

ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN INFLUENCE IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

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Abstract

Recent research shows that the cultural remnants of a more distant past were more faithfully preserved in sub-Saharan Africa than in the societies further north. Striking parallels between extant African cultures and written (as well as oral) testimonies concerning ancient Near Eastern societies can be detected. It becomes clear that in the period preceding the textual evidence of the Middle Ages, African societies were not isolated or self-contained, but that instead they took part on various levels in global exchange. Historians are inclined to attach considerable importance to written sources, while they tend to disregard the stories that are orally transmitted. Lange (and others) disregard the present trend of research (i.e. an African perspective of the African past) and adopt a comparative perspective which leads to the conclusion that the oral traditions which trace the origin of some African states or cultures to the ancient Near East are basically correct.

1. Introduction

My first publications dealt with religion and politics in ancient Israel. Field research among the Lemba in Southern Africa spurred my interest in oral traditions, archaeology and social and political institutions in Africa. In this paper, I turn my attention to the study of cultural remnants of the distant past which have been more faithfully preserved in sub-Saharan Africa than in the societies further north. In this regard I am relying on the recent work done by Lange (2004) and others.

This investigation disregards the present trend of research, i.e. an African perspective of the African past (cf. Temu & Swai 1981; Brizuela-Gracia 2006:85-100) and adopts a comparative perspective (cf. Le Roux 2003). It is with a view to interpreting the strange and exotic, especially when we deal with oral traditions from different cultures and different epochs of the past, that scholars in the field of comparative religion (cf. Smith 1982; Mack 2001) have developed the strategy of description (as thick as possible), comparison (with phenomena that are as widely divergent and different as possible), redescription (revisiting our initial description in the light of our comparative work and the theoretical models applied) and rectification of categories (a reconceptualisation of the phenomena but not in terms derived from the insider language). Once comparative models are introduced, we start to discover the complexity and rhetoricity of the mythmaking processes (Lincoln 1996:225-227). On the basis of new evidence gained through field research (cf. Lange 2004:1; Le Roux 2003; Parfitt & Semi 2002 and others) it can be shown how striking parallels between extant African cultures and written testimonies concerning ancient Near Eastern societies can be detected.

Africa north of the Sahara was part of the Mediterranean world and also in close contact with major developments in Nearer Asia (Fage 1978:34). It becomes clear that in the period preceding the textual evidence of the Middle Ages, African societies were not isolated or self-contained but instead took part on various levels in global exchange. They were in intense economic and cultural contact with the Semitic societies of the ancient Near East. Lange (2004:1) mentions in particular that ‘during the Canaanite-Phoenician period, many culture traits of ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern societies were adopted in African contexts, almost unchanged, but others were modified due to local factors, thus giving rise to new cultures with specific forms of their own’. His reconstruction of the Canaanite-Israelite culture areas of Africa south of the Sahara is based on oral and cultic traditions.

He argues that historians are inclined to attach considerable importance to written sources, while they tend to disregard the stories that are orally transmitted (Lange 2004:155). Oral cultures simply rely much less (mostly not at all) on reading and writing than do modern cultures.¹ To get a more accurate picture of sub-Saharan Africa’s distant past and its trading partners, an interdisciplinary study is necessary over a very broad spectrum based on a proper synthesis of all existing data (cf. Daffue 2004:1).

By restricting himself to the study of parallel phenomena in Hausa (and other sub-Saharan communities) and in Canaanite-Israelite societies, Lange

¹ Vansina (1985:27) 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’. 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 (Deist 1984:63, 119).

does not provide any historical explanation for the spread of Semitic influences to the societies further south of the Sahara. He does, however, refer to the Phoenician factor in the state building processes in sub-Saharan Africa (Lange 2003:3-6). My focus will mainly be on some ANE remnants in Hausaland, Yoruba, Kenia, Ethiopia and among the Lemba in sub-Saharan Africa, and I will also indicate ostensible evidence of maritime undertakings and activities between the ancient Near East and Africa south of the Sahara. Ancient trade with Africa has been greatly neglected, and where writers have referred to it, it mostly concerned the Horn of Africa and the northeast coast (cf. Daffue 2004:1). Due to the scarcity of information, both written and archaeological, one has to rely on classical authors, and when they are silent as they most often are, one has to build up plausible theories around what little information is available. Informed speculation often leads to remarkable findings.

2. Remnants of ancient near Eastern influence