Created in their Own Image : A Comment on Beta Israël Figurines.
Monsieur Steven Kaplan, Monsieur Chaim Rosen

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Résumé
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Créées à leur image : une analyse des statuettes beta Israël. —Cet article est consacré à l'étude des statuettes produites par les Beta Israël tant en Éthiopie qu'en Israël. De précédentes études sur ces statuettes s'étaient attachées à cerner la question de leur ancienneté ou de leur authenticité. Celles qui avaient à tort admis leur ancienneté, avaient laissé de côté le problème des rapports entre les Falasha et les forces externes, et avaient considéré ces œuvres comme une preuve de l'ancienneté de ce peuple. En revanche, celles qui n'ont vu dans ces statuettes qu'une forme d'art « touristique » ne datant que des années 1960, ont eu tendance à les rejeter comme inauthentiques. Cet article s'attache à démontrer que ces statuettes offrent un éclairage précieux sur l'évolution des formes de l'identité « judéo-éthiopienne » et sur leurs relations avec l'extérieur. L’accent est mis sur l’histoire de ces statuettes, qui d'un art ethnique juif en Éthiopie mène à un art ethnique éthiopien en Israël.

Abstract
This paper examines the statuettes produced both in Ethiopia and in Israel by the Beta Israel (Falasha). Previous studies of these statuettes have focussed around the issues of antiquity and authenticity. Those who have erroneously accepted the antiquity of the statuettes have ignored the issue of relations between the Falasha and external forces, and seen these works as a valuable due concerning their past. Those who have recognized that such statuettes are a form of ‘tourist art’ and date back no later than the1960s have tended to dismiss them as inauthentic. This article argues that these statuettes provide valuable insights concerning changing forms of ‘Ethiopian Jewish’ identity and relations with outsiders. In particular, emphasis is placed on the evolution of the statuettes from Jewish ethnie art in Ethiopia to Ethiopian ethnie art in Israel.
Ethiopia has held and continues to hold an ambiguous position in studies of sub-Saharan Africa cultures and peoples. Although its modern history and recent political upheavals are usually integrated into recent surveys of African politics, its religious life and cultural traditions are often neglected in comparable volumes about the continent.1 Two recent articles on 'African Visual Arts', for example, lack even a single reference to a publication about Ethiopia (Adams 1989, Ben-Amos 1989). In this short article we shall explore the social and political conditions underlying the evolution of a tradition of figurines and statuettes among one Ethiopian people, the Beta Israel (Falasha).2 It is our belief that much of what we present shares important themes with the history of images and their diffusion elsewhere in Africa.

More specifically, we shall trace the emergence of the Beta Israel as a semi-caste of despised craftsmen in medieval Ethiopia and analyze the development of their statuettes in the past three decades as a form of tourist art sold first in Ethiopia and later in other countries, especially the United States and Israel. We shall seek to understand both the manner in which interventions by foreign individuals and local government institutions have shaped the production of these figurines, and the role this ethnic art plays in the projection of larger national image. These outside interventions, notwithstanding, we shall also seek to understand the significance of the statuettes and their production for the Beta Israel themselves.

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1. The Journal of Religion in Africa recently devoted an issue to religion in Ethiopia. In an editorial Professor Adrian HASTINGS (1992: 193) writes: 'There remains a strong feeling that Ethiopia does not quite belong to Africa. Certainly Ethiopian studies tend to be severely separated from those of sub-Saharan Africa . . .'.

