).

- 2 Of course the only way to get to most of the villages was by dirt tracks which are used by occasional motor traffic. Some villages are not accessible by car at all.

7 The Bene Israel

- 1 'A View from the margin: the state of the art of Indo-Judaic Studies', July 2002, Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies.
- 2 The report was published in Portuguese in 1687 under the title 'Notisias Dos Judeos de Cochim'. The English translation of this text appears in Koder (1986: 121–45).
- 3 Interviews in Cochin in August 2001.
- 4 This observation was made by Shalva Weil at the conference 'A view from the margin: the state of the art of Indo-Judaic studies', Oxford Centre, 1–4 July 2002.
- 5 For a recent study of Judaising movements see Parfitt and Trevisan-Semi (2002).
- 6 For a recent detailed discussion of the Shinlung see Parfitt (2002).
- 7 Correspondence with Sadok Yacobi, August 2002. For a detailed discussion of the 'Telugu Jews' and an analysis of the reasons for the emergence of their movement see Egorova (2006).
- 8 For a recent detailed discussion of Kehimkars version of the Bene Israel legend of origin, see Numark (2001).
- 9 Though this book was published only in 1937, its manuscript had been completed by Kehimkar in 1897 (Isenberg 1988: ix).
- 10 For a discussion of Hindu elements in the Bene Israel religious practices see Weil (1994).
- 11 *The Lamp of Judaism* 3(15), 13 April 1883: 113–14.
- 12 For a more detailed description of these organisations see Isenberg (1988: 243–7).
- 13 *Report of the First Bene Israel Conference, 1917*, Bombay: Moses, S. (1918): 5, 59–60; *Report of the Third and Fourth Bene Israel Conferences, 1919 and 1920*, Bombay: Moses, S. (1922): 75; *Report of the Eighth Bene Israel Conference, 1924*, Bombay: Ezekiel, J. (1926): 9; *The Israelite* 3(1–2) (January–February 1919): 8–9.
- 14 *Report of the First Bene Israel Conference, 1917*: 60–1; *Report of the Second Bene Israel Conference, 1918*: 22–3; *Report of the Eighth Bene Israel Conference, 1924*: 10–1.
- 15 *Report of the Eighth Bene Israel Conference, 1924*: 14.
- 16 *Report of the Eighth Bene Israel Conference, 1924*: 14; *The Israelite* 3(1–2) (January–February 1919): 5.
- 17 *Report of the First Bene Israel Conference*: 14; *Report of the Second Bene Israel Conference*: 32; *Report of the Third and Fourth Bene Israel Conferences*: 76, 87; *Report of the Seventh Bene Israel Conference*: 22; *Report of the Eighth Bene Israel Conference*: 45; *Report of the Eleventh Bene Israel Conference*: 45.
- 18 *The Bene Israel Annual and Yearbook* (1917) 1: 19.
- 19 Sanskritisation was defined by Srinivas as 'the process by which a "low" Hindu caste, or tribal or other group, changes its customs, ritual, ideology, and way of life in the direction of a high, and frequently "twice-born" caste' (Srinivas 1966: 6).
- 20 *Census of India* (1881) Bombay City and Island: 50.
- 21 Quoted in Roland (1998: 115). It should be noted that some time before the memorial was sent, the government had abolished all the exemptions to the 1878 Act and hence rejected the request of the Baghdadis.
- 22 ORT stands for Organizatsiya Rasprostraneniya Truda (Sredi Evreev), Russian for 'Organisation for the promotion of work (among Jews)', established in 1880 in Russia with an aim to develop vocational training among the Jewish population.

- 23 See *Bene Israel: Halakha Verdicts about their Status and Origin* (Hebrew), Jerusalem, 1967: 20–2.
- 24 Hai Gaon (939–1038) last Gaon of Pumbedita and son of Sherira Gaon.
- 25 See *Misphpetei Uzziel, Even ha-Ezer*:32 quoted in Corinaldi (1998: 24). The problem with the passage from Maimonides like other mediaeval passages is that it is unclear which Indian–Jewish community is being referred to.
- 26 See *Bene Israel: Halakha Verdicts about their Status and Origin*: 25.

