

# TEACHING AND INTERPRETING THE OLD TESTAMENT IN AFRICA

## Written word, archaeology and oral world

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### Abstract

*In Africa we are confronted daily with a society that has lost its moral fibre, resulting in seemingly endless problems in the educational sector. Universities have the special task of promoting the humanities and applying social values and the social relevance in their teaching, which should lead to effective learning and an improvement in the quality of learning. Neither the written text (Hebrew Bible) nor the archaeological discoveries have provided us with sufficient information on certain Israelite practices and customs. Africa has traditions that need to be respected. A study of oral traditions may provide a supplementary, or perhaps alternate, view. A comparative study between Lemba and proto-Israelite customs and beliefs indicates that there is yet another group whose customs and rituals correspond to a great extent with those of the proto-Israelites. It is comparison in aid of cross-cultural interpretation, as is now forcefully stated in more recent studies in religion.*

### A INTRODUCTION

A report<sup>1</sup> currently in production on a consensus study conducted by the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf), declares the Humanities to be in a state of crisis, which is reflected in the alarming decline in student numbers, falling graduation rates and decreasing government funding. Post-apartheid government's focus on developing skills in science, technology, engineering and mathematics has benefited these disciplines to the detriment and neglect of the Humanities<sup>2</sup>.

Raidt maintains that universities should not fall prey to the temptation of becoming market-driven "knowledge factories" for a global "knowledge-driven economy". They have a special task to promote the humanities in their curricula and apply social values in their teaching in the ongoing formation of their staff and in their governing structures. "In a post-colonial Africa the in-

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<sup>1</sup> Entitled "Consensus study on the future of the humanities in SA: Status, prospects and strategies".  
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<sup>2</sup> "In many parts of the world concern has been expressed about the diminishing role that the Humanities are playing in the knowledge chain and these worries have pointed specifically to the weakening place of the Humanities within the academy, and more generally, a deepening disregard of the Humanities in society. The single most important threat to the growth of an intellectually vibrant scholarship in the Humanities is the problem of an ageing academic and research cohort, a factor that must be read alongside the evidence of a decline in doctoral graduates in the Humanities.

[\[cid:image002.jpg@01CC52BD.9D73A480\]](#)MEDIA RELEASE. This report calls "on the Government to commit to a White Paper on the Humanities that establishes in the public mind, and in Government policy, a renewed emphasis on the Humanities, and its full integration into national science policy. Funding needs to be restructured for advanced degrees (doctorates in particular) through national funding agencies, such as the National Research Foundation, that enables full-time study for top candidates in the Humanities who make the choice of academic careers".

depth-study and promotion of the dignity of the human person therefore should take centre stage”<sup>3</sup>.

The question of *research* needs to receive special attention because by their very calling universities should be centres of research that produce “new knowledge” based on their intellectual tradition. Ideally, this research should be *socially relevant*, that is, it should deal with issues of leadership, intercultural contexts and conflicts, values-based education at all levels, and especially inculturation. Cultural sensitivities, such as ethnicities, languages, religions, social classes, nationalities and daily problems, should motivate educators to reshape and align the curriculum to the learners’ backgrounds. This implies that contextualisation and experiential learning takes place<sup>4</sup>. Central to this teaching is that it allows learners to ‘choose’ academic excellence without losing a sense of personal and cultural identity<sup>5</sup>. The aim is eventually to empower students to examine critically the society in which they live and to work for social change<sup>6</sup>. This would assist learners to understand their role in the community, the nation and the world. The purpose of this learner-centred learning paradigm in Old Testament Studies is that it would lead to effective learning and would improve the quality of learning and teaching.

Africa has customs and traditions that need to be respected. In particular, some of these are closely linked to customs and traditions in the Old Testament, which should not be ignored in the teaching of Old Testament Studies. On the contrary, these need to be pointed out all the more clearly, and to be taken into consideration. Many comparative studies have already been carried out between the Old Testament and Africa, but in the quest for a better understanding of the Old Testament in Africa, the research on the Lemba in Southern Africa indicates that there is *yet another group* whose customs and rituals correspond to a great extent with those of the proto-Israelites.

Living as we do in a multicultural society, we need every possible means to learn about and understand the rich rituals of those about us. In discovering parallels between the cultural worlds of the Bible and those of contemporary cultures, the ideal is to see one’s own culture and that of others in a new light and to become *aware of the need for cultural tolerance and sensitivity*. These

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<sup>3</sup> Edith H. Raidt, Unpublished Graduation Address at St John Vianney Seminary, 27 October 2010, Pretoria, 6, based on a published article: Edith. H. Raidt, “Catholic universities in Africa”, *Sciat ut Serviat*. The Festschrift of the International Federation of Catholic Universities (2010): 147-177. Professor Raidt is President Emeritus of St Augustine College of South Africa.

<sup>4</sup> Rachel Powell, “Then the beauty emerges: a longitudinal case study of culturally relevant teaching.” *TTE* 13/5 (1997): 474.

<sup>5</sup> Gloria J. Ladson-Billings, “Like lightning in a bottle: Attempting to capture the pedagogical excellence of successful teachers of Black students”. *QSE* 3 (1990): 337.

<sup>6</sup> Gloria J. Ladson-Billings, “Readings between the lines and beyond the pages: A culturally relevant approach to literacy teaching”. *Theory-in-practice* 31 (1992): 314.

African groups with their values ‘rooted in the Old Testament’, have the capacity and commitment to be motivated future leaders who might participate in building a better society in South Africa and the rest of Africa. The aim is to create an awareness of the relevance that African traditional cultures may have for the understanding (and teaching) of certain institutions and practices in the Bible.

There is yet another reason why the Old Testament plays an important role in Africa. Early missionaries first came to Africa with the message, and later with the translation of, the New Testament. Translations into numerous African languages of the bulkier and much older Old Testament followed, which was then perceived as the more important of the two Testaments. The Old Testament’s relevance to their own life experience was found by grass-roots readers in the passages of the Old Testament. “The twentieth century made the Old Testament an African book”<sup>7</sup>. An increasing tendency to relate the texts of the Old Testament more systematically to the African religio-cultural and socio-cultural experience developed rapidly. The idea of the Africanisation of Old Testament Studies forms part of the more general search for the Africanisation of the humanities as a whole and is part of a process of rooting biblical studies in African soil<sup>8</sup>.

Since it is no longer possible to put questions relating to the ancient practices and institutions to the people of the Old Testament, there are many uncertainties about certain practices and the teaching employed and passed on during certain religious rituals. Certain cultural groups in Africa with similar practices and institutions (with an oral culture) could serve as additional sources – “living sources” – to help clarify certain aspects. This paper discusses just some of the ostensible remnants of an ancient type of religion which makes the Lemba particularly valuable to the historian of religion or comparative religion<sup>9</sup>.