2. In Ethiopia these people called themselves (Beta) Israel ('the house' of) Israel. They were best known by the name Falasha, which they reject today as pejorative. In Israel they are usually referred to as Yehuday Etiopiya ('Ethiopian Jews'). Prior to 1977 all but a handful of them, approximately 40,000, lived in Ethiopia. During the 1980s almost half came on aliyah ('immigration to Israel'), and the center of Beta Israel life shifted from one country to the other. In 1991, Operation Solomon put an end to the Beta Israel as an active and living Ethiopian community, and by the end of 1992 virtually all of them were in Israel.
A Semi-Caste of Craftsmen

Until quite recently, virtually all attempts to explain the presence in Ethiopia of a seemingly recognizable Jewish ethnic group focussed on the possibility of contact with members of one or another ancient Jewish community, particularly in Egypt or Yemen. In the main the history of Judaism and Christianity in Ethiopia has been portrayed as the recapitulation in miniature of the history of these two faiths in the world at large; a small early Jewish population is said to have been superseded by a later Christian community with only a tiny remnant of Jews surviving. The Beta Israel, it has been claimed, are essentially a fossilized survival from pre-Christian Aksum.  

Recent research has painted a radically different and far more complex picture of the two faiths in Ethiopia. Indeed, it bears little resemblance to that of the two religions elsewhere in the world. From a cultural perspective there appears to be little question that the Beta Israel must be understood as the product of processes that took place in Ethiopia between the fourteenth and sixteenth century (Kaplan 1992; Abbink 1984: 69-71, 1990; Shelemay 1986; Quirin 1992). Their emergence as a distinct people was the result of a variety of political, economic, and ideological factors. The rise of the so-called Solomonic dynasty in the last decades of the thirteenth century and its subsequent expansion throughout the Ethiopian highlands placed those living around the Lake Tana region (as well as many other hitherto autonomous groups) under unprecedented pressure.

From the fifteenth century onward, a gradual process of disenfranchisement took place that eventually deprived many of the Beta Israel of their rights to inheritable land (*rist*). Denied this crucial economic asset, they pursued a number of strategies to retain their economic viability. Some migrated to peripheral areas where access to *rist* was still an option; others accepted the reduced status of tenant farmers. Almost always they sought to supplement their income by pursuing crafts such as smithing, pottery and weaving (Quirin 1992: 63-65, 134-138; Kaplan 1992: 65-69).

By the time the Portuguese arrived in Ethiopia in the sixteenth century, the Beta Israel had established a reputation as ‘excellent smiths’, valued for their ability to make and repair tools and weapons. It was probably their connection to toolmaking that led them to being among the first Ethiopians trained as masons and carpenters.

Over the succeeding centuries the Beta Israel became almost exclusively identified with crafts; men as smiths and women as potters. This led to a

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4. For a masterful survey of this period, see Tadesse Tamrat 1972.
strangely ambivalent relationship with their mostly Christian patrons. Although valued for the essential role they filled as suppliers of agricultural implements, tools, weapons, and clay vessels, they were also feared and avoided as semi-magical masters of fire, *buda*, capable of changing the form not only of earth and metal, but of people and animals (Kaplan 1992: 110-115; Abbink 1987).

The Emergence of Tourist Art

Prior to the 1960s the work of Beta Israel craftsmen was almost totally of a practical nature. Thus their connection with building and paintmaking did not dispose them to paint pictures or frescoes. Their smiths did not produce sculptures or jewelry, and their potters made, in the main, vessels for daily use. Indeed, virtually all the objects they crafted were also common household items among the Beta Israel themselves.

Significantly perhaps, the notable exceptions to this rule and among their few ventures into the realm of artistic creation were associated with religion, making incense holders, *tabots* (arks), and even crosses for their Christian patrons and the crown (*gulelat*) for their own prayer houses.6