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Index

- '60 Minutes' show on CBS 58
- Aaron, Moses' brother 29, 34, 112
- Aaron Hacothen, biblical high priest 29, 34
- Abarbanel 45
- Abayudaya community of Mbale 63
- Abraham 35, 47
- Abrami, L. Rev. 63
- Abu al-Fidah 127 n.3
- African Americans 2, 18, 24, 63; communities, origin of 26; DNA testing of 22; research on roots 25
- Agris 101
- Ahmed, R.Z. 111, 114
- Ahmedabad 108, 113
- Aish HaTorah* 37, 38, 42, 43
- AJDC (American Joint Distribution Committee) 108
- All-India Israelite League 97
- Amar, Shlomo 124
- America: creationists 40; Jews 72; Jews, relationship with African Americans 63
- American Indians 24
- American Journal of Human Genetics* 32
- American Society of Human Genetics 16
- Andhra Pradesh 94
- Anglo-Indians in India 106
- Anglo-Jewish Association in London 106
- Anglo-Manipur War 93
- Ankole 47
- Antiochus Epiphanes, persecution of 95
- Applebaum, H. 85–6
- Arahuaco community of Columbia 19
- 'Armenoid' genes 54
- Aryans 25
- Ashanti 46, 88
- Asher 126 n.1
- Ashkenazi, J.D. 97
- Ashkenazi Jews 6, 31, 35, 57, 80, 87; Cohanim and lay Jews within 30; communities 29, 32; definition of 107; *see also* Sephardi Jews
- Ashkenazi Levites 33; R1a1 in 32
- Assam 93
- 'Association for an Upright Generation' 35
- Australia 112
- Avichail, E., Rabbi 93
- Baghdad 92
- Baghdadi Jews of India 90, 91, 98, 100, 101, 113, 117, 121; in Bombay 105, 121; of Calcutta 103, 104; campaign for recognition as Jews 108; classification of 103, 106; classified as 'Europeans' 103; considered 'Indian' after 1885 104; disputes with Bene Israel 98
- Bakhtin, M. 4
- Balloch, J. 2
- Bamshad, M. 25, 26
- Bantu 56, 57
- Banyai 51
- Behar, D.M. 32, 33
- Belling, S. 80
- Bender, B., Rabbi 79
- Ben-Dor, S. 126 n.4
- Bene Israel Conference 97; Education Fund 108

- Bene Israel of western India 1, 6, 7, 83, 89, 90; after independence 108–9; among other Indian communities 98–103, 118; of Bombay 112; caste dignity, priestly status and purity 102, 113, 119; as Cohanim or related to family of Moses 114; DNA material of 89; fight for recognition 121; genetic research on 100, 111, 118; Hindu elements in religious practices 97, 128 n.10; history of 9, 95; Jewish identity 110; in later British period 94–8; links with Chitpavans 101; media response to tests on 111–12; origins 98; of Poona 101; practice of Judaism 120; response to genetic tests 112–18; socio-economic progress 99–100; status in the State of Israel, problem of 117
- Bengal Chamber of Commerce 106
- Bengal Electoral Rules 104
- Benjamin, I.J. 91
- Benjamin of Tudelah 5
- Beta Israel* (Ethiopian Jews) 47, 48, 63, 122, 127 n.5; descended from Abraham 48
- BETAR (Brit Trumpeldor) 86
- Beth Din* 79
- Bhandaris 99
- Bible 44; literal truth of 40; prophecies on end of time 40; understanding of Jews 72
- bio-ethicists 24
- bio-piracy 19
- biotechnology: impact on human life 13; negative effects of 19
- Black Africans 46
- black anti-Semites 63
- Blacking, J. 127 n.5
- black Jews 44, 49, 60, 90, 91, 122; black–white mixed marriages 84; colour and status of various communities of 48; communities, three groups 49; converts to Judaism 78, 84; and Halachah 48–50; in United States 49
- Bleich, D., Rabbi 35, 36, 48, 49, 50
- Bloch, T. 38, 39
- blood: black 2, 56; metaphor of 68; quantum 4; testing as paternity test 36
- Bnei Menashe 49, 92, 93, 123, 127 n.6; origins of 124
- Bobiwash, R. 19
- Bombay 89, 91, 95, 113
- Bradman, N. 29, 30, 33, 126 n.1
- Britain and Palestine 106, 107
- British Chin–Lushai Expedition 93
- British Israelites 43
- Brodwin, P. 1, 2, 3, 4, 26, 27
- Brown, J.M. 104, 105
- Brownell, M.S. 4
- Buba 57, 69
- Burma 93
- Calcutta 91; Baghdadi Jewish community *see* Baghdadi Jews of India; Jewry 105, 107
- Canaanites 46
- Canada 112
- Canadian Jewish News* 124
- Caplan, A.R. 18, 21, 22
- Carsten, S. 5
- Cavalli-Sforza, L.L. 17, 23, 26
- Centre for World Indigenous Studies 19
- Chabad Centre in Johannesburg 81
- Chamberlain, H.S. 46
- Channel 4 film 58
- Chiciga, D.C. 54
- Chief Rabbi of South Africa 50
- Chief Rabbi of Petah Tikvah 109
- Chikim, as one of the Lost Tribes 93
- The Children of Abraham* 58
- Chinese attitudes towards Jews 42, 126 n.4
- Chitpavan Brahmans 100, 101
- Chosen People in Bible 77
- Christianity 5, 72; among Lemba 63
- CMH *see* Cohen Modal Haplotype
- Cochini Jews of India 90, 97, 107, 117; black and white Jews of Cochim 106
- Cohanim* (Jewish priests) 8, 29, 36; distinct paternal genealogy for 30; extremist Christian and white supremacist reaction to 40–3; project 34; research 32, 57; study on 40
- Cohen, D.J. 104
- Cohen, D.N. 37
- Cohen, S. 39
- Cohen family 34, 60; Y chromosomes, homogeneity of 30