## **B CROSS-CULTURAL INTERPRETATION**

My publications on the Lemba are based on a period of extensive field research, which I have undertaken since 1994, in various Lemba communities, mainly in Sekhukhuneland, the former

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<sup>7</sup> Knut Holter (ed), *Let my people stay! Researching the Old Testament in Africa. Report from a research project on Africanization [sic] of Old Testament Studies* (Nairobi: Acton, 2006), 2.

<sup>8</sup> Magdel Le Roux, & Schalk W. Van Heerden, “Postgraduate supervision as teamwork: ‘The Africanisation of Biblical Studies’ project – A case study.” *Scriptura* 101 (2009): 259-273; cf. other products of this joint project between the University of Stavanger and Unisa (2002-2006): Knut Holter (ed). *Interpreting classical texts in contemporary Africa* (Nairobi: Acton, 2007); Knut Holter (ed). *Let my people stay! Researching the Old Testament in Africa. Report from a research project on Africanization of Old Testament Studies* (Nairobi: Acton, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> Magdel Le Roux, “Lemba religion. Ancient Judaism or evolving Lemba tradition?” *Religion & Theology* 11/3 & 4 (2004): 313-330.

Venda and the southern part of Zimbabwe. The Lemba in Southern Africa are a very specific group with unique traditions regarding their Israelite extraction<sup>10</sup>. The supposed early departure of the group from Israel could imply that its religion could contain remnants of a very ancient type of religion, which would prove to be of great value when these are juxtaposed with those of early Israel. Furthermore, this investigation seeks to understand the relevance of the Old Testament in Africa and is therefore a selective and not an exhaustive comparison between the Lemba and early Israel<sup>11</sup>.

The purpose of my field study was, as far as possible, to gather all existing oral traditions with an Old Testament resonance from among these Lemba communities in order to observe their 'Jewish' (or rather, Israelite) customs, religious pluralism and interdependence. The standardised questionnaire of the anthropologist Van Warmelo was used with great success<sup>12</sup>.

The aim was also to investigate the *functioning of oral traditions* in a pre-industrial society in relation to 'facts' and 'history', something that is currently highly fashionable in New Archaeology, History of Religion and Old and New Testament Studies, and by doing so to find a contemporary counterpart to an understanding of the Old Testament and early Israel. This involves comparison in aid of cross-cultural interpretation for, as is now forcefully stated in more recent studies in religion, it is through comparison that the strange and exotic become intelligible and describable, whether the comparison entails juxtaposition of diverse phenomena or of theoretical models of those phenomena<sup>13</sup>. This is particularly exemplified in the circle of religion scholars surrounding Jonathan Z. Smith and Burton L. Mack<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> A detailed discussion of the controversial origins of the people and the name *Lemba* is beyond the scope of this paper. It was a complex process occurring over many centuries that cannot be explained by simplistic views, such as the view that they either derived directly from one of the tribes of pre-monarchic Israel, or that they simply made some sort of religious shift along the way. In an attempt to provide maximum understanding, one has to draw from divergent sources – the oral traditions of the Lemba themselves, as well as from all possible sources such as anthropological, archaeological, ethnological and genetic sources (see Magdel le Roux, *In search of the understanding of the Old Testament*, Unpublished DLitt et Phil, 1999).

<sup>11</sup> The purpose is not to determine the historicity of certain narratives or customs, but rather to determine what pre-monarchic Israel's experience of certain customs and rituals was, as well as the role it played in their (Israelite) communities.

<sup>12</sup> Although not all the questions were used in every interview, this, nevertheless, offered effective guidelines, according to which additional information was gathered. I was guided by three themes in my inquiry: the oral traditions of the Lemba people; their customs, festivals and ceremonies; and their concept of God and Christianity.

<sup>13</sup> Gerhard Van den Heever, private communication, 2004.

<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining religion. From Jonestown to Babylon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); Burton L. Mack, *The Christian myth. Origins, logic, legacy*, (London: Continuum, 2001). Compare for example how this is elevated to the status of theoretical underpinning of the study of religious phenomena in the work of Smith, the eminent Chicago scholar of religion (Smith, *Imagining religion*, 102-120) and in general the circle of religion scholars surrounding Smith and Mark – mostly members of the North American Association for the Study of Religion; Van den Heever, private communication, 2004.

It is with a view to interpreting the strange and exotic, especially when we deal with traditions from different cultures and different epochs of the past, that Smith and Mack have developed a fourfold strategy of description (as thick as possible), comparison (with as widely divergent and different phenomena as possible), redescription (revisiting our initial description in the light of our comparative work and the theoretical models that were applied) and rectification of categories (i.e. a reconceptualisation of the phenomenon but now not in terms derived from the insider language)<sup>15</sup>. To pursue this kind of strategy is a necessary procedure for the scholar of religion since scholarship should not serve as advocacy of the insider viewpoint and so remain captive to the ideology and rhetoric of the sources, but rather serve interpretation, which essentially entails translating or traducing traditions into “languages” foreign to the insiders and with which they might not necessarily agree<sup>16</sup>.

Lincoln contends that “when one permits those whom one studies to define the terms in which they will be understood, suspends one’s interest in the temporal and contingent, or fails to distinguish between ‘truths’, ‘truth-claims’, and ‘regime of truth’” one has ceased to function as a historian or scholar. “In that moment, a variety of roles are available: some perfectly respectable (amanuensis, collector, friend, and advocate), and some less appealing (cheerleader, voyeur or retailer of import goods). None, however, should be confused with scholarship”<sup>17</sup>. The value of this kind of procedure – to show if not to prove the ‘biblicalness’ of African culture – lies precisely in its undermining of the conventional pictures of biblical history and biblical religion.

“... [i]t is ironic that interpreters of Israelite religion, suspicious of the comparative method, so enthusiastically took up the study of other ancient Near Eastern traditions. As subsequent reflection has shown, comparisons between religions in the same geographical area are fraught with the same kinds of theoretical problems as comparisons between religions in different geographical areas.”<sup>18</sup> Once comparative models are introduced, we start to discover the complexity and rhetoricity of the myth-making processes<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> Smith, *Imagining religion*; Mack, *The Christian faith*.

<sup>16</sup> Van den Heever, private communication.

<sup>17</sup> Bruce Lincoln, *Discourse and the construction of society: comparing studies of myth, ritual and classification* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 225-227; Cf. Bruce Lincoln, ‘Theses on Method,’ *MTSR* 8/3 (1996): 225-227.

<sup>18</sup> Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, *The savage in Judaism. An anthropology of Israelite religion and ancient Judaism*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 16 and Susan Niditch, *Folklore and the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Smith, *Imagining religion*, 66-89.