It was the women's connection to pottery which was to lead to the developments that concerns us in this paper. During the early 1960s women in the village of Wallaqa, situated a few kilometers from the regional capital, Gondar, began to engage in a new form of craft. Encouraged by outsiders including the wife of an American doctor and Peace Corps volunteers, Ethiopian Jewish women, who already had well-developed potting skills, began to produce small clay dolls for sale to tourists. Initially these were modelled either on pictures of prehistoric figurines that they had been shown or reflected elements from everyday life, such as a woman carrying an infant or engaged in preparing food (see Fig. 1). Later, to appeal to Jewish tourists and highlight their own evolving religious orientation, Beta Israel women began to create 'rabbis' with Torah scrolls, Solomon and Sheba lions crowned with Jewish stars, and other Jewish themes (Fig. 2).7 Technological innovations in the form of a kiln and potters wheel were later introduced. With the help of the Ethiopian Tourist Organization a pottery cooperative was formed, and a trip to Wallaka to visit the 'Black Jews of Ethiopia' and purchase their figurines became part of the Ethiopian tourist

6. MESSING 1982: 30. In the past the Beta Israel prayer houses, known as a *masgid* or *salota bet*, had a pottery crown, *gulelat*, at its top (ibid.: 127). More recently, they had a Star of David.
7. MESSING (1982: 30) offers an account of the earliest stage in the development of the figurines. For pictures of this stage, in addition to Fig. 1, see MEINARDUS (1966), and RAUCHENBACH & HAMMERSCHMIDT (1966). Later developments are discussed in KREMPEL (1972: 156-157), SCHOENBERGER (1975: 134-137), KAHANE (1977: 37-40).
Fig. 1. Pottery figurines from Wallaqa in the early 1960s
(Courtesy of Dan & Vered Harel, and Beth Hatefutsoth - Photo Archive. Photographer: Yakov Brill).

Fig. 2. Beta Israel woman selling pottery figurines, Wallaqa 1984
(Courtesy of Beth Hatefutsoth - Photo Archive. Photographer: Doron Bacher).
The figurines rapidly came to be the most recognizable element of Ethiopian Jewish material culture and were sold by several pro-Falasha organizations as part of their fundraising efforts.

Almost from the outset, the Wallaqa figurines were the subject of confusion and misunderstanding. Within a few years of the production of the first statuettes, a scholarly article concerning ‘Falasha Fertility Idols’ was published. Indeed, despite a wealth of literature documenting the statuettes relatively recent origin, their image as a traditional art form of considerable venerability has proven to be surprisingly durable. Thus in early 1993 the Museum of the Negev featured an exhibition entitled ‘The Sheba Connection’, which displayed ‘traditional artistic’ Ethiopian ceramics and pottery with parallel objects found in archaeological digs in Israel. Writing in the exhibition catalogue, the Israeli Minister of Immigrant Absorption went even further and noted that the exhibition demonstrated ‘a direct line between the daily life of rural Jewish community in a strange land and the lives of the “Ancient Israelites”’.

The Beersheba exhibit was, in fact, one of many projects seeking to celebrate Ethiopian (ethnic) artists. Following both Operation Moses (1984) and the more recent Operation Solomon (1991), attempts have been made to encourage Ethiopian immigrants in Israel to engage in cottage industries. Proposals have been put forward to create a traditional Ethiopian village as a tourist attraction, where various traditional products would be on sale. Typically, statuettes produced by both men (!) and women have figured prominently in such proposals.

As we have discussed elsewhere, the attempts of such programs to achieve cultural preservation are replete with paradoxes and inconsistencies (Kaplan & Rosen 1993). In one of the most developed pottery workshops, for example, Ethiopian Jewish men were trained for the first time as pottersculptors. In some cases the sculptures they produced were modelled on non-Ethiopian sub-Saharan figurines even including such uncharacteristic elements as bare-breasted women. These and other works designated as ‘typical village scenes’ were regularly exhibited in shows of Ethiopian or more general immigrant art.

Ironically the cooperative collapsed under communist rule and women returned to individual sales. MEINARDUS (1966) viewed these as idols. See however the response of GAMST & BALDIA (1980) and GAMST (1992). Although Tsaban’s position appears based on ignorance, the exhibition organizers can offer no such excuse. The exhibit catalogue refers on several occasions to SCHOENBERGER’s work (1975: 132-136) in which the recent origin of the statuettes is documented. There is, therefore, no escaping the conclusion that the misrepresentation is, on their part, deliberate.

