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# Yemen, Aden and Ethiopia: Jewish Emigration and Italian Colonialism

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## Abstract

*After Aden came under British rule (1839) its Jewish community was reinforced by Jewish immigrants from inland Yemen and also from other Middle Eastern countries. Some of the Adeni Jews, most of them British subjects, entered the Indian-British commercial network and expanded it to East Africa, mainly to Ethiopia, founding commercial strongholds there. From the late nineteenth century, Jews coming from Yemen joined the existing Adeni settlements.*

*This paper compares the reasons for the emigration to Ethiopia of Adeni Jews and Yemeni Jews, and their economic and social status under Italian colonial regime (established in Eritrea in the 1880s). It discusses relations between these Jews, which it argues, were determined by the position of each group in the colonial hierarchy, and by the necessity of sustaining religious-communal life. Thus, in spite of their shared Yemeni origin and attendance at the same communal institutions, ethnicity and religion proved weaker than social and economic considerations, and the two groups cultivated a separate identity.*

The Red Sea and its environs – the coast of East Africa and the western coast of the Arab peninsula – are part of one geographic zone, united but separate. One can discern climatic similarities, likeness of demographic features, political ties, and comparable cultural influences. Yemen and Ethiopia, two countries on opposite sides of the Red Sea, have historically had continuous relations, both agreeable and not.<sup>1</sup> One feature of these relations was the migration of people from one territory to the other. Political developments during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the increasing influence of European powers in the Red Sea region resulted in an increase in the flow of Jewish migrants from Jewish centres in the Arabian peninsula – Yemen and Aden – to Ethiopia, creating satellite Jewish communities there. The following discussion will examine the nature and causes of this Jewish migration. It will present the complex relations between Adeni Jews and Yemeni Jews and will argue that this resulted from the colonial situation and the role that each group played in the Italian colonial order. In addition, it will argue that while the two groups seemingly composed a single community, they did not develop a shared identity;

<sup>1</sup>See Edward J. Keal, "Possible connections in antiquity between the Red Sea coast of Yemen and the Horn of Africa", in Paul Lunde and Alexandra Porter (eds), *Trade and Travel in the Red Sea Region: Proceedings of Red Sea Project I* (Oxford, 2004), pp. 43–55; Mordechai Abir, *Ethiopia And The Red Sea* (London, 1980); Richard Pankhurst, *An Introduction to the Economic History of Ethiopia – From Early Times to 1800* (London, 1961), pp. 356–361; Haggai Erlich, *Ethiopia and the Middle East* (Boulder, 1994).

each maintained a separate communal affinity that lasted even after the communities of origin were extinct, and until the community in Ethiopia was dissolved (Jewish immigrants called both Ethiopia and Eritrea: Ethiopia). This article's methodology is based on data that, for most part, have not been analyzed to date. It relies on oral history – personal interviews with Adeni Jews and Yemeni Jews now living in Israel – and on written sources such as memoirs, itinerary books, and newspaper articles.

### Political Survey: the Intervention of World Powers

The importance of the Red Sea as a strategic waterway *en route* to Eastern Africa and the Far East has long been known and became even more important after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. By 1839 the British had captured the port town of Aden on the southern tip of the Arab peninsula, transforming it into an important base on the way to India.<sup>2</sup> The Ottoman Empire, fearful of the growing British presence in the area, conquered the coastal Yemeni Red Sea plain in the mid-nineteenth century, and took over central Yemen in 1872, to remain there until 1918.<sup>3</sup> In the 1880s, following the British occupation of Egypt in 1882, Italy also became a major player in the region. In 1885 Italian forces landed in the Ethiopian port town of Massawa, and from there advanced inland. Italy's attempt to take over all of Ethiopia was blocked by Melenik II in 1896, in the famous Adwa battle, but in 1900 they completed their conquest of the Ethiopian Red Sea coast and established the colony of Eritrea. In 1935 Mussolini's Italy conquered all of Ethiopia. The country remained, like Eritrea, an Italian colony until 1941 when, in the course of World War II, the Italians were ousted by the British.<sup>4</sup> Following the British withdrawal, Emperor Hayla-Sellase ruled over a united Ethiopia but in 1952 Eritrea became an autonomous province of Ethiopia and in 1962 it was annexed to Ethiopia. The Emperor was overthrown in the 1974 revolution and in 1977 Mengistu Hayla-Maryam took over the country. He established a centralised-military government and held Marxist-Leninist ideas. In 1991, following a civil war, Eritrea became an independent state.

The world-powers' involvement in the Red Sea region, in the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, brought about new activity in the area and strengthened relations between its two coasts. Foreign troops and administrators stationed in Aden, Yemen and Eritrea encouraged economic undertakings. Foreign merchants were joined by local merchants, Jews and non-Jews, and these were followed by labour migrants.

### The Jews of Aden

The most conspicuous Jewish migration to Ethiopia, especially to Eritrea, came from Aden. When Aden came under British rule in 1839, the Adeni Jewish community numbered about two hundred and fifty, most originally from inland Yemen. Like their Yemeni brethren, Aden

<sup>2</sup>For the commercial and strategic importance of Aden in medieval time, see Roxani Eleni Margariti, *Aden and the Indian Ocean Trade – 150 Years in the life of a Medieval Arabian Port* (Chapel Hill, 2007).

<sup>3</sup>For the Ottoman involvement in Yemen, see Caesar E. Farah, *The Sultan's Yemen – Nineteenth-Century Challenges to Ottoman Rule* (London and New York, 2002).

<sup>4</sup>See Angelo Del Boca, *The Ethiopian War 1935–1941*, translated from the Italian by P. D. Cummins (Chicago and London, 1969); Bahru Zwde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia 1885–1974* (London, 1991).