Apart from the work of the circle of scholars I referred to above in the field of Old Testament Studies or studies of religion of ancient Israel, one can also point to the groundbreaking work of Rainer Albertz, Norman Gottwald, Howard Eilberg-Schwartz and Susan Niditch<sup>20</sup>.

I compare the Lemba with pre-monarchic Israel (circa 1250–1000 BC) since: (i) their communities function according to a segmented tribal system without a common leader; (ii) this period is interesting for the study of oral cultures; and (iii) they regard themselves as ‘children of Abraham’. I take Lemba oral traditions seriously and engage in a comparative study between Lemba and proto-Israelite customs and beliefs, without verifying or falsifying Lemba<sup>21</sup> claims to Israelite origin<sup>22</sup>.

For the initial fieldwork the theoretical framework developed by Ninian Smart, a scholar in the field of comparative religion, was employed<sup>23</sup>. He proposes that the religion of pre-industrial communities needs to be studied under the rubric of worldview and this category would then mean an individual’s or a group’s orientation to life<sup>24</sup>. Smart stresses that worldviews are neither monolithic nor static, and provides various heuristic categories or dimensions that he has found to be useful in exploring the religious aspects of ancient Israel. The experiential dimension<sup>25</sup> involves direct experiences of the presence of God; the mythical dimension<sup>26</sup> refers to the rich narrative traditions that symbolise the invisible world; the ritual dimension<sup>27</sup> expresses, in a dramatic form, some of the symbols found in a group’s myth; and the legal or ethical dimension comprises a group’s moral guidelines<sup>28</sup>. The experiences or emotions of men and women feed or carry the other dimensions of religion: for example, ritual without compassion or feeling is lifeless, myths which do not move hearers are feeble and the application of laws without keeping in touch with

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<sup>20</sup> Rainer Albertz, *A history of Israelite religion in the Old Testament period*. Vol. I, (Kentucky: John Knox, 1994); Norman K. Gottwald, *The tribes of Yahweh: A sociology of the religion of liberated Israel 1250-1050 B.C.E.* (London: SCM, 1980); Norman K. Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible – a socio-literary introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985); Eilberg-Schwartz, *The savage in Judaism. An anthropology of Israelite religion and ancient Judaism*; Niditch, *Folklore and the Hebrew Bible*; Susan Niditch, *Oral world and written word. Ancient Israelite literature*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996); Van den Heever, private communication.

<sup>21</sup> It is clear that various religions exerted an influence on the proto-Israelites and that others exert an influence on the thought and religion of the Lemba, which will not be addressed in this article.

<sup>22</sup> Le Roux, *In search of the understanding*, 1-10.

<sup>23</sup> Ninian Smart, *The religious experience of mankind* (Collins: Glasgow, 1983); Ninian Smart, *The world’s religions: Old traditions and modern transformations* (Cambridge: University Press, 1989); Ninian Smart, *Worldviews. Crosscultural explorations of human beliefs*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1995); more recently I have drawn heavily on the fourfold strategy suggested by the circle of religion scholars discussed above. Cf. David Chidester, *Savage systems. Colonialism and comparative religion in Southern Africa*, (London: University Press of Virginia, 1996).

<sup>24</sup> Smart, *The religious experience of mankind*, 22-27.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Smith, *Imagining religion*, 36-52.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Smith, *Imagining religion*, 66-89.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Smith, *Imagining religion*, 53-65.

<sup>28</sup> Smart, *Worldviews*, 7-9; Smith, *Imagining religion*, 102-120.

people's emotions are irrelevant.<sup>29</sup> These categories often overlap and may be broken down into many other facets; nevertheless, they are helpful and provide a way of obtaining a perspective on traditions.

The Lemba and their particular traditions of origin and identity, as well as their particular characteristics and practices, have opened up numerous possibilities for further interdisciplinary teaching and research and for the interpretation of the Old Testament.

### **C WRITTEN WORD, ARCHAEOLOGY AND ORAL WORLD**

Dever states that what we have known until recently about Old Testament customs and traditions comes exclusively from the Hebrew Bible, which contains only roughly contemporary literary data. Unfortunately, the textual evidence has many limitations: it has often been recorded much later than the events it purports to describe; in part due to this lateness, it presents an idealised or artificial scheme of religion written by and for the intelligentsia, who preserved, transmitted and finally edited it into its present form. Such a document may, for example, reveal very little about the actual religion of the masses and tell us very little about conditions during the pre-monarchic period<sup>30</sup> (or Iron Age I).

Biblical “[a]rchaeology’s greatest contribution to the study of proto-Israelite’s religion lies in its potential for looking at the other side of the coin, at popular religion and the views of the counter-culture”<sup>31</sup>. Archaeology confirms that not everything that happened or how it happened was written down. The task of archaeology is often to prove a point and not always, as it probably should, to explore material remains in order to determine the circumstances of ancient cultures and civilisations in a country where they have been so varied and so many. Archaeology seeks to illuminate ancient Israelite religious practice in its material and sociological setting<sup>32</sup>.

Owing to archaeological discoveries in this century we have begun to resurrect the long-lost world of Canaanite history and culture – especially the spectacular find of the library of fourteenth- to thirteenth-century BC cuneiform mythological texts from Ugarit. In addition, the

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<sup>29</sup> Smart, *The religious experience of mankind*, 21-25.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. William, G. Dever, “Archaeology reconstructs the lost background of the Israelite cult”, Pages 119-186 in *Recent Archaeological discoveries and Biblical research* 4, (1990): 119-186; cf. Thomas L. Thompson, *Early history of the Israelite people from the written and archaeological sources*. Studies in the history and culture of the ancient Near East (Leiden: Brill, 1992); Thomas L. Thompson, *The mythic past: biblical archaeology and the myth of Israel* (New York: Basic, 1999), 155, 158-161 and Susan Ackermann, *Under every green tree: popular religion in sixth-century Judah*. Harvard Semitic Monographs 46 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1992)

<sup>31</sup> Dever, “Archaeology reconstructs the lost background of the Israelite cult”, 124; cf. Thompson, *Early history of the Israelite people from the written and archaeological sources*.

<sup>32</sup> Dever, “Archaeology reconstructs the lost background of the Israelite cult,” 127; Cf. Z. Zevit. *The religions of ancient Israel: a synthesis of parallaxic approaches* (London: Continuum, 2001).

systematic excavations of many Late Bronze Age sites in Israel, Jordan and Syria have contributed immensely to the understanding of the material culture of Canaan in the two or three centuries just preceding the emergence of the entity we call 'Israel'<sup>33</sup>.