More than a dozen such shows have been organized in Israel and Europe since 1984. Significantly, perhaps, the contributions of Russian immigrants are almost exclusively in the realm of general Western art.
Patronage, Innovation and Ethnic Art

Most discussions of the statuettes published to date have focussed either explicitly or implicitly around the issues of the antiquity and authenticity. Those who have presented the statuettes as an authentic part of traditional culture have, of necessity, avoided the issue of relations between Falasha artists and external entrepreneurs. They have, however erroneous their conclusions, taken the cultural and historical significance of the statuettes quite seriously, often seeing them as a valuable clue concerning the Beta Israel past.

Those better attuned to the chain of events that produced the figurines have, in contrast, focussed little attention of their significance or meanings. They have tended, rather, to dismiss them as inauthentic, and have usually restricted themselves to correcting inaccurate impressions concerning their antiquity. While conscious of the role played by outsiders, they have not subjected this to any detailed analysis. In neither case have the connections between works produced in Ethiopia and those found in Israel been discussed.

Despite the dramatic change in circumstances undergone by the Beta Israel since the statuettes were first produced, certain themes have remained fairly consistent. Both in Ethiopia and in Israel, outsiders have played a crucial role in initiating, producing and marketing the statuettes. With a few recent (mainly male) exceptions artists have remained anonymous and their works have been sold as products of an ethnic collective, rather than distinctive individual creations.

Indeed, although both sides would probably shrink from the comparison, the attitudes of the Ethiopian and Israeli governments to ‘Falasha’ art have had much in common. Both have sought to encourage the development of such works as a minor income supplement for a few members of a marginal population. Even more significantly, both have used the Falasha in general and their ethnic art in particular as part of a general policy designed to construct a positive national image. Thus, in Imperial Ethiopia the ‘Black Jews of Ethiopia’ were depicted as a piece of Ethiopia’s ethnic mosaic. Their presence in the country was cited in support of the Imperial family’s claim to Israelite descent. The statuettes produced by the Beta Israel also emphasized their Biblical/Jewish identity.

In Israel the dramatic ‘rescue’ of Ethiopian Jews served to validate the central premises of Zionism, while at the same time demonstrating (at least in Israeli eyes) that ‘Zionism is not Racism’. Traditional figurines by Ethiopian Jews emphasizing Ethiopian themes are representative of Israel’s ingathering of the exiles.

13. The issue of authenticity has recently received considerable attention in the field of ‘tourist arts’; see for example, LITTELL, ANDERSON & BROWN 1993.
14. African, African-American, and other non-white visitors to Israel are inevitably brought to sites housing Ethiopian immigrants. The welcome Israel has accorded Ethiopian Jews has also figured prominently in attempts to improve relations between American Jews and African-Americans.
In both cases, minority ethnic groups are encouraged to give cultural (as opposed to political) expression to their collective identity in the service of the larger national image. On behalf of multiculturalism and ethnic pluralism the Falasha of Ethiopia were urged to give expression to their Jewishness and those of Israel to their Ethiopian cultural roots.

Thus individual artists have been created and employed to render largely anonymous service to the nation through the promotion of a distinct cultural sub-identity. Ethiopian artists in Israel are not, for example, trained in the conventions of Jewish/Israeli art, nor are they encouraged to produce works of a general character. Even when the techniques and media are new (as in the case of photography, painting and wall hangings), the messages and images conveyed have been particularistic.

Given the overwhelming evidence for the external initiatives behind the production of the Falasha figurines, it is tempting to dismiss them as inauthentic and to forgo any attempt at interpretation. Support for this view is also found in the fact that neither in Ethiopia nor in Israel have figurines become household decorations for the Beta Israel themselves. Several considerations would appear, however, to dictate against too cavalier an approach.