Jews were craftsmen mainly silversmiths. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, when Aden became an important mercantile centre, Jews joined in the commercial activities and deserted their traditional occupations almost entirely. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the Adeni Jewish community was reinforced by additional Yemeni Jews and also by Jews from India, Britain, Persia, Egypt and Ottoman centres such as Iraq and Anatolia – all of whom came to Aden for business. These immigrants helped to create a cosmopolitan Jewish community that communicated in Arabic, English and Hebrew.<sup>5</sup> Since Adeni Jews (like many Yemeni Jews) adopted the Sephardic prayer tradition,<sup>6</sup> the newcomers, who were mainly Sephardic, were easily absorbed into local religious and communal life. They thus contributed to the creation of a new communal Sephardic–Adeni identity, which supported the Adeni claim to being different from the rest of the Jews of Yemen. This claim was also sustained by the fact that most Adeni Jews were British subjects.<sup>7</sup> Some Adeni Jews entered the Indian–British commercial network, and later expanded their commercial activities to the coast of East Africa.

Through almost the entire nineteenth century, the Adeni community depended on Yemen for spiritual guidance. The Aden court (*bet din*) accepted the legal authority of the Jewish court in San`a' and Adeni ritual slaughterers received their authorisation from Yemeni rabbis.<sup>8</sup> During the twentieth century, with Aden's growing modernisation and its increasing importance as a British stronghold in the Middle East, and also as a base for Yemeni Jewish emigration to Palestine, its secular Jewish communal institutions were strengthened under the presidency of the Messa family (Menahem Messa was the founder of the dynasty and his son Benin was especially influential).<sup>9</sup> But in spite of the presence of a number of prominent rabbis, its religious institutions did not develop at the same pace. The Adeni Jewish community depended on learned Yemeni Jews who served in different religious capacities.<sup>10</sup>

### Adeni Jews Immigrating to Ethiopia

From the end of the nineteenth century and until the middle of the twentieth century, Ethiopian external trade was controlled by foreign traders, who also entered into internal

<sup>5</sup>Joseph B. Schechtman, "The Jews of Aden", *Jewish Social Studies*, 13 (1951), pp. 134–136; Rickie Burman, ed. *The Jews of Aden* (London, 1991), p. 13.

<sup>6</sup>Starting from the seventeenth century the Sephardic prayer book (*shami*) gradually replaced the local Yemeni prayer book (*baladi*). See for example, Yisshaq Glusqa, *Hatfila be-masoret temen* (Jerusalem, 1995), pp. 3–11.

<sup>7</sup>The British distinguished between the colony of Aden (an area of about 75 square miles), whose residents were entitled to British passports, and the larger Aden Protectorate in which they never had direct rule, see Reuben Ahroni, *The Jews of the British Crown Colony of Aden* (Leiden, 1994), pp. 198–200. At its height, in 1948, this community numbered close to 5,000. In the same year, following the establishment of the State of Israel and the great Jewish emigration from Yemen, many Adeni Jews also emigrated to Israel, Reuben Ahroni, *The Jews of Aden: A Community that Was* (Tel-Aviv, 1991), p. 408 (Hebrew).

<sup>8</sup>Ahroni, *The Jews of the British Crown Colony* pp. 54–56; about Aden's rabbis, see Avraham 'Arusi, "Qore ha-dorot", in Yehuda Levi Nahum (ed.) *The Jews of Aden, Literary Writings from Yemen* (Holon, Private Publication, 1981), p. 132 (Hebrew).

<sup>9</sup>About the members of the Messa dynasty and their leadership, see Ahroni, pp. 46–61; Jacob Tobi, *West of Aden – A Survey of the Aden Jewish Community* (Netanya, 1994), pp. 59–74; for the financial leadership and its control over the Adeni Jewish community during the 1920s, see Arusi, *op. cit.* pp. 127–137.

<sup>10</sup>See, for example, Mahalal Ha'adani, *Between Aden and Yemen*, Vol. 1 (Tel-Aviv, 1988), pp. 123–132, 136–146 (Hebrew).

trade.<sup>11</sup> During this time, Adeni Jews began to migrate to Ethiopia in significant numbers. Utilising business ties and family relations, these Jews in Ethiopia developed commercial ventures with Aden and with other Red Sea centres in Yemen, Sudan, Egypt and elsewhere. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Benin Messa opened a commercial branch of the family company in Addis Ababa (in addition to other African branches in Djibouti and Kenya),<sup>12</sup> and in about 1910 he constructed a building for offices and storage in Addis. This outpost developed into the Benin *Sefer* (compound) where other families settled and created a small Jewish community, which, at its height, numbered about seventy Adeni Jews.<sup>13</sup> The upper story of the building was used by the Benins as a vault to store silver coins, the Austrian Maria-Theresa *thalers* (circulated in Yemen and in other Red Sea regions). In the early 1920s, when Jews from Yemen joined the compound, it was transformed into a synagogue.<sup>14</sup> Gabriel Sion, an Ethiopian-born Adeni Jew, relates that Yemeni Jews who arrived in Addis tried their fortune in trade but most left after a short period of time. He recalls however, that Yefet, a Yemeni Jewish teacher, remained. In the 1950s he taught Jewish children Hebrew and religious studies.<sup>15</sup>

It was Eritrea that attracted most of the Jewish emigration to Ethiopia. Adeni Jews are recorded as having founded commercial colonies in Eritrea as early as the 1890s and, in the port town of Massawa and in Asmara, formed thriving trading communities.<sup>16</sup> In Massawa, which for centuries was an important commercial centre, they encountered foreign merchants, among them Jews from Italy, Izmir and other Turkish parts of the Ottoman Empire, who had arrived with the Italians in the 1880s. The 'European section' of Massawa numbered about two thousand five hundred inhabitants during the 1920s.<sup>17</sup> An earthquake in 1922 almost completely destroyed Massawa and drove many of its Jewish inhabitants to settle in the highland town of Asmara.<sup>18</sup> A few Adeni Jews made fortunes and acquired real estate in Eritrea: shops and houses both to conduct their own business in and to let.