- Cohen Modal Haplotype (CMH) 30,
 33, 37, 41, 57, 58, 59, 82, 89
 College Museum 45
 colonialism 5, 19
 Columbia University 39
 Commission of Inquiry under Sir John
 Simon 104
 Conference on Racism in Durban
 2001 26
 Connor, S. 34
 Cooper, J.E. 91
 Corinaldi, M. 48
 Croatan Indians 2
 Cuoq, J.M. 52
 Cush, descendants of 44
cushi, term in Hebrew for black 44
Cushim 44

 Dalits 25, 26
 David, King 46
 Davis, D. 2, 4
 D'Beth Hillel, D. 91
 Declaration of Indigenous Peoples of
 the Western Hemisphere regarding
 the Human Genome Diversity
 Project 1995 20
 Delagoa Bay 52
 Derrida, J. 4, 13, 14
Der Stürmer 46
The Description of Africa 46,
 127 n.2
 Dijck, J. van 6, 16, 24
 Dijk, T.A. van 6
 DNA: analysis to identify dead body
 36; collections 81; manipulation 16;
 mapping 20; research on Bene
 Israel Indian Jewish group 89;
 Tay-Sachs, tests for 35; tests 8,
 12, 24, 62, 87
 Douglas, M. 4
 Duke, D. 41
 Duster, T. 11, 126 n.2
 Dutch East India Company 52

Edgefield Journal, The 61
 Edinburgh 45
 Edomites 49
 Egorova, Y. 94, 128 n.7
 Eisenstadt, S.N. 109
 Ekstein, Rabbi 35
 Eldad Ha-Dani 5, 49
 Eldad the Danite 126 n.1
 Elias, F. 91
 Elliott, C. 1, 2, 3

 emigration: of Baghdadi Jews to Israel,
 the Americas and Great Britain 92;
 of Bene Israel to Israel, Europe and
 the Americas 108
 Enthoven, R.E. 100
 Epstein, N. 33, 34, 35, 38, 42
 Erulkar, D.S. 100
 Eshkol, Prime Minister 109
 essentialism 23
 essentiality 4
 Ethiopia, evolution of kind of Judaism
 in 48; *see also* Falashas of Ethiopia
 Ethiopian Jews 31, 47–8, 65, 79, 80,
 87, 122, 126 n.4, 127 n.4; genetics
 83; welfare of 63
 ethnic dimension of Jewish
 identity 38
 eugenics 11, 12; policies of past 22
 European/s: and American Jews 117;
 anti-Semitic propaganda 41;
 involvement in tests 75; Jews 37,
 49, 80; Muslim, Anglo-Indian and
 general 104; representations of
 Jews 42
 European Association 106
 European–Sephardi descent 106
 Exodus 30
 Ezekiel, J. 100, 128 n.13
 Ezra, D. 105
 Ezras of Calcutta 92

 Falashas of Ethiopia 6, 49, 108,
 127 n.4
 Finlason, C.E. 55
 First International Conference on
 Cultural and Intellectual
 Property Rights of Indigenous
 Peoples 1993 20
 First Temple, destruction of 30
 Forman, S. 63
Forward 34, 38, 39
 Foster, E.A. 2
 Foucault, M. 4
 founding mothers 31; of different
 Jewish communities 34
 Francisco, J. 94
 Franklin, S. 15, 16, 17
 Freund, M. 124
 Friedman, S. 86–8
 Fukuyama, F. 13, 14