However, neither the written text nor the archaeological discoveries have provided us with sufficient information on certain Israelite practices and customs such as the functioning of oral traditions, the role of the Ark of the Covenant; circumcision; the Sabbath and the New Moon ceremonies; dietary laws, the use of the *shofar*, the role of the ancestors and many more.

A study of the functioning of oral traditions may provide a supplementary or perhaps an alternate view. The view still exists in certain circles that 'history' requires the existence of written documents. Historians are inclined to attach considerable importance to written sources, while they tend to disregard the stories that are orally transmitted<sup>34</sup>. It is clear that written sources are not the only shapers of people's notions about the past. In some African communities oral traditions provide more information than any written sources.

Vansina<sup>35</sup> defines *oral traditions* as "verbal messages which are reported statements from the past beyond the present generation", these could be "oral statements spoken, sung, or called out on musical instruments"<sup>36</sup>. Substantial criticism has been raised concerning the problems of chronology and limited time depth, variations in different versions of the same events, and the problem of feedback between oral and written sources<sup>37</sup>. However, no one who has worked extensively with oral materials will deny their value as historical sources<sup>38</sup>.

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<sup>33</sup> Dever, "Archaeology reconstructs the lost background of the Israelite cult," 127; D. Pardee. *Ritual and cult at Ugarit* (Leiden: Brill, 2002).

<sup>34</sup> Dierk Lange, *Ancient Kingdoms of West Africa. Africa-centered and Canaanite – Israelite perspectives. A collection of published and unpublished studies in English and French* (Dettelbach: Röhl Lange, 2004), 155.

<sup>35</sup> Jan Vansina, *Oral traditions as history* (London: James Currey, 1985), 27.

<sup>36</sup> Oral traditions can also be seen as the handing down of folklore (beliefs, customs, rituals, stories and sayings of a community) from one generation to another by word of mouth (Ferdinand E. Deist, *A concise dictionary of theological terms with an English-Afrikaans and an Afrikaans-English list* (Pretoria: Sigma, 1984), 63, 119.

<sup>37</sup> James Quirin, "Oral traditions as historical sources in Ethiopia: The case of the Beta Israel (Falasha)." *History in Africa. A Journal of Method* 20 (1993): 297: "It is axiomatic that historians should use all available sources. African historiography has been on the cutting edge of methodological innovation for the last [few] decades, utilizing written sources, oral traditions, archaeology, linguistics ... and other techniques to bring respect and maturity to the field. But to use such a diverse methodology has brought controversy as well, particularly regarding oral tradition" (my insertion).

<sup>38</sup> David Henige, *The chronology of oral tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974), 191; Cf. "Oral history represents the feelings and values of the people accurately: what events are worth remembering and retelling?" Oral history gives us some very distinctive kinds of expression, some personal and some culture-based. In oral tradition the people themselves have passed on a very perceptive set of observations about important events and the relationship of those occurrences to their group, Barre Toelken, *The Dynamics of folklore* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1996), 400-402.

I will here seek to redress the imbalance by giving precedence to the contribution of oral traditions – conceived as a newer and independent, yet interrelated, discipline with unique explanatory potential – and by adopting a phenomenological or ‘functionalist’ (comparative) approach to the study of religion and practices, relying more on anthropological and sociological models than on theological method, and more on oral traditions (and material remains of the cult where available) than on ideology<sup>39</sup>.

## **D TEACHING AND INTERPRETING THE OLD TESTAMENT IN AFRICA**

One should seriously consider that the oral phase encapsulated in many sections of the Old Testament is much more important for the understanding of the character and essence of certain sections of the Old Testament than the later written phase. Oral traditions that were handed down were fluid and not supposed to be in ‘fixed’ form. Literacy in the earlier Lemba (and other African) communities and those of early Israel also has to be understood in the context of an orality-of-tradition culture<sup>40</sup>.

The tendency to view Lemba religion in a static and ahistorical fashion is not limited to scholars who advocate a link to a particular ancient religion. The relationship between the Lemba and proto-Israelites, especially in the field of religion and culture, can be attested by many deep-rooted Israelite or quasi-Israelite practices detected from the earliest times to the present day in the Lemba churches and in the fabric of Lemba society. Yet, most of their rituals and practices are embedded in an African traditional religion (the so-called counter-culture) and today draw heavily on Christian<sup>41</sup> Lemba sources and only recently in a limited way on modern Judaism. Only oral and ceremonial traditions preserve possible links with Judaism ‘proper’<sup>42</sup>.

It needs to be clarified that ‘[a]ncient Judaism’ generally refers to those religious cultures that developed in the centuries following the return of the Israelites (now Jews) from the Babylonian exile. “The forms of Israelite religion that emerged were fundamentally different from their

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<sup>39</sup> Dever, “Archaeology reconstructs the lost background of the Israelite cult,” 119-186; Cf. B. W. Anderson, *Rediscovering the Bible* (New York: Association, 1951), 23-87. G. Ernest Wright, *God who acts: Biblical theology as recital* (London: SCM, 1952).

<sup>40</sup> Magdel Le Roux, *The Lemba. A lost tribe of Israel in Southern Africa?* (Pretoria: Unisa, 2003), 233; Smart (*Worldviews*) explains the experiential dimension as “the direct experiences of the numinous [through] visions, messages from God or more subtle indications of a divine presence” (my insertion). These experiences or emotions of men and women feed or carry the other dimensions of religion: for example ritual without compassion or feelings is lifeless, myths that do not move the hearers are feeble and the application of laws without keeping in touch with people’s emotions is irrelevant.

<sup>41</sup> The question if certain Lemba traditions should not be challenged in the light of their professed Christianity is valid, but will not be addressed in this article.

<sup>42</sup> I have investigated the historical and existential relationship of Lemba “Judaism” with “authentic” Judaism. There are many important questions to be asked, but these will not be addressed here.

predecessors and had important commonalities with the forms of Judaism that emerged only later”<sup>43</sup>. This “distinction draws attention to the important fact that Judaism cannot be equated with the religion of the Old Testament”<sup>44</sup>.

## **1 The legal and ethical dimension**

The overarching emphasis of most of the social laws among the Lemba (and other African cultures) and early Israel falls on the protection of family ties, the protection of the individual, property, cleanliness (ritual and otherwise) and honesty, and on the protection of their exclusivity: to my mind, important *values which should be promoted*. Clearly, people do not always meet the standards they profess, and often the standards which are inculcated by the dominant faith within a particular society may not be embraced by all members of that society. One should distinguish between the moral teaching incorporated in the doctrines and mythology of a religion, and the actual sociological effects on, and circumstances of, those who adhere to the faith in question<sup>45</sup>.