The first known Jewish community leader was Nissim Behar, a Jew from Istanbul. In 1904 the Italian colonial authorities granted Behar, in his capacity as the head of the Jewish

<sup>11</sup>Zewde, *op. cit* pp. 97–98.

<sup>12</sup>Zewde, *op. cit* p. 98.

<sup>13</sup>Gabriel Sion, interview with the author, October 2004. Most of the buildings were later sold to the Adeni Shelemay family who immigrated to Addis Ababa from Aden, together with some other Jewish families, soon after the 1947 riots against the Jewish community of Aden, Kay Kaufman Shelemay, *A Song of Longing: An Ethiopian Journey* (Urbana and Chicago, 1994), p. 62. Haim Shoshkes, *Bedarkhei tevel* (Tel-Aviv, 1954), p. 176, mentions the Shelemay family as "the rich Yemeni family" in Addis Ababa whose son Shlomo he met during his 1952 visit to Ethiopia.

<sup>14</sup>During a visit to the synagogue in October 2004, I could see the niches in the walls that served to store the coins. For a description of the synagogue, see Kaufman Shelemay, *op. cit* p. 54. Unrelated to the synagogue, in 1923 Ya'aqov (Jacque) Faitlovitch established a Jewish school for Beta Israel children in Addis Ababa. Adeni and Yemeni Jewish children are not mentioned as students, see Itzhak Greenfeld, "The first Hebrew School in Addis Ababa at the Beginning of the Italian Conquest (1936–1937)", *Dor le-dor*, 5 (1992), pp. 51–83 (Hebrew). More regarding Faitlovitch and the school, see Emanuela Trevisan-Semi, "Jacque Faitlovitch", *Pe'amin*, 100 (2004), pp. 91–112 (Hebrew).

<sup>15</sup>Yefet lived in Addis Ababa until his death, Gabriel Sion.

<sup>16</sup>Marco Cavallarin, *Juifs En Érythrée* (Bologne, 2004), p. 7.

<sup>17</sup>On Massawa as an important commercial centre, see Richard Pankhurst, *History of Ethiopian Towns – From the Mid-Nineteenth Century to 1935* (Stuttgart, 1985), pp. 339–341.

<sup>18</sup>Cavallarin, *Juifs*, pp. 8–9; for the history of Asmara, see Pankhurst, *Towns*, pp. 112–115.

community, a piece of land on which the Jewish synagogue was erected in 1905.<sup>19</sup> Following him was Shoa Menahem Joseph, a most remarkable Adeni Jew, who headed the Eritrean Jewish community for about forty years (from circa 1927).<sup>20</sup> Born in Aden around 1880 (and died in Asmara in 1966), he arrived in Massawa in 1911. There he worked for Mansur, an Adeni Jew who owned a draper's shop. In 1922, when Mansur left Eritrea because of the earthquake, Shoa bought his firm, moved to Asmara and expanded the business which retained the name Mansur. His family owned almost two entire streets in the commercial centre of Asmara.<sup>21</sup> Other Adeni Jews were employed as shopkeepers, shop-assistants, clerks, bookkeepers, shoemakers, goldsmiths, and the like, and many worked for the Shoa Menahem Yosef enterprise.<sup>22</sup>

### Yemeni Jews Emigrating to Ethiopia

Adeni Jews were joined in Ethiopia by Jews from inland Yemen. Yemeni Jewry was one of the oldest communities in the Jewish world, dating back at least to the second century. Throughout the centuries Yemeni Jews retained ties with other Jewish centres and adopted some of the important developments in the Jewish world, such as Jewish law and its interpretation, poetry and *Kabbala*. Learning centres and Jewish courts prevailed in many settlements and in district towns, all recognising the moral authority and scholarly leadership of the High Court of San`a'. In Yemen, the Jews made their living mainly as craftsmen, retail traders and pedlars.<sup>23</sup> Relative to conditions in Yemen, their economic situation was adequate. But in times of plagues and droughts – which were frequent in Yemen's history – they suffered like the rest of the population, and seemingly more, from economic hardships.

As nineteenth-century political and economic developments left their imprint on Yemen, the country was pulled into the world economy. Consequently, Yemen's inhabitants became aware of economic opportunities elsewhere. During the first half of the twentieth century, the industrial and commercial centre of Aden attracted cheap Yemeni labour, both Jewish and non-Jewish. Some Jews continued to Africa in pursuit of better economic prospects, travelling from Aden mainly to near-by Ethiopian centres and also to Djibouti and Somali. Aharon Aharon and some friends, for example, left the village of Tirba (in the Sadda district) for Aden. They intended to work there for a while, earn some money, and return home. While in Aden they heard that the Italians were hiring hands for a road they were building in

<sup>19</sup>Sammy Cohen, interview with the author, October, 2004, based on documents found in the Asmara synagogue; Itzhak Greenfeld, "The History of the Jews of Aden and Yemen in Eritrea in the First Quarter of the Twentieth Century", *Te'uda*, 10 (1996), pp. 309, 311, 313 (Hebrew).

<sup>20</sup>About Shoa Menahem Yosef as a successful businessman and his close relations with the authorities, the Italians, the British and the Ethiopian royal house, see Jacob Tobi, p. 94.

<sup>21</sup>Anna Shoa-Hay, Shoa Menahem Joseph's granddaughter, interview with the author, January, 2004; Cavallarin, *The Jews in Eritrea* (In manuscript, 2003), p. 6.