 Gad 126 n.1
 Gangte, Shimon, Rabbi 123
 Gaon, Hai 129 n.24

- Gaon, Sherira 129 n.24
 Garifo, C. 33
 Garlake, P.S. 54
 Gayre, of Gayre 54; article about
 Lemba 62
Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency
 96, 99
Genes, Peoples and Languages 23
 genetic/s 4, 15; anthropology 23–6;
 carbon dating 111; contemporary
 Western usage of 12; counselling
 36; critique of contemporary 11;
 elite, emergence among Jews 38;
 engineering 10; essentialism 6, 15;
 ethics and human nature 10–17;
 eugenics 10; exploitation 21;
 generated identity 27; identity 1,
 26–8; Jewishness, idea of 113;
 knowledge 22; in post-modern
 theory 16; screening 22, 36
 geneticisation 15
 geneticists: on Lemba as Jewish
 community 121; and public
 ‘understanding gap’ between 21;
 rhetoric and cultural representations
 of genetics 15
Genetic Politics, From Eugenics to
Genome 11
 genetic research: on Cohanim 34;
 critique of 20; on history of Jewish
 populations 36; medical 12, 16, 18;
 ‘non-scientific’ aspects of 10; on
 origin of Jewish communities 27, 42;
 orthodox Jewish view 35–40
 Genetics and Identity 24
Genome Biology 124
 genome research 16
 George, P. 41
 Georgia 31
 Gilman, S. 4, 41, 42, 45, 46
 Gilmore, I. 123
 Glaberson, W. 3
 Glover, J. 10, 11
 Goa 89
 Gogodala tribe of Papua New
 Guinea 49
 Goldstein, D. 34, 37, 59, 126 n.4
 Goodman, P. 101
 Gould, S.J. 18
 Government of India Act of
 1935 105
 Graham, E. 15
 Great Zimbabwe civilisation 51,
 54, 61
 Gregson, R.E. 127 n.3
 Grubach, P. 41
 Gujarat 89
Haaretz 93, 124
 Habermas, J. 12, 13, 14; critique of
 genetics 15
 Hacham, S. 97
 Hacker, A. 63
 ha-Cohen Kook, A.I., Rabbi 44
Hadassah Magazine 35
 Hadramaut 52
 Haifa Technion 29, 34, 114
halakhah 35
 Halkin, H. 35, 42, 122, 123
 Hall, R.N. 4, 54
 Hamisi, F.C.R. 69–70
 Hammer, M. 8, 30, 36, 37, 38, 59,
 122; study 41
 Haraway, D. 7, 15
 Harding, S. 7
 Harris, C., Chief Rabbi 79, 83–4
 Harry, D. 18, 24
 Hassan ibn Muhammad
 al-Wazzân al-Zayyâti *see* Leo
 Africanus 46
 Hauskeller, C. 3, 22
 Hebrew and Yiddish
 expressions 67
 Hebrew University 122
 Hecht, Rabbi 81–3
 Heming, E. 4
 Heming, S. 2; children of 4
 Himyar conversion to Judaism,
 126 n.3
 Himyarites 5
 Hindu religious culture 101
The History and Geography of Human
Genes 23
History of Israel 101
 Hoare, S., Secretary of State for
 India 106
 Holy, L. 5
 Hottentots 46, 47; as of Jewish
 descent 47
 Howard University project on African
 American ancestry 24
 human genome 13
 Human Genome Diversity Project
 (HGDP) 17, 18, 20, 24
 Human Genome Project (HGP) 10, 14,
 20, 21; Information 21
 Hundji 52
 Hyman, M. 91, 92