In Africa, the Lemba have their own particular ‘Israelite’ oral laws, embedded in the counter-cultures. It appears, however, that some of the Lemba’s legal and ethical codes closely resemble those in Exodus, Deuteronomy and, in particular, Leviticus, with many traces of influence from the life-world of the Old Testament. Written laws and codes represented the ideal as it was presented to the people, but this does not imply full-scale adherence to the law. The Lemba obviously also possess codes that do not concur with those in early Israel.

The purpose is to refer cursorily to some of the laws and codes used by Lemba communities, as well as to those that occurred in early Israel. No completeness is intended.

### **1a Dietary laws and taboos**

Some of the traditionalists stress that they do not mix meat and milk in their food, but in the field I did not find many people who still maintained the custom of keeping milk and meat separate. It appears from the Old Testament that the communities in early Israel probably did not know of the prohibition of mixing meat and milk, that they understood this as a symbol for something else, or that they did not consider it important. Besides its expression in Deuteronomy 14:21 and Exodus 23:19, no other law is indicated in the Old Testament against mixing meat with milk. Obviously, archaeology does not reveal much about these customs and practices. The literal interpretation of the metaphor or euphemism for another matter reminds one of the verse in Deuteronomy 14:21:

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<sup>43</sup> Eilberg-Schwartz, *The savage in Judaism*, 4 and note 3.

<sup>44</sup> Eilberg-Schwartz, *The savage in Judaism*, 4 and note 3.

<sup>45</sup> Le Roux, In search of the understanding.

“You may not boil the kid in the milk of his mother”<sup>46</sup>. For some African communities, for example the Ndembu and the Venda, who maintain that the “mother is like a pot” (or “a milk tree”<sup>47</sup>) this expression would indicate the prohibition of sexual relations between a mother and her son, as indicated by the separation of milk and meat.

Milk is often the natural symbol for the relationship between a mother and her child<sup>48</sup>. The Hebrew term for kid is כִּזְיָא (male singular noun<sup>49</sup>) and an examination of the role of the kid-goat in Israelite narratives suggests that it sometimes serves as a symbolic substitute for a male child (Cf. 1 Sm 16:20; Jdg 13:15). A literal performance of what was possibly only meant to be a metaphor probably remained (this time in modern Judaism) in the commandment regarding the mixing of milk with meat.

It is clear that most Lemba rank their specific cultural laws or principles above any of those of the churches to which they belong. Other teachings are mainly added to their existing cultural teaching or values. Most of their rituals and laws are in some way or another related to their spiritual or physical cleanliness. In most pre-technical societies, religion is not just a personal matter; it is inherent in daily life.

In the *teaching situation*, new tutorial matter with codes or commandments in the Old Testament, for example the Pentateuch, will link up with some of our African learners’ own legalistic orientation within a tribal system or within a clan. Not everything in a specific culture is necessarily good or bad; hence such information in the teaching activity could have a transformational function in that it attempts to create the willingness to build upon useful elements and abandon undesirable elements of a culture or system.

## **2 Rites among the Lemba and early Israel**

The dimension of ritual is central to religion, and vital for the understanding of worldviews. The experiential is channelled and expressed not only by myth, but also through ritual.

### **2a The New Moon ceremony**

The traditional Lemba regard the day of the observance of the new moon as a day of rest or cessation, as modern Jews would consider the Sabbath. Most of the elements of the celebration of

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<sup>46</sup> *NJB*; Cf. *NKJ* “You shall not boil a young goat in its mother’s milk”.

<sup>47</sup> Victor Turner, *The forest of symbols. Aspects of Ndembu ritual* (London: Cornell University Press, 1967), 250; cf. Claude Levi-Strauss, *The savage mind*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 471-493.

<sup>48</sup> Jean Soler, “The dietary prohibitions of the Hebrews”. *New York Review of Books* 26/10 (1979): 29.

<sup>49</sup> Francis Brown, Samuel R. Driver, & Charles, A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English lexicon of the Old Testament with an appendix containing the biblical Aramaic*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), 152.

the new moon of early Israel (but not modern Judaism) are still present in the religion of the Lemba.

The first mention of *Rosh Hodesh* (or the New Moon ceremony) in the Old Testament is made in Numbers 10:10. Numbers 28:11-15 specifies the offerings to be included in the sacrifice of each *Rosh Hodesh*<sup>50</sup>. In this way the new month is dedicated to the Lord. The new moon of the seventh month (in mid-September of the Hebrew calendar) possessed special significance. Much later the Jewish community celebrate this day as New Year's Day. Numbers 29:1-6 and Leviticus 23:24-25 mention specifically the loud blowing of trumpets and the fact that no servile work was to be done; it was a day of rest. The usual sacrifices are mentioned except that one bull instead of two should be offered.

In 1 Samuel 20:18-42, during which King Saul observes a two-day *Rosh Hodesh* feast, we find a few more remnants of this ancient ritual.

Many things are not mentioned in the text or have perhaps been edited out by later redactors. The classic fallacy in arguments from silence is that absence of evidence does not prove absence of the phenomenon. It is not, for example, clear how the actual sighting of the new moon took place in early Israel nor, how it was related to the Sabbath. Before anything was written down by the Israelites, mainly during the Babylonian exile, there were already oral traditions that were transmitted from generation to generation. We therefore have to investigate other available sources to illuminate what cannot be derived from the text.

The invasions by Assyria and Babylonia as well as the Israelites' exiles to these countries, suggest major influences on the latter's religious rituals, festivals and calendars. As Eilberg-Schwartz<sup>51</sup> puts it, there are fundamental religious changes between the early "Israelite religion and ancient Judaism as a result of the Babylonian exile". The observance of the *full moon* is called 'sabbath', derived from *shabbatu*, the Accadian word for 'full moon'.

'New moon' (חֲדָשׁ) and Sabbath (שַׁבָּת) are similarly associated in 2 Kings 4:23; Amos 8:5; Hosea 2:11 and Isaiah 1:13<sup>52</sup>. The first day of each month was considered holy; hence the association in the Old Testament of the monthly 'new moon' with the weekly Sabbath (e.g. Is 1:13). The day of new moon was also regarded as dangerous. The Israelites could possibly have

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<sup>50</sup> Apart from the daily burnt offering there shall be an extra offering to the Lord consisting of two young bulls, one ram, and seven male yearling lambs – all without defect and accompanied by all the relevant spice and drink offerings, as described in Numbers 15:1-12; Le Roux, "African light on the New Moon ceremony," *Old Testament Essays* 18/2 (2005): 281-295.

<sup>51</sup> Eilberg-Schwartz, *The savage in Judaism*, 4.