External, in the sense of non-Beta Israel, patronage has always played a role in the development of Beta Israel crafts. Indeed, as was noted above, among their few ventures outside the realm of daily objects was the production of religious objects for their Christian customers. The foreign tourist can be considered, at least in part, as an extension and transformation of their long-standing relationship with outside buyers (cf. Adams 1989: 79). Among the Beta Israel in Ethiopia, as in many other parts of Africa, the encounter with new (American-European tourist) patrons led to innovations in techniques and changes in forms.

The production of tourist art also led to technological innovations (a kiln and potter's wheel), new economic institutions (the cooperative) and increased contact with the government (the Ethiopian Tourist Organization). In Israel, this new form of out-group trade has also produced changes in the location (workshops and schools) and composition (the inclusion of men) of the 'artistic community'.

None of these changes by themselves should preclude attempts to analyze various layers of meaning revealed through and in the process of creat-

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15. In Israel more credit is given to individual artists whose names usually appear at exhibits and in exhibit catalogues.

16. In this they differ from straw baskets, which are produced by Ethiopian women. These are given as gifts or sold to outsiders, and used for both decorative and practical purposes by Ethiopians themselves (Doleve-Gandelman 1990: 251-253). Such baskets, it should be noted, were not a distinctively Beta Israel product in Ethiopia.

17. Ben-Amos 1989: 36-37. The Beta Israel were, of course, unusual in being overwhelmingly influenced by Jewish tourists and emissaries.
ing the Falasha figurines. Indeed, the changes undergone as a result of external influences can be viewed as a microcosm of larger processes effecting the Beta Israel during the same period. Thus, the move to workshops and the inclusion of men coincided with a general transfer of the workplace outside the home and a wider redefinition of gender roles.  

More significantly, changes in the images conveyed by the figurines should not be reduced to merely a matter of market forces. The first shift in the production of figurines was the transition from ‘primitive’ art to Jewish forms. It is suggestive that Beta Israel traditions recorded in the 1970s view the production of Jewish forms neither as an ancient tradition nor as a development which grew out of an earlier foreign initiative. Rather they were credited to a single woman in Wallaqa, Takai Elias, who claimed to have conceived of Jewish figurines as mementoes to sell to tourists who visited the village. Others, including converted Falasha and women with relatives in Wallaqa, saw her success and followed suit (Schoenberger 1975: 134-137; Kahane 1977: 37-39).

Although outside demand clearly played a role in their choice of images, other factors should not be discounted. During the 1950s, Wallaqa and several of the villages around it had been strongly influenced by the work of Israeli and other Jewish envoys (Westheimer & Kaplan 1992: 19-23). In response, many Beta Israel began to identify themselves with world Jewry, its practices, beliefs and symbols. Takai Elias’s decision to decorate her figurines with ‘symbols which she knew to be associated with the Jewish faith’ (Schoenberger 1975: 134) may be understood as indicative not merely of knowledge, but also of a changing self-image. The Beta Israel in Ethiopia were, it must be remembered, a largely oral culture in which knowledge was preserved and transmitted through a variety of media including the human body (tatoos), music, and artefacts (Antebi 1994). Similarly, objections raised by Falasha women to the use of Jewish symbols by those who had converted to Christianity may also be understood, at least in part, as a conflict over the borders of group identity and the right to present oneself as an Ethiopian Jew.

The situation with regard to figurines created in Israel is far more complex and multi-levelled. At first glance, works of art emphasizing the distinctive ethnic identity of Ethiopian immigrants would appear to be in conflict with their oft-cited desire to be fully accepted as Jews by the Israel

18. Although most studies of Ethiopian immigrants in Israel have generally emphasized the decline in the status of men and the new opportunities for women (cf. Westheimer & Kaplan 1992: 79-102), the move of men into pottery and their emergence as artists is a clear exception to this pattern.