- Imagenation* 16
- India 7; Baghdadi Jews lower-class 92; Bene Israel in rural areas 110; caste system of 25; Dalit movement 26; Indian Jewry 89, 90, 93, 94, 103, 122, 129 n.25; perceptions of Bene Israel 101
- Indian Arms Act of 1878 104
- Indian National Congress 101
- Indian Statutory Commission 105
- Indigenous Peoples' Council on Biocolonialism (IPCB) 18, 19, 20
- Inspector for European Schools 103
- Institute of Semitic Studies and the Committee for Jewish Studies, Princeton University 122
- International Institute of Indigenous Research Management 24
- international Jewish organisations 108
- In the Blood*, BBC series 68
- Irwin, Lord 105
- Isaac, B. 112
- Isenberg, S.B. 95, 96, 97, 98, 102, 126 n.6, 128 nn.9, 12
- Islam 5, 52, 72
- Israel 93; civil equality in 110; religious authorities 8; right to live in 18
- Israel, J.B. 101
- Israelis: Jews 69; North American and British Jews 29; populations 88; Western Jews 117
- The Israelite* 100, 101
- Israelite Temple 29
- Issac, I.A. 101
- Jacob 32
- Janner, B. 107
- Jaques, A.A. 55
- Jefferson, T. 2; descendants of 4
- Jenkins, T. 57, 75, 122
- The Jerusalem Post* 34, 36, 56
- Jews/Jewish: Amsterdam, community of 90; biological difference 41; blackness 8, 44, 48, 58; blood 56; Bombay, community in 103, 120; in Canada, Israel and UK 30; characteristics, genetically determined 39; in China 126 n.4; Chitpavans, origin of 101; Christians 70; Cochin, community in 90, 96, 103; colony of Elephantine 48; control over Hollywood 63; and devil, comparisons between 44; genes 37, 42, 57; genetics 29, 36, 41, 112; in India, community in 122; intermarriage 30; international aid organisation 112; and Judaism, definition by Bene Israel 113; law 36, 46; law (*halakhah*), creation of 44; liberation theology 94; noses 48, 55, 56, 78; physicality 4, 39, 42; population of Israel 48; priests 29, 31; racial connection with blacks 45; responses to genetic studies 34–5; in South Africa 53; Tay–Sachs gene 35; Temple in Jerusalem, restoring 37; in Thane 111; travellers to Malabar 90; in United States 63; X chromosome 18; in Yemen 72; in Zimbabwe 72
- The Jewish Advocate* 101
- Jewish Agency in Bombay 93
- Jewish Association 104
- Jewish Board of Deputies in London 106
- Jewish Bulletin of Northern California* 36, 39
- Jewishness: of Bene Israel 102, 109, 116; DNA tests for 8, 12, 24, 62, 87, 89, 111; of Lemba 66; of Viennese Jews 45
- Jewish News of Greater Phoenix* 33
- Jewish Tribune* 106, 107
- 'Jews for Jesus' movement 60
- Jobling, M. 33
- Johnson, B.C. 91
- Johnson, D. 25, 26
- Johnson, T.B. 47
- Johnston, J. 3
- Jonah, Benjamin ben, Rabbi 126 n.2
- Jones, S. 35, 39, 68
- Judah, E. 105
- Judaising movements 9, 128 n.5; black, in Zimbabwe 88; in India 92–4
- Judaism 5, 9, 62, 64, 66, 72, 94, 113
- Judas 46
- Judeo-Christian tradition 30
- Junod, H.A. 52
- Kaestle, F. 126 n.3
- Kaifeng 6
- Kairouan 126 n.1
- Kaplan, S. 48, 126 n.4
- Karaites, wandering 48
- Karp, J. 112

- Katz, S.H. 23
kazis: emergence of institution of 95;
 as *shohatim* 96
 Kehimkar, H.S. 95, 97, 98, 128 n.9;
 book on history of community 109;
 version of Bene Israel legend of
 origin 128 n.8
Kelal Israel 62
 Keller, E.F. 7
 Kerr, A. 11, 12
 Kessler, D. 126 n.4
 Kevles, B.H. 60, 61
 Khazar Empire 32
 Khazars 5, 33, 34, 39
 kinship, anthropological discussion
 of 5
 Kitcher, P. 11; concept of 'laissez-faire'
 eugenics 22
 Kittles, R. 22, 25, 26
 Kleiman, Y., Rabbi 37, 38
 Knesset 108
 Knox, R. 45
 Koder, S.S. 90, 128 n.2
 Koestler, A. 5, 32, 94, 95
 Kolb, P. 47
 Kolis 99
 Konkan coast 113; Bene Israel
 in 95
 Kopelowitz, S. 127 n.6
 Kottaredipalam 94
 Kuki-Chin-Mizo population 123
Kulanu 62, 63, 74; objectives and
 scope 127 n.1; sponsored mission
 of Abraham Levy 65
 Kunbis 99
 Kurdish 31
- Land of Cush 126 n.1
 Land of Israel 30
The Lamp of Judaism 128 n.11
 LCA (Lemba Cultural Association) 53,
 77, 120
 Leicester University, UK 33
 Lemba of South Africa 1, 3, 6, 50, 51,
 52, 63, 76; black Jews, recognition
 of 80; elite 121; genetic heritage 57;
 historical background 9; interest in
 Jewish heritage 59; interviews with
 65–70; Jewishness 73, 74, 81, 88;
 Jews 64, 77; and Jews, genetic
 affinities between 58; leadership 77;
 legends of 9, 52, 61; of Middle
 Eastern extraction 52, 58; missions
 of 62–4; Muslims 53, 64;
 non-participants in tests 23;
 observant Christians 59, 120; oral
 tradition of origins 51, 57; relations
 with rest of Jewish community 76;
 religious life of 53; response to
 genetic research 64–5, 88; and
 South African Jewry, relations
 between 76, 78; tests, media
 and responses 9, 57, 111; in
 Zimbabwe 56, 78, 121
 Leo Africanus 46, 127 n.3
 Levi, Y. 62
 Levi, male descendants of 32
 Levites 32; studies on 34, 38
 Lewicki, T. 52
 Linde, S. 15, 16
 Lippman, A. 15
 Lost Tribe of Dan 48, 126 n.1
 lost tribes of Israel 5, 41, 50, 93,
 127 n.1; migration through
 China 123
The Lost Tribes of Israel 58, 60, 62
 Louis Trichardt 64
- Maharashtra 89
 Mahar untouched group 99
 Maimonides 108; passage from
 129 n.25
 Maity, B. 124
 Malabar, Jews of 91
 Malecka, A. 52
mamzerut 82, 108
 Mandelbaum, D. 91
 Manipur 93
Mankind Quarterly 54, 62
Mapping Human History 58
 Martin, G. 40
 Masai 46
 Mataatua Declaration on Cultural and
 Intellectual Property Rights of
 Indigenous Peoples 20, 126 n.1
 Mathivha, M.E.R., Professor 53, 58,
 65, 77, 80, 127 n.6
 Mathivha, R. 59; interview 65–7
 Mausenbaum, R.S. 65, 86
 Mbeki, President 66
 Mberengwe/Mposi area of
 Zimbabwe 51
 Mbolekwa, K.N. 88
 M'charek, A. 17
 media: coverage 57–62; on genetic
 tests 6, 7, 17; responses to Jewish
 communities research 33–4
 Mela Chala 93