<sup>52</sup> Mitchell, T.C., s v 'Moon'. *NBD* (1988): 793; Job 31:26 refers to the moon as an object of idolatrous worship; 2 Kings 4:23 suggest that both days were regarded as providing an opportunity for consulting the prophets. Psalm 81:4, 5 refers to the need to blow the horn on the new moon and the full moon. Ezekiel 46:1 mentions the new moon and Sabbath as a special day of worship.

associated their labour and toil in Egypt with this day and thus considered it a day of safety and rest to be celebrated in their Promised Land. The similarity to the Babylonian name does point to an early connection, though<sup>53</sup>.

The possibility that the Sabbath could have had the same content and significance as that acquired by the Sabbath later in history is improbable. Wolfe<sup>54</sup> and others are further convinced that the fourth commandment (Ex 20:8), namely to keep the Sabbath, is not correctly translated. They are of the opinion that it should read: “remember the day of cessation, to keep it holy”. According to them the notion of “cessation” was replaced by post-exilic redactors six centuries later, when their notion of “Sabbath” had developed. Wolfe proposes a free translation: “Remember the holy day to keep it sacred!” Thus it does not refer to ‘Sabbath’, as it was known later, but to a day of cessation equivalent to the New Moon celebration.

The matter of the day of cessation linked to the new moon and the specific description of how the actual sighting of the new moon takes place in Lemba culture are unique and make a major contribution to the understanding of this Old Testament custom<sup>55</sup>. Further elements present in Lemba culture that we do not find in the Old Testament (early Israel) are mainly the rituals concerning the announcement and confirmation of the observance, much of the detail of which has probably not been recorded, or edited out by later authors, but the latter are clearly described in the Babylonian and Canaanite documents (and other archaeological sources) and a continuation of this announcement and confirmation ritual is found during the Talmudic period and in contemporary Orthodoxy. The similarities and differences between this Lemba (and other groups in Africa’s) custom and that of early Israel and even Babylonia are therefore noteworthy – we find a

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<sup>53</sup> Michael Grant, *The history of ancient Israel* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1984). The matter of the day of cessation, which is linked to the new moon by the Lemba’s observation of the new moon and a similar custom among the Babylonians and the Canaanites, offers interesting possibilities of interpretation to the idea of the Sabbath in the Old Testament

<sup>54</sup> Rolland Wolfe, *The twelve religions of the Bible. Studies in the Bible and early Christianity*, Vol. 2 (New York: Edwin Mellen 1982), 87.

<sup>55</sup> Just before the time of the new moon, a bowl is placed under a tree or in the shade of a hut. Then a day before the moon is seen by anyone, sometimes two days before, the moon become visible, it reflects in the water in the bowl, usually around noon. The first observer runs to the chief to report; the chief send servants to confirm; when the chief blow the horn, the people leave everything behind, all old men and old women will shave their heads and everybody fasts for the rest of the day. The following day no work is done. It is kept as a day of cessation and everybody brings food to the chief. Mathivha explains that if a person’s head is not clean-shaven he or she becomes foolish. The Lemba women specifically shave their hair to become wiser. This ritual is accompanied by different chants and songs (Le Roux, *In search of the understanding of the Old Testament*, 175-176). During a visit to the eastern Hadramaut, in Yemen, Parfitt (*Journey to the vanished city*, 340) was surprised to find that the tribes of the *wadi* Sena have exactly the same new moon celebration as practised by the Lemba in Southern Africa. The kind of bowl which the Lemba use for the observance of the new moon is also found there. Nowhere else during his many travels, investigating Judaising movements all over the world could he find a similar practice.

combination of both in the Lemba custom<sup>56</sup>. Exactly the same kind of bowl used by the Lemba for the observance of the new moon is also found among the Jewish tribes of the wadi Sena in the eastern Hadramaut.

The changing rituals and understandings of *Rosh Hodesh* are examples of how Jewish cultural resources are reused, reshuffled and remade in response to changing natural and cultural conditions. This investigation develops an original theory which could yield a greater understanding of the Sabbath, early lunar calendars and the system of the sighting of the new moon which should be reflected in our teaching<sup>57</sup>.

## 2b Circumcision

One of the Semitic rites that the Lemba practise with great conviction is circumcision. Many ethnographic accounts of Lemba life agree that they brought circumcision to Africa and spread it to the other peoples<sup>58</sup>.

Nabarro maintains that the method associated with male circumcision used by the Lemba differs markedly from that of Islamic religion. The incision is small and possibly similar to the mode of circumcision during the pre-Talmudic period<sup>59</sup>.

It is also clear that not all the Lemba connect circumcision with the Covenant with God. The same could be said of the Israelites, namely that the making of the Covenant was not necessarily part of the conceptual world of all the tribes, and thus of their memories and experience.

I only want to mention one aspect of importance here which is a remark made by a traditional leader in Sekhukhuneland that, after a circumcision, the Lemba “cut the hair of the boys just a little bit around their heads”. This practice is similar to a metaphor for circumcision used in Jeremiah 9:26, namely: “who clip the hair of their temples<sup>60</sup>. Is this a coincidence, or would this custom have been a literal execution of the archaic metaphor that Jeremiah uses for circumcision? According to recent ethnographies, root metaphors often provide a foundation for rituals and narratives<sup>61</sup>. The archaic expression, interpreted literally, may perhaps suggest authenticity. In

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<sup>56</sup> This Lemba custom has become intertwined with other religious ideas, or they have become diffuse and were then assimilated into other rituals or customs than what was originally intended; Le Roux, “African light on the New Moon ceremony,” 281-295.

<sup>57</sup> Le Roux, “African light on the New Moon ceremony,” *Old Testament Essays* 18/2 (2005): 281-295.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. The Rev. Schlömann, “Die Malepa in Transvaal”, *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 26 (Berliner Gesellschaft für Anthropologie, 1894): 64; H.A. Junod, “The Balemba of the Zoutpansberg (Transvaal),” *Folk-lore* 19 (1908): 284; Jaques, “Notes on the Lemba tribe of the Northern Transvaal,” 247.

<sup>59</sup> In, Le Roux, *The Lemba*, 166-167.

<sup>60</sup> Le Roux, *The Lemba*, 166-167.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. Eilberg-Schwartz, *The savage in Judaism*, 25, 115-140.

other words, the symbolic meaning of the expression for circumcision may have become vague and was then ‘wrongly’ implemented literally.

Much more information concerning the ritual, the related teaching, its duration, when and where it took place and so on is known with regard to Lemba practice *vis-à-vis* that in the Old Testament. Of course a certain amount of information is also available from Orthodox Judaism, but these customs have changed since Old Testament days on account of inner-Jewish migration. Scanty archaeological information is available on this topic.