<sup>22</sup>For the Adeni's occupations see Itzhak Greenfeld, "The History of the Jews of Aden", pp. 309, 311, 313 (Hebrew); Cavallarin, *Jews in Eritrea*, pp. 13–14.

<sup>23</sup>For a survey of Jewish life in Yemen, see Avihai Shvitiel, Wilfred Lockwood, R. B. Serjeant, "The Jews of San`a'", in R. B. Serjeant and Ronald Lewcock (eds.) *San`a': An Arabian Islamic City* (London, 1983), pp. 391–431; Bat-Zion Eraqi Klorman, "Yemen", in R. Simon, M. M. Laskier and S. Reguer (eds.) *The Jews of the Middle East And North Africa In Modern Times* (New York, 2003), pp. 389–408.

Azab, the southern port of Eritrea. They crossed the Red Sea to Ethiopia and after finishing their job in Azab, some of them continued on to Asmara.<sup>24</sup> Other Jewish immigrants to Ethiopia crossed the Red Sea directly from settlements in Yemen. They joined existing Jewish settlements and worked there as artisans, pedlars, and religious functionaries.<sup>25</sup> The 1920s and mainly the 1930s and 1940s witnessed increasing numbers of Yemeni Jewish craftsmen travelling regularly to Ethiopia, working for several months and then returning home.<sup>26</sup> But some remained in Ethiopia, mainly in Eritrea. There were also Jews who reached Ethiopia in search of temporary asylum from troubles at home.<sup>27</sup> Others saw Ethiopia as an interim station on their way to Palestine. For example, Yosef Hubara of San`a' intended to emigrate to Palestine in 1922. When he reached Aden he found that he would neither get an emigration certificate to Palestine nor a travel permit to Port Sa'id. He learnt, however, that the Italian consul was distributing passage certificates to Massawa from where it would be easy to reach Port Sa'id and continue on to Palestine. Hubara arrived in Eritrea in 1922, stayed for two years and continued to Palestine.<sup>28</sup> Such people stayed only for a short time and it seems that they (as well as the temporary labour migrants) were not always registered as members of the Jewish community.

In 1935 there were about two hundred and fifty Jews in Eritrea, most in Asmara. Sixty per cent of Asmara's Jews were Adeni, twenty percent were Yemeni and the rest were of Italian, Ottoman-Turkish and Spanish origin.<sup>29</sup> When the British entered Asmara in 1941, they registered four hundred Jews. At the end of the 1950s, Asmara's Jewish population had grown to about five hundred, even after many Jews had emigrated to Israel. This figure

<sup>24</sup>Aharon Aharon, interview with the author, August, 2004.

<sup>25</sup>Aharon, interview with the author; Yisshaq Suberi, *From San`a' to Zion* (Qiryat Ono, 1992), p. 121 (Hebrew). Regarding Jewish silversmiths who sought work in Eritrea, see Ephraim Ya'akov, *Temana: Introduction to the Land of Al-Hugariyya* (Nahariya, 1995), p. 17, note 28 (Hebrew); and on Yehi'el Haiby of San`a' visiting his relatives who settled in Asmara in the 1930s, see Y. Haiby, *San`a' and its Surroundings (Photographs)* (Bene Beraq: private publication, 1985), p. 5 (Hebrew); and on Abraham Salem, who in the late 1930s travelled with his family to Djibouti, then to Somali and from there, in the 1940s, to Dire Dawa in Ethiopia, peddling and working as a *shohet* (ritual slaughterer) and *mohel* (circumciser), see [Mali Granit], *Ima* (Ramat-Gan: private publication, 2004), pp. 6, 14 (Hebrew).

<sup>26</sup>For example, upholsterer Salem Ibn Salem of Dhahra used to travel to Asmara via Aden in the 1930s. He worked there and came back to Yemen in the month of *Ehul* for the High Holidays. He would then leave again, return for the festival of *Purim* and stay until the end of *Shavuot* (Pentecost). The same routine was taken by Sa'ida Yahya's father, who worked in Asmara as a silversmith a *shohet*, Sa'ida Yahya, interview with Nehama Mahyut, April, 2003.

<sup>27</sup>For example, in 1919, Sulayman ben David Hazi of al-Mahwit fled punishment by the legal authorities in Yemen and reached Massawa, his son Ovadia Hazi, in an interview with the author, August 2004; in the 1930s Yosef Halevi from the 'Amar district in Yemen fell in love with a Muslim girl. The couple ran away, the girl converted to Judaism and they married. Halevi and his wife were caught, judged and imprisoned. The man later escaped from prison and fled to Asmara where he stayed until he travelled to Palestine, N. B. Gamlieli, *Ahavat teman* (Tel-Aviv, 1996), pp. 226–227; Hayyim Shar'abi was arrested by the British authorities in Aden for violating immigration regulations and was deported in 1931 with his family to Asmara. See Bat-Zion Eraqi Klorman, "Illegal Immigration and the Jews of Yemen", *Miqqedem Umiyyam*, 7 (2000), p. 126 (Hebrew).

<sup>28</sup>See Yosef Hubara, *Bitlaot teman vi-yerushalayim* (Jerusalem: private publication, 1970), pp. 110–111; also Yehuda Zdoc arrived in Asmara in 1927 and stayed until 1930 with his brother Hayyim, who worked there as a silversmith, and continued to Palestine, interview by the author, with his son Rafi Zadoc, May, 2004.