19. Since 1991 these Falasha converts to Christianity have increasingly identified with Judaism and many have demanded to be allowed to come to Israel as Jews. The attempt of converted women in Wallaqa to take advantage of their connections to the Beta Israel and Judaism can be viewed as a precursor of this larger phenomenon. Cf. Kaplan 1993.
Indeed, it is intriguing to note that while the stories of origin, political causes and ethnic designations adopted by Ethiopian Jews in Israel stress their claims to a Jewish identity (Kaplan 1988, 1994; Kaplan & Rosen 1994), pan-Jewish elements have all but disappeared from their visual arts. Thus, what was in Ethiopia one of the most identifiable artifacts of Ethiopian Jewish identity has become almost obsolete in Israel.

Although somewhat puzzling at first glance, this situation is neither mysterious nor unique. As we have recently demonstrated (Kaplan & Rosen 1993), the cultural changes undergone by Ethiopian Jews in Israel have been neither uniform nor unidirectional. Ethiopian immigrants to Israel have transformed, discarded and added elements to their cultural repertoire in an attempt to define an identity appropriate to their new circumstances.

In the case of the figurines and other visual arts, it is their new ethnic identity as Ethiopian (and in some cases more generally African) Jews that is expressed. It is this new ethnicity that is being presented and expressed in the images created by the first generation of Israeli-based Ethiopian sculptors.

As was noted above, previous discussions of Falasha figurines have tended to revolve around the issues of antiquity and authenticity. Those scholars who have been aware of the statuettes comparatively recent origin have tended to ignore both the policies that influenced their emergence and the meanings that they expressed. In this short article, we have attempted to offer something of a corrective. By briefly discussing the interaction between the Beta Israel and external groups in both Ethiopia and Israel, we have sought to illuminate the social, economic and institutional factors behind this art form. We have, moreover, sought to demonstrate that even this seemingly insignificant artistic genre richly reflects the dramatic changes undergone by Ethiopian Jews during the past three decades.

Harry S. Truman Research Institute,
Hebrew University & Ministry of Immigrant Absorption, Jerusalem.

20. Needless to say, artists are not attempting to portray a heavily realistic image of Ethiopia. Ethiopia has become, in the words of Tsili Doleve-Gandelman (1990: 255) a 'lost imaginary space'.

21. At a presentation of this paper, given in 1994 at a symposium on Ethiopian immigrants and the arts at the School of Education, Hebrew University, several Ethiopian artists mentioned their desire to document aspects of Ethiopian life for future generations.
ABBINK, J.


ADAMS, M.

ANTEBY, L.

BEN-AMOS, P.

DOLEVE-GANDELMAN, T.

GAMST, F. C.

GAMST, F. C. & BALDIA, M. C.

HASTINGS, A.

KAHANE, Y.
1977 *Achim Schechorim: Chaim Be-gevrev Ha-Falashim* ['Black Brothers: Life among the Falasha'] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved).

KAPLAN, S.


**KAPLAN, S. & Rosen, C.**


**KREMPEL, V.**


Abstract

This paper examines the statuettes produced both in Ethiopia and in Israel by the Beta Israel (Falasha). Previous studies of these statuettes have focussed around the issues of antiquity and authenticity. Those who have erroneously accepted the antiquity of the statuettes have ignored the issue of relations between the Falasha and external forces, and seen these works as a valuable clue concerning their past. Those who have recognized that such statuettes are a form of ‘tourist art’ and date back no later than the 1960s have tended to dismiss them as inauthentic. This article argues that these statuettes provide valuable insights concerning changing forms of ‘Ethiopian Jewish’ identity and relations with outsiders. In particular, emphasis is placed on the evolution of the statuettes from Jewish ethnic art in Ethiopia to Ethiopian ethnic art in Israel.

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Key Words/Mots-clés : Ethiopia/Éthiopie, Israel/Israël, Falasha/Falasha, ethnicity/ethnicité, tourist art/art touristique, emigration/émigration.