- Melamed 44, 45, 46, 127 n.1
 Melungeons 2
 Menasseh 93
 Menasseh ben Israel's discussion of
 origin of American Indians 127 n.1
 Menozzi, P. 23
meshubrarim converted to Judaism 91
 Mhani, W.M.M. 69–70
 Middle Eastern Jews in Bombay 92
 Middle Eastern non-Jewish
 populations 31
 Milner, J., Major 107
 Mishnah 45
 mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) 3, 24,
 31; mutations on 26; testing 24, 25
mitzvoth 49
 Mizoram 93; tribes claiming Jewish
 ancestry 123
 Mizos as Lost Tribe of Israel 93
 Modise, Tim, South African radio
 show 80
 Moeti, S. 59
 Montagu–Chelmsford reforms 104
 Moses 29, 34, 35, 96
 Mosses, S. 128 n.13
 Motenda, M.M. 56
 Mozambique 53
 Mposi rural chieftainship in
 Zimbabwe 64
 Msitshana, V. 78; Jewishness 80
 Mufuka, K. 55
 Mumbai *see* Bombay
 Museum of Human Sciences, Harare 52
 Musleah, E.N. 91, 92, 103, 104,
 105, 106
Mwenye 53
- Nadkarni, V.T. 112
 Nair, M. 111
 Naphtali 126 n.1
 National DNA Analysis Centre in
 Kolkata 123
 National Library at Rome 127 n.2
 National Socialism *see* Nazis
 Native Americans 2, 4, 18; ancestry
 24; 'ancient' DNA research on
 identity of 126 n.3; genetic research
 20; identity of 24
Nature 29
 nature-nurture debate 12, 20
 Nazis: anti-Semitic discourses 40, 46;
 'experiment', historical context of
 39; propaganda 42; science of racial
 hygiene 18
- Negaim 45
 'negritude' of the Jew 45
 Nelkin, D. 15, 16, 17, 18, 19
 neo-Nazi groups 43; propaganda 46
 Netanyahu, B. 124
 Newitt, M. 127 n.1
*Newsletter of the Jewish Religious
 Union* 113
 New Testament 70
New York Times 34, 58
 New York University 34; School of
 Medicine 33
 New Zealand 19
 Nissenson, M. 61
 Nissim, Y. 108
 Noachide Code 49
 non-recombining protein of Y
 chromosomes (NRY) 31
 Norris, H.T. 127 n.3
 NOVA programme *The Lost Tribes of
 Israel* 58, 60, 62
 Nubia 44
 Numark, M. 128 n.8
- Oded, A. 63
 Old Testament 72
 Olson, S. 58
 'one drop' rule 2
 Oransky, I. 34
 origins: of Lemba and of Cohanim 60;
 stories of 'non-European' Jewish
 communities 8; of various Jewish
 groups 6, 29
 Ormsby-Gore, W. 107
 ORT (Organisation for Technological
 Training) 108, 112, 120, 128 n.22
 Orthodox and Reform synagogues 81
 Ostrer, H. 33
Our Posthuman Future 13
 Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish
 Studies 89, 128 nn.1, 4
- Palestine 31, 106, 107
 Panvel 95
 Papuan tribes 49
 Parfitt, T. 7, 46, 49, 54, 55, 56,
 57, 58, 63, 64, 70, 71, 77, 88,
 120, 126 nn.1, 4, 127 n.4,
 128 nn.5, 6
 Pasha, D. 92
 Pereyra de Paiva, M. 90
 Peters, C. 54
 Pezzl, J. 45
 Piazza, A. 23