<sup>29</sup>Data was registered by Carlo Alberto Viterbo during his 1936 visit to Ethiopia, see Carlo Alberto Viterbo, *Ebrei di Ethiopia – due diari (1936–1976)*, (Firenze, 1993), p. 66; Cavallarin, *Juifs*, p. 10; Greenfeld, *The History*, p. 309. Between 1934 and 1939, about thirty per cent of the Jewish population of Asmara consisted of newcomers, mostly Italians, who came following the Italian invasion of Ethiopia.

remained constant up to 1975 (when the total population of Asmara numbered more than twenty thousand).<sup>30</sup>

### Adeni-Yemeni Relations in Eritrea

On arriving in Eritrea, the Yemeni Jews encountered the more affluent and better-established Adeni Jews. In practice, the Adeni Jews acted as absorbing agents, but their treatment of the Yemenis was ambivalent: reservations and rejection on one hand and acceptance on the other. As in other instances of Jewish migration within Europe and to the USA, friction between the old-established Jewish community and the poorer newcomers was not uncommon. In nineteenth century Germany, for example, the local better-off modernised Jews looked down with disgust on poor 'backward' Ostjuden (Eastern European Jews) immigrants and maintained a distance from them.<sup>31</sup> Similar patterns of behaviour were discerned in the United States by the veteran German Jewish immigrants towards East European poor immigrants.<sup>32</sup> The relations between Adeni and Yemeni Jews in Eritrea were likewise shaped by the extent of modernisation and by class differences. Additionally, however, they were also affected by the fact that the Adenis relied on the same religious and cultural heritage as did Yemeni Jews, and more importantly they were moulded by social and political pressures that stemmed from Italian colonialism in Eritrea. Thus, the ambivalent Adeni attitude toward Yemeni Jews resulted from two conflicting factors: the Adeni concern that their position in the white colonising society might be jeopardised by their association with Yemeni Jews; and their dependence on Yemeni Jews to reinforce the Jewish community and contribute to its religious life.

As a result of Italian colonial regulations, associating with Yemeni Jews placed Adeni Jews in an uncomfortable situation. The Italians pursued a policy of segregation, based on their conviction that the colony would be controlled only by a separation of races and by cultivating European superiority.<sup>33</sup> Italian colonial law differentiated between Italians and those entitled to be equal to their legal status, including foreign citizens and persons assimilated into European culture; and colonial subjects, i.e., indigenous Africans and other persons who did not belong to the first group, among them all immigrants from Arab countries. Members of the colonial elite benefited from diverse social, economic and legal advantages and from civil rights of which all the rest were deprived. For example, civic and penal cases involving one or more 'Italians' were judged by the colonial judicial authority, while colonial subjects were judged by the traditional local legal system. The latter were

<sup>30</sup>Cavallarin, *Juifs*, p. 11. It seems that these figures do not include Yemeni Jews who stayed there temporarily *en route* to Palestine.

<sup>31</sup>Steven E. Aschheim, *Brothers and Strangers: The East European Jew in German Jewish Consciousness, 1800–1923* (Madison, 1982), pp. 3–31; Arie Gartner, "The Mass Migration of European Jews 1881–1914", in Avigdor Shinan (ed.) *Migration and Settlement among Jews and Gentiles*, (Jerusalem, 1982), p. 354 (Hebrew).

<sup>32</sup>See for example, Avraham Barkai, "Jewish Immigration waves from Germany 1830–1910", in Arie Gertner and Jonathan D. Sarna (eds.) *The Jews of the United States* (Jerusalem, 1992), pp. 78–79 (in Hebrew); Arie Gartner, "The Mass Migration", pp. 367–368.

<sup>33</sup>Richard Pankhurst, "Education in Ethiopia during the Italian Fascist Occupation (1936–1941)", *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Vol. 5, No3 (1972), pp. 362, 384; Jonathan Miran, "Missionaries, Education and the State in the Italian Colony of Eritrea", in Holger Bernt Hansen and Michel Twaddle (eds.) *Christian Missionaries & the State in the Third World* (Athens, Ohio, 2002), pp. 124–125.

also excluded from European neighbourhoods and confined to separate living quarters.<sup>34</sup> Thus, children of Italian fathers and African concubines were considered as Italians only if recognised by the father, otherwise they would be taken as colonial subjects.<sup>35</sup> Consequently, the Adenis, who were all British subjects, were regarded as members of the colonial group, while Yemeni Jews were defined as indigenous colonial subjects. The Jewish community's attempts during the first two decades of the twentieth century to equalise the legal status of all Jews were rejected by Italian authorities.<sup>36</sup>

The Adenis strove to consolidate their position in the colonial society and propel their community upward, as close as possible to the Italian rulers. Accordingly, Samuel (Sammy) Cohen, a prominent member of the community and currently the last of the Jews of Asmara, presented the life of the Jewish community as always being interwoven with the lives of the Italians: "we grew up with the Italians, we lived with them and we had many Italian friends".<sup>37</sup> The Adenis dressed in European fashion and sent their children to be educated in the Italian kindergartens and day schools operated by the church (though a few sent their children to the English school).<sup>38</sup> Poor Jews coming from Yemen in their traditional costume embarrassed the Adenis and threatened their position as part of the 'Italian society'. Hubara, a native of San`a', reports that when he first arrived in Asmara in 1922, a local Adeni Jew refused to walk beside him, since he did not wish to be seen to maintain friendly relations with an indigenous black person. Hubara continues that he soon learned that:

The Italians divide all people into two groups: whites and blacks. The Europeans were white and the Abyssinians and other Africans were black. As to the Jews – those who dressed in European fashion were considered white, but those dressed in oriental clothing would be despised and humiliated just like the blacks.<sup>39</sup>

The Adenis, therefore, hastened to change the Jewish newcomers' appearance and to give them a 'European' look, to blur their coreligionists' identification with 'the blacks', which might taint them as well. They asked the Yemenis to conceal their head locks and provided them with western-style suits.<sup>40</sup> In addition, the Adenis helped the Yemeni immigrants to improve their economic conditions and to come closer, but not too close, to their own modern community. The newcomers were usually helped to set up a small-scale business, to establish themselves in the crafts (e.g., silversmiths, shoemakers and carpenters), or to

<sup>34</sup>Greenfeld, *History*, pp. 301, 306, 312–313.