The various kinds of rituals, such as the New Moon ceremony, initiations sacrifices and the meaning behind them, may *teach scholars* much about Africa, especially where there may be voids concerning certain Old Testament themes. The idea is not necessarily to promote those rites or practices but to grasp that it is essential to understanding world-views. Every tradition has its rituals, practices and other behaviour patterns that fulfil a function in developing spiritual awareness or ethical insight<sup>62</sup>.

### 3 Myth among the Lemba and early Israel

The experiential is often conveyed by myths. Myths, stories and images symbolise the invisible world. Many scholars agree that the mythical does not necessarily imply that which is fictitious<sup>63</sup>. ‘Myth’ in relation to religious phenomena is quite neutral and has no bearing on the veracity or falsity of a story enshrined by reporting what is believed by a specific group or person. Most African and proto-Israelite myths and traditions are transmitted through songs, prayers, conversations, recitations, symbols, proverbs, sayings, written documents and numerous other mnemonic devices<sup>64</sup>.

The term *mythistory* acknowledges the close kinship between myth and history and the manner in which the two interact to comprise ‘shared truths’<sup>65</sup>. Myth and history underpin the Lemba worldview<sup>66</sup>. From the ancient Near East to modern times, groups have based their cohesion upon shared truths: truths that differed from time to time and place to place, exhibiting a rich variety<sup>67</sup>.

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<sup>62</sup> Smart, *The worlds religions*, 15, 16.

<sup>63</sup> Smart, *The world’s religions*, 15, 16; Georges, R.A. ed., *Studies on mythology* (Illinois: Dorsey, 1968), 27, 137; Ruth Finnegan, *Oral literature in Africa*. (Dar-Es-Salaam: Oxford University Press, 1976), 327; David Jobling, *The sense of biblical narrative: structure analyses in the Hebrew Bible II* (Sheffield: Academic, 1987), 17.

<sup>64</sup> Vansina, *Oral traditions as history*, 16, 46; cf. Finnegan, *Oral literature in Africa*, 206.

<sup>65</sup> Lincoln, *Discourse and the construction of society*, 23-26; McNeil, *Mythistory*, 24-31.

<sup>66</sup> “Shared truths that provide a sanction for common effort have obvious survival value”, without which no group can long preserve itself McNeil, *Mythistory*, 7.

<sup>67</sup> McNeil, *Mythistory*, 7.

### 3a The Ark of the Covenant and the *ngoma lungundu* ('the drum that thunders')

According to Biblical tradition, Israelite tribes similarly remembered numerous myths with historical and religious significance. Within these narratives the Ark of the Covenant with God played a major role. Possibly, oral traditions increasingly gained a more prominent place among the tribes of Israel. These could have been important in establishing their *identity* and the *uniqueness* of their God in the midst of the conglomeration of other nations which also laid claim to the same land. Their traditions can therefore be described as a sacred factor of coherence with a political undertone.

Parallels between orality in proto-Israelite and African religions can be drawn, and specifically between the story of the *ngoma lungundu* and that of the Ark of the Covenant. Lemba oral traditions contain significant information on the leading role their priestly family (the Bhuba<sup>68</sup>; *cohaniem*) performed on their journey from the North into the Arabian Peninsula and eventually into Africa. As traders from Yemen they came by boat to Africa and made their way southwards into Africa, with the *ngoma lungundu* playing a very similar role to that of the Ark of the Covenant. In function especially it was very similar to the Biblical Ark, the famous lost Ark which has been sought without success throughout the ages. Both stories, that of the Ark of the Covenant and that of the *ngoma lungundu*, may be classified by some scholars as myth<sup>69</sup>.

Although the Lemba themselves never make the connection between the *ngoma lungundu* and the Ark of the Covenant (as far as I could determine), many scholars observe such parallels<sup>70</sup>. In sub-Saharan Africa, at least in the interior, there are no written records and we are dependent upon oral tradition. On the east coast of Africa, Arabs and other observers left some accounts of what they saw and heard of this extraordinary group of people and the role the *ngoma* played.

The earliest direct reference to the presence of the Lemba and the *ngoma* on the east coast of Africa is made by the twelfth century Arab geographer, al-Idrisi [c 1150]<sup>71</sup>, who records that the Senzi (Zanji people, probably the Venda) – possessors of the *ngoma lungundu*<sup>72</sup> – these people of the magic drum, became closely associated with the Lemba in the same area<sup>73</sup>.

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<sup>68</sup> Magdel le Roux, "The Bhuba. An paternally inherited Jewish priesthood in Southern Africa?" *Ekklesiastikos Pharos* (2010): 286-304.

<sup>69</sup> By "myth" we normally understand stories in which the high figures of the great gods play the main role (Herman Gunkel, *The folklore in the Old Testament* (Sheffield Press, Almond, 1987), 26. These are stories "which accompanied rituals, which were basically poetic descriptions of the workings of nature, a different way of thinking about the world, different from that of modern man [sic];" John W. Rogerson, *The supernatural in the Old Testament* (Butterworth, Guildford, 1976), 9; Smart, *The world's religions*.

<sup>70</sup> Harold Von Sicard, *Ngoma lungundu. Eine africanische Bundeslage*, Studia Ethnographica Upsaliensia V, (Almqvist & Wiksells Boktrycker, Uppsala, 1952).

<sup>71</sup> As cited in J. E. Mullan, *The Arab builders of Zimbabwe* (Umtali, Rhodesia Mission, 1969), 73-76.

<sup>72</sup> Cf. H.A. Junod, *Life of a South African tribe* (London: Macmillan, 1927); Nicolaas J. Van Warmelo, "A preliminary survey of the Bantu tribes of South Africa," *Ethnological Publications* 5 (Pretoria:

Von Sicard<sup>74</sup>, who spent his whole missionary career working among the Lemba people in Zimbabwe, was possibly the first scholar to draw definite parallels between the Ark and the *ngoma lungundu* and between the *ngoma lungundu* and the sixth to the thirteenth century Ethiopian *Kebrā Nagast* (“Splendour of the Kings”; a highly valued literary work, reflecting on the history of their kings)<sup>75</sup>. He arrives at the conclusion that the Lemba people literally carried the concept of the Ark of the Covenant and concomitant related Semitic customs southwards into Africa. He describes their *ngoma* as “Eine Afrikanische Bundeslage” (i.e. an African Ark of the Covenant)<sup>76</sup>. He is convinced that the Lemba were strongly influenced by the numerous transmitted stories (and the *Kebrā Nagast*) concerning the possible presence of the Ark in Ethiopia and that, as an elite, priestly group, they carried those concepts southwards by means of their *ngoma lungundu*. To cut a long story short: If the story of the *ngoma lungundu* can be linked to the 13th century *Kebrā Nagast* narrative (as suggested by Von Sicard) it indicates that their tradition is at least 700 years old. If it is linked to the observance of al-Idrisi in 1150, the implication is that their tradition could be at least 900 years old. Parfitt takes this tradition even further back to the Arabian Peninsula<sup>77</sup>.