- Picturing DNA* 61
 Pollack, R. 36, 39, 40, 126 n.4
 Popkin, R.H. 18
 population genetics 4, 17–23; DNA screening 21; medical 20, 22; research 27; technology currently being used in 3
 Pory, J. 46
poskim responses to challenges of modernity 48
The Present State of the Cape of Good Hope 47
 Pretoria 64
 Price, E.T. 2, 53
 priestly marker 59
 Primack, K. 63, 127 n.1
 Pritchard, J.C. 45
Proceedings of the National Academy of Science USA (PNAS) 37
 proselytism 62
 Pune 108, 113
 purity: of blood 112; and status 118–19

 Queen of Sheba 54
 questionnaires 70–8; among Bene Israel 113; in Zimbabwe and South Africa 64
 Quirin, J. 48, 126 n.4

 Rabbinical courts in Baghdad and Jerusalem 108
 Rabbinic sources, modern 44
 Rabinovich, A. 39
 Rabinow, P. 14
 racism/race 23, 54; and ethnic differences 5; and race discrimination, debate on 25; scientific 48
 Rahabi, D.E. 95, 96, 97
 Raleigh's Lost Colony 2
 Ramokgadi, G. 78; conversion of 80
 Ramusio, G.B., *Delle navigazioni et viaggi* 127 n.2
 Reading, Lord 106
 Reed, J.S. 2
 Reform Bene Israel 113
 reform conversion 82, 85
 Reform Jews 66
 Reinemann, S. 95, 96, 97
 Remba 127 n.2; *see also* Lemba
 Report of First Bene Israel Conference 96
 Rhodesia 54

 Risch, N. 38
 Rita-Ferrera, A. 127 n.1
 Rodef Shalom 113
 Roland, J. 92, 95, 98, 99, 101, 102, 103, 105, 108, 109, 126 n.5, 128 n.21
 Roman Jews 31
 Rosen, Rabbi 66
 Round Table Conferences 105, 106
 Royal, C. 22
 Rubin, Z. 126 n.3
 Rushdie, S. 112
 Russia, vocational training for Jews 128 n.22
 Ruwitala, A. 52

 Sabeans 46
 Sabeti, P. 25
 Sabir, S. 26
 Sagi 48
 Saichhunga 93
 Saïd, E. 4
 Salamon, H. 126 n.4
 Samra, M. 93
 Sanskritisation 101, 128 n.19
 Sargon, A. 97
 Sargon, M. 97
 Sartorius, J.A. 126 n.5
 Sassoon, V. 112, 113
 Sassoons of Bombay 92, 98, 108
 Satmar Chassidim community of New York 35
 Satya Shodak Samaj 101
 Saussure, F. de 4
 Sayuna 52, 127 n.3
 Schapera, I. 127 n.5
 Schiffman, L.H. 34, 38
 Schur, W. 96, 97
Science et Vie 58
 Second International Congress of Yeminite Jewish Studies 122
 Sefwi Wiawso 63
 Segal, J.B. 91
 Seminole Nation of Oklahoma 3
 Semitic features 55; *see also* Jewish, noses
 Sena 51, 52, 127 n.1
 Sephardi Jews: in Israel 29, 57, 124; British subjects 106; Chief Rabbi of Israel 108; Cohanim and lay Jews within 30; definition of 107; lay Jews common parental Near Eastern ancestry 32; Levites 32; origin 105; *see also* Ashkenazi

- Seruna 127 n.3
 Shakespeare, T. 11, 12
 Shalom Hebrew Israelite
 Congregation 88
Shanah Tovah, Hebrew formula 77
Shanwar Teli 95
 Sheleg, Y. 93, 123, 124
 Shelton, B.L. 19
 Shimoni, G. 78, 80
 Shinlung 92, 123, 128 n.6; converted
 to Judaism 93
 Shoofs, M. 60
 Simon, J. 104–5
 Simpson, B. 6
 Skorecki, K. 29, 33, 34, 38, 59, 114,
 124; study on Bnei Menashe 124
 Smiles, W. 106
 Smith, I. 53, 54, 95
 Smith, J. 95
 Smoke-Asayenes, D. 19
 social stereotypes, stigmatisation and
 reinforcing of 20
 Sociology of Scientific Knowledge
 (SSK) 17
 Solomon, King 54
 South Africa 7, 51; Jewish young
 people 86; Jewry 65, 77, 79, 80, 85,
 87; Jews, response to tests 78–88;
 press 74
 South African Broadcasting
 Corporation 59
 Soweto: black community 78; Lemba
 67–9
 Spanier, B.B. 7
 Spurdle, A. 57, 122
 Srinivas, M.N. 128 n.19
 Stayt, H.A. 55
 Steinsaltz, A., Rabbi 39; and Pollack,
 debate between Jewish Talmudic
 authority 42
 Stern, Henry Aaron 48
 Stone, L. 5
 Strizower, S. 98, 100, 102
 Stutz, E. 124
 Synagogue of Children of Yacob 94
 Syrian Jews 92
 Syrians 31