<sup>35</sup>See Giulia Barrera, "Patrilinearity, Race, and Identity: The Upbringing of Italo-Eritreans during Italian Colonialism", in Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Mia Fuller (eds.), *Italian Colonialism* (Houndmills, 2005), pp. 97–108; Giulia Barrera, "Mussolini's colonial race Laws and State-Settler Relations in Africa Orientale (1935–41)", *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 8 (3), pp. 425–443.

<sup>36</sup>Greenfeld, *History*, p. 312–314.

<sup>37</sup>Sammy Cohen, interview with the author; and cf. Cavallarin, *Jews in Eritrea*, p. 6.

<sup>38</sup>They studied in the mission schools run by Catholic Capuchins, see Miran, "Missionaries" pp. 128–129; Anna Shoa-Hay, interview with the author, January, 2004; Zecharia Qesar, interview with the author, May, 2004; Ovidia Hazi, interview with the author, August, 2004; Sammy Cohen, interview with the author, maintains that both the Italian school and the English school were operated by Combiani, a Catholic organisation supported by the Vatican.

<sup>39</sup>Hubara, *Bitlaot*, p. 114.

<sup>40</sup>Shlomo Tiv'oni, *Kerem Haya li-Yedidi* (Tel Aviv, 1978), pp. 44–46; Hubara, *Bitlaot*, pp. 114, 116; Suberi, *From San`a'* p. 114, 119; Hazi, interview with the author.



work as helpers in Adeni stores and in services.<sup>41</sup> Usually, they did not perform ‘dirty’ manual jobs, “since for this there were the blacks”.<sup>42</sup> Yet, a few of the Yemenis obtained a parcel of land and farmed it much like the local population – an occupation that the Adenis avoided.<sup>43</sup> Some Yemeni women worked in low-income jobs such as washing, ironing and baking bread for sale in the Jewish community.<sup>44</sup> During the 1930s, with increased emigration from Yemen to Ethiopia, the Adenis were alarmed that the demographic balance between themselves and the Yemenis would be threatened. They encouraged and helped newly-arrived Yemeni Jews to travel to Aden, and to wait there for an opportunity to go to Palestine.<sup>45</sup>

Though they patronised the Yemenis, the Adenis depended on them for human reinforcement of their small community and as an important contribution to religious life. Ovadia Hazi claims that “the Adenis needed the Yemenis for the synagogue only”, and according to Aharon Aharon, “the Adenis in Asmara were rich but they did not have a rabbi or a *shohet* (ritual slaughterer)”.<sup>46</sup> After increased Yemeni Jewish immigration in the 1920s, religious life was revitalised. The synagogue (built in 1905), which usually opened only on Saturdays, was opened for daily services.<sup>47</sup> Italian education served secular purposes well, but Adeni Jews, who were all religious, sought some religious education for their children that would help to sustain religious communal life. Since Aden traditionally looked to Yemen for religious guidance, and Yemeni teachers (*moris*) used to teach children in Aden,<sup>48</sup> Yemeni immigrants were welcomed as suitable religious teachers and providers of other religious services. Yemeni *moris* taught Adeni and Yemeni children according to Yemeni Jewish tradition. Studies were held in the Asmara synagogue in the afternoons and on Sundays, and while mainly children participated, adults did as well.<sup>49</sup> Yemeni immigrants were also in charge of conducting festive ceremonies. Yisshaq Suberi, a native of San`a`, relates that during a wedding festival in 1928 in Asmara, attended by “the entire Jewish community, the rabbis, the leaders, the wealthy Adenis and the sons of the rich”, he found that the Adenis did not know the songs that should be sung on such an “honourable occasion”. Suberi became the expert in this area and later led the singing at circumcision parties and weddings.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Menahem Yosef, interview with the author, September 2004; Yosef, Yisshaq Suberi’s brother, first worked as a silversmith. When he realised that he could not make a decent living he opened a small grocery shop. Suberi himself (p. 119) learnt the trade of shoemaking and Hubara (p. 118) pursued his profession as a silversmith; Aharon, who was a blacksmith in Yemen, became a carpenter in Ethiopia.

<sup>42</sup> Menahem Yosef, interview with the author.

<sup>43</sup> Sammy Cohen, interview with the author.

<sup>44</sup> Suberi, *From San`a`* pp. 116, 119; Hazi, interview with the author.

<sup>45</sup> Hazi, interview with the author.

<sup>46</sup> Hazi, interview with the author; Aharon, interview with the author.

<sup>47</sup> Hubara, pp. 120–121.

<sup>48</sup> Dani Goldsmid, “The Establishment of a Jewish School for Boys in Aden, 1912”, *Pe’amim*, 64 (1995), pp. 111–112 (Hebrew).

<sup>49</sup> For example, Hazi’s father took his first steps in Asmara in 1920 as a *mori* for children, Hazi, interview with the author; Hayyim Suberi who arrived, penniless, in Asmara in 1928 became a *mori* and taught children until 1933 when his family left for Aden and from there to Palestine, Suberi, p. 116; Qesar’s family stayed in Asmara for a year and a half during which Zecharia and his brother Shalom attended the Italian school and in the evenings studied Torah with *mori* Jamal, a Yemeni silversmith, Qesar, interview with the author. During the 1940s, “Mr. Sholem”, an Adeni Jew, arrived in Asmara and worked as a religious teacher for Adeni children, Menahem Yosef, interview with the author; Meir Shoa, interview with the author, April 2005. During the 1950s a *Talmud tora* for children’s religious education was established next to the synagogue.