It is clear that straightforward ‘explaining away’ of the supernatural in both stories will not do justice to the complexities of these traditions. Only a sympathetic theological approach will appreciate its real point: it expresses the Israelite tribe’s conviction (and that of the Lemba) not merely of the presence of God (or Mwari), but of his active guidance and leadership through a difficult journey<sup>78</sup>.

The similarities between the myths of the two groups (Lemba and the proto-Israelites) are remarkable. The age or the historical accuracy of the stories is not of importance here, but both have historical and religious significance. What *is* important is what they believed and what formed part of their worldview.

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Government Printer, 1935), 122; N. J. Van Warmelo, ed., “The copper miners of Musina and the early history of the Zoutpansberg.” *Ethnological Publications* 8 (Pretoria: Government Printer, 1940); J. B. De Vaal, “Die Vhalemba, die Semitiese Bantoes,” *Suid-Afrika* (Feb, 1947): 46; Robert Gayre of Gayre, “The Lembas or Vendas of Vandaland,” *Mankind Quarterly* 8 (1967): 5; P. Davison, “Lobedu material culture,” *Annals of the South African Museum* 94/3 (1984): 119.

<sup>73</sup> Al-Idrisi further records that the inhabitants of al-Banyes worship a drum called Arrahim covered with skin on one side. He says it makes a terrible noise (when smitten) which can be heard about three miles away. As “l” and “r” are interchangeable in many African languages it is possible that what he actually heard was Errahim – a corruption of the word Elohim – the Hebrew word for God (in Tudor Parfitt, *The lost Ark of the Covenant: The remarkable quest for the legendary Ark* [HarperCollins, London, 2008], 227).

<sup>74</sup> Harold Von Sicard, *Karangafolkets äldsta Missionshistoria* (Stockholm: Svenska Kyrkans, 1943) and Von Sicard, *Ngoma lungundu*.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. Le Roux, “Lemba religion. Ancient Judaism or evolving Lemba tradition?” 313-330.

<sup>76</sup> In the 1950s he got hold of the drum and preserved it in the museum in Bulawayo. During the war of independence it was moved to the museum in Harare.

<sup>77</sup> Parfitt, *The lost Ark*.

<sup>78</sup> Rogerson, *The supernatural in the Old Testament*, 44.

Since many narratives and myths about the past play such an important role in the Old Testament, *learners could be encouraged to reflect* about the stories or the myths in their own cultures or religions and those of others as well as the functioning of oral traditions in their communities.

## E CONCLUSION

There are clearly elements of a kind of religion from antiquity that have been preserved among the Lemba (and other African) communities, which indicate close similarities with pre-Talmudic Israelite religion, not with contemporary Judaism! This illuminates the significance of these rituals to both groups; offers thought-provoking questions about ‘Judaism’ or ‘Judaising groups’; and possibly provides new answers<sup>79</sup>.

Obviously, it is no simple matter to compare the religion of the Lemba to that of early Israel, and it could be deemed an impossible exercise. However, once comparative models are introduced, we start to discover the complexity and rhetoricity of the myth-making processes and it is through comparison that the strange and exotic become intelligible and describable<sup>80</sup>. Cross-cultural interpretation expands the boundaries of this discipline which results in an enrichment of the subject as well as the teaching of the subject. It is apparent that we do have much more detail about certain rituals and customs among the Lemba which provide some understanding of similar customs or rituals in the Old Testament. Many of the details in the latter have probably not been recorded, or could have been ‘edited’ out by later authors.

Lemba myths and traditions provide more information than any written sources. All historical sources have limitations as well as strengths. With a careful collection and comparison of various versions of the oral traditions, and corroboration with archaeological and written sources, we may arrive at a high degree of probable history<sup>81</sup>.

The reciprocity between orality and inscripturation of traditions in the Lemba narratives yields valuable information regarding the possible development of traditions in the Old Testament. If some of their oral traditions are close to 1000 years old, this has serious implications for the late dating of the Old Testament<sup>82</sup>. According to Scheffler, it is perhaps owing to the “absence of vocalicity in western culture that ancient oral traditions mentioned in the Old Testament are denied

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<sup>79</sup> Cf. Eilberg-Schwartz, *The savage in Judaism*.

<sup>80</sup> Cf. Smith, *Imagining religion*, 66-89.

<sup>81</sup> Quirin, “Oral traditions as historical sources in Ethiopia,” (1993): 306; cf. Magdel Le Roux, “Ancient Near Eastern Influence in sub-Saharan Africa,” *Ekklesiastikos Pharos* 90, N.S. 19 (2008): 1-20.

<sup>82</sup> Magdel Le Roux, “Ngoma lungundu: An African Ark of the Covenant,” *Old Testament Essays* 22 (2009): 102-125.

or not reckoned with”<sup>83</sup>. Oral cultures and the transmission of oral traditions from one generation to another, over many generations, are nothing strange in Africa.

The implication of the fact that there are numerous points of convergence between most cultures in Africa and the Old Testament is that the reception of the Old and New Testament in Africa would differ from that on other continents or in other countries.

This investigation attempts to create *awareness* of certain parallels, thereby familiarising people with such phenomena. In this way it could assist different groups in Africa to appreciate their own cultures and those of others, gain some skills in dealing with intercultural contexts and conflicts and will hopefully become aware of the need for cultural tolerance and sensitivity<sup>84</sup>. The purpose of this learner-centred learning paradigm in Old Testament Studies is that it would lead to effective learning and would improve the quality of learning and teaching.

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<sup>83</sup> Cf. Davies 1992, 98; Carroll 1986, 65-82, in Eben H. Scheffler, “Debating the late-dating of the Old Testament”, *OTE* 11/3 (1998): 522-533. The consequences are, therefore, that there is no “pre-exilic ancient Israel because it is only a product of the imagination, it is worthless for historiography and not even containing a historical kernel”. Scheffler contends that the trend in dating the Old Testament late is “a typically modern, western phenomenon”. He draws the attention to the existence of folklore or oral traditions among Africans and “the basic vocality of culture”; Scheffler, “Debating the late-dating of the Old Testament”, 523-525.

<sup>84</sup> The Bible is regarded as a valuable source of information on the successful handling of humankind’s experience of religiosity.

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**Transcripts of interviews conducted during field study:**

- D:L Runesu Vhimisai, Nyajena (Masvingo), Zimbabwe, June 1997.
- D:N Takavada, Hwingwire, Gutu, Zimbabwe, July 1997.

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