 Taharot 45
 Tallbear, K. 4, 24
 Talmud, the 36; law 91
 Taylor, H. 88
 Tay–Sachs disease 35, 39
 Telis 100

 Telugu Jews 49, 127 n.6, 128 n.7;
 conversion to Judaism 94
 Temple Emanuel Reform synagogue 84
 Ten Lost Tribes 49
 Thane 95, 108, 113
 Thomas, M. 30, 31, 32, 33, 57, 59,
 126 n.1
 Thompson, L.C. 55, 56
 Tilak, B.G. 100
 Timberg, T.A. 92, 98
 Timbuktu, ruler of 46
Times of India 111, 114
 Tobias's Bodies 59
 Torah 38; Orthodox interpretations of
 36; tradition 37
 Transvaal 6
 Trevisan-Semi, E. 126 n.4, 128 n.5
 tribal membership, DNA tests as means
 of determining 24
 Tunisia 126 n.1
 Tutsis 46
 Tutton, R. 126 n.6
 Twaddle, M. 63

 Uganda 63, 88
 Umyali 55
 UNESCO Statement on Race,
 revised 23
 United Jewish Appeal (UJA) Federation
 of North America 39
 United Nations resolution equating
 Zionism with Racism ('ZR') 5
 United Pentacostal Church in
 Buallawn 93
 United States: anti-racist causes in 63;
 black Jews in 49, 88; Department of
 Energy and the National Institutes of
 Health 10; descendants of President
 Jefferson 2; DNA work on Lemba,
 interest in 62, 84; effort to link
 genetics and social policy 18;
 employment and immigration
 policies 18; Ethiopian community in
 122; leaders of indigenous groups
 18; 'one-drop' rule 2; *see also*
 African Americans; America
 universal concept of human
 rights 13
 University College London 29, 31
 University of Arizona 8, 30
 University of Maryland 21
 University of Utah 25
 untouchables 25
 Uzziel, M.H., Rabbi 108

150 *Index*

- Venda 67, 69, 127 n.5; *see also*
Zimbabwe
- Vendaland 68
- Vermont Legislature, State's
Commissioner of Health 24
- Verwoerd, H.F. 68
- Vhalemba 56
- Vuhindi 52
- Wade, N. 33, 34, 35, 39, 58
- Wahrman, M. 36
- Wallach, C., Rabbi 84–5
- Warmelo, N.L. Van 56
- warrior tribes in the Atlas 46
- Watson, J. 1
- Wedgwood, J., Colonel 107
- Weil, S. 93, 109, 122, 128 nn.4, 10
- Weinberg, N., Rabbi 37
- Weingarten, M.A. 123
- Whitehead, M. 78
- white Jews 63, 90, 91; of Africa 87;
biological 87
- Williams, J.J. 46
- Wilson, J., Rev. Dr 95
- Winterton, E. 107
- Wise, S., Rabbi 40
- Wolf, E. I. 45
- Women's Zionist Organisation in
America 35
- Woodson, T. 4
- Worton, R. 16, 17
- Xhosa 46, 68, 88
- Yacobi, Sadoq 94, 128 n.7
- Yacobi, Shmuel 94
- Y chromosomes 3; Cohen,
homogeneity of 30; genetic
similarities on 29; haplotypes 29;
mutations on 26; non-recombining
regions of Y chromosomes (NRY)
31, 32; testing 24, 25; *see also*
mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA)
- Yemen 92
- Yemenite Jews 31; genetically close to
Yemeni Muslims 123; in Israel 122
- Young, P. 40
- The Young Earth Creation Club 40
- Zeller, J. 63
- Zelliot, E. 99, 101, 126 n.4
- 'Zera Israel', Bnei Menashe as 124
- Zhou, X. 42, 126 n.4
- Zimbabwe 7, 51, 53, 120;
civilisation as work of Venda
and Lemba 55
- Zion Christian Church (ZCC) 81
- Zionism 5, 64, 91
- Zohar, Z. 48
- Zulus 46, 68

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