<sup>50</sup> Suberi, *From San`a`* p. 120–121.

Yemeni Jews held other religious functions. During the early 1920s, the Yemeni *Mori* Shalom (Salem) al-Qahlani, originally from San`a', who grew up in Manakha in central Yemen, served as Chief Rabbi to the Asmara community.<sup>51</sup> After Rabbi Qahlani's death, spiritual leadership went to Adeni Jews: Sulayman Zecharia in 1925–1927 and Yehiel Banin in 1927–1940. The Chief Rabbi from 1943 until his death in the mid-1960s was the Yemeni Rabbi Rason Tobi.<sup>52</sup> In the late 1920s, *Mori* Sulayman Garama was the *shohet* of Asmara.<sup>53</sup> During the 1930s, the *shohet* was *Mori* David, a Yemeni from al-'Awd, who also served as the *hazan* (cantor).<sup>54</sup> It should be noted that although religious teachings were conducted in the Yemeni tradition, prayers were read in the Asmara synagogue according to Adeni Sephardic tradition and melodies.<sup>55</sup> Thus even in the synagogue Yemeni Jews were subordinated to the Adenis' social superiority.

### Marriage ties as a social signifier

Adeni men living in Ethiopia continued to marry Adeni women, usually members of their extended families. When a suitable match could not be found, a bride or a groom would be brought in from Aden. Yet, a small number married other foreign Jews in Ethiopia.<sup>56</sup> As to the Yemeni men – most were married men who had left their families in Yemen. After making some money, some returned to Yemen for good, others went for a visit and came back. The minority brought their families to Ethiopia. The rest, in the course of time, married in Ethiopia. Among them were married men who deserted their wives in Yemen,<sup>57</sup> and, in accordance with Yemeni Jewish polygamist tradition, took a second wife in Ethiopia. Some men married local Yemeni Jewish women, but most married into the indigenous African Jewish and non-Jewish society. In Ethiopia there existed an old Jewish community: Beta Israel (Falasha). Jewish legal authorities doubted their being 'real' Jews, but a 1973 ordinance by Israel's Chief Rabbi clarified the issue accepting them as Jews.<sup>58</sup> There is no data available to assess the exact number of Yemeni men who married into local African society, but it seems that this was a common phenomenon. Thus, Aharon Aharon relates of his friend Meshumar Melihi, with whom he came to Ethiopia in 1937, who married a local Beta Israel (Falasha) woman from Gondar. Melihi remained in Gondar until he emigrated to Israel (his family currently lives in the town of Ramla).<sup>59</sup> Hazi, who knew Melihi, counts four more Yemeni men who married Falasha women in Gondar.<sup>60</sup> Also, visiting Gondar in

<sup>51</sup> Hubara, *Bitlaot* pp. 114–115, 120; Hazi, interview with the author.

<sup>52</sup> Cavallarin, *Jews in Eritrea*, p. 12; Anna Shoa-Hay, interview with the author.

<sup>53</sup> Suberi, *From San`a'* p. 120.

<sup>54</sup> Aharon, interview with the author.

<sup>55</sup> Suberi, *From San`a'* p. 120; Hazi, interview with the author; Qesar, interview with the author; Cavallarin, *Jews in Eritrea* 2003, pp. 11–12.

<sup>56</sup> For marriage preferences in the Jewish community of Aden, see Michal Amdur, *The Jewish Community in Aden 1900–1967* (Tel-Aviv: private publication, 1990), pp. 24–32 (Hebrew); in Asmara, Shoa-Hay, interview with the author; Hazi, interview with the author; Yosef, interview with the author.

<sup>57</sup> For example, during the early 1940s, Sa'ida Yahya's husband left her and travelled to Ethiopia. Her efforts to find him failed and she remained deserted and unable to remarry, Sa'ida Yahya, interview with Nehama Mahyut, April, 2003.

<sup>58</sup> See Steven Kaplan, *The Beta Israel (Falasha) in Ethiopia: From Earliest Times to the Twentieth Century*, (New York, 1992); Hagar Salomon, *The Hyena People: Ethiopian Jews in Christian Ethiopia*, (Berkeley, 1999)

<sup>59</sup> Aharon, interview with the author.

<sup>60</sup> Among them were the Jirafi and Sulayman families, Hazi, interview with the author.

1952, Haim Shoshkes met a number of Yemeni Jews, “all married black Falasha women”. He writes that they all spoke Hebrew and were looking for the opportunity to emigrate from Ethiopia to Israel.<sup>61</sup> Aharon Aharon himself left his pregnant wife in Yemen, stayed in Asmara for five years and in Addis Ababa for seven years. In Addis he married Masraja, a Beta Israel woman, who bore him a son, Shelomo. He later deserted his second wife when she was pregnant, took his Ethiopian-born son to Aden and emigrated in 1950 to Israel.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, Yishaq Yishaq Ma’bari, a married man with a young son (whose family had migrated from Yemen to Aden when he was about 10) was invited to Ethiopia around 1915, before the high holidays, to work as a *shohet* in Diredawah [Dire Dawa]. He eventually married a gentile indigenous woman whom he converted to Judaism and had seven children. In 1971 he emigrated to Israel with his family.<sup>63</sup>

Hence, marrying into the local Ethiopian population clearly classified Yemeni Jews as colonial subjects, while the inter-communal marriage ties of Adenis – British subjects – preserved their status as part of the colonial society.

### Conclusion

Yemeni Jews and Adeni Jews lived side by side for many years. The majority shared a common Yemeni Jewish origin, they prayed in the same synagogue, and some of their children attended the same schools (the Catholic Italian school, which was open also to ‘assimilated’ colonial subjects,<sup>64</sup> in the mornings and the religious Yemeni-style school in the afternoons) – nevertheless they did not develop a common identity. The Adenis preserved a sense of separateness and superiority, derived mainly from their claim to be part of the colonising society and based on their higher economic status. Their sense of exclusivity was further strengthened by their inter-communal marriage customs, connecting them as members of one big extended family, from which Jewish colonial subjects were excluded. Hubara wrote: “They were careful not to become too close to the Yemenis and they kept to themselves in a separate circle”. Mockingly, Hubara, a man of San`a`, added: “The Adenis developed a strange custom to call themselves Sephardic, while they are, of course, none other than rural Yemeni Jews, most originated from Shar`ab [in south Yemen]”.<sup>65</sup>

According to Homi K. Bhabha, ‘whiteness’ acts as a strategy of authority that takes for granted the demand for power and privilege.<sup>66</sup> Like the Italian colonialist who related this strategy to all colonial subjects, so did the Adenis. They implemented ‘whiteness’ towards ‘others’ – native Africans as well as their coreligionist Yemeni Jews. The Adenis were unable to conceal their cooperation and religious affinity with a lower class in the colonial order: the legally-defined ‘black’ native Yemeni Jews. However, similar to Fanon’s observations, who pointed to the new stands taken by blacks in an attempt to integrate into the white colonial

<sup>61</sup>Haim Shoshkes *Bedarkhei*, pp. 193–194.

<sup>62</sup>Aharon was later united with his first wife and child and is living in Rishon Le-Zion. He has no contact with his son Sintayo who was born in Ethiopia after he left, Aharon, interview with the author.

<sup>63</sup>After a few years in Ethiopia, rabbinic messengers made contact with Yishaq and he released his first wife from her marriage. Ofra Alyagon, “The Captive Rabbi Married the Daughter of the Chief of the Tribe”, *Ma’ariv* (21 September 1973); Efraim Isaac, Yishaq Yishaq’s son, interview with the author, December, 2003.

<sup>64</sup>Miran, “Missionaries”, p. 128; and cf. above note 37.

<sup>65</sup>Hubara, *Bitlaot*, p. 120.

<sup>66</sup>Homi K. Bhabha, “The White Stuff (Political Aspect of Whiteness)”, *Artforum*, 36, 9 (1998), pp. 21–24.

society, in order to ‘become’ white,<sup>67</sup> so the Adenis denied their own ‘blackness’ by means of social disengagement from Yemeni Jews, and assimilation into Italian society and culture. This conduct was designated to make them more ‘white’ and to preserve their position as belonging to the ‘European’ class. The colonial situation therefore created a flexible consciousness of one imagined Jewish community, and pushed the object of identification towards the colonial society. Thus ethnicity and religion clearly proved weaker than social and economic considerations.

Rejected by the Adenis, Yemeni Jews were motivated to cultivate their own unique identity. In response to their peripheral place in colonial society (their position as colonial subjects, their lower social and economic status, their exclusion from marrying Adenis), they developed a sense of superiority vis-à-vis the Adenis that relied on their awareness of possessing higher religious knowledge and better understanding of the ‘proper’ way to conduct communal life. This process was encouraged by the regular arrival of temporary migrant Jewish labourers from Yemen in Ethiopia, which strengthened the ties with their communities of origin and consolidated their awareness of the richness of their cultural heritage. Hence, even after living in Ethiopia for decades, or even having been born there, and having adopted many Adeni and Ethiopian cultural components, they remained Yemeni Jews, rather than Adeni or Ethiopian Jews. Therefore, after the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, when the Jews of Yemen poured into Aden on their way to Israel, most Yemeni Jews in Ethiopia joined them, while most of Adeni Jews remained.<sup>68</sup>

The Jewish community of foreign origin survived in Ethiopia until 1974 when political changes and the nationalisation projects of the Mengistu Hayla-Maryam regime (1974–1991) drove most of the foreigners out. A few Jews left Eritrea for Addis Ababa, but the great majority left Africa entirely.<sup>69</sup> Meanwhile, the British had left Aden in 1967 and its Jewish community became extinct. As Aden was no longer an option, most foreign Jews in Ethiopia, Adeni, Yemeni and other Sephardic Jews, emigrated to Israel.<sup>70</sup> Others migrated to Britain; some to Italy and other western countries. The existence of three peripheral Jewish communities – the prominent Yemeni community and its satellites in Aden and Ethiopia – eventually came to an end.<sup>71</sup> Yet it seems that for the time being even in their new locations its members still cherish their separate and unique identities.

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<sup>67</sup>Franz Fanon, *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs* (Paris, 1952), Chapter 1.

<sup>68</sup>In the early 1950s, one third of the Jews of Asmara, mostly Yemenis, emigrated to Israel.

<sup>69</sup>In 1979 only about twenty Jewish families remained in Asmara while in Addis Ababa their number increased to about one hundred and twenty families, most Adenis and a few Yemenis, “*Shomrei ha-gahelt*”, *Hedim*, 4, no. 36 (Kislev, 1979), p. 17.

<sup>70</sup>In 1986, six English-speaking Adeni Jewish families (numbering twenty five individuals) lived in Addis Ababa. Almost all of their property was nationalised by the Mengistu regime, Amnon Kapelyuk, ‘Why do you harass the Falashas? – Asked the Jews of Addis Ababa’, *Yedioth Ahronot* (21 February 1986), p. 7 (Hebrew).

<sup>71</sup>In 1991 Ethiopia became a federal republic and Eritrea, which returned to Ethiopian sovereignty in 1952, became an independent country. But the foreign Jewish community was never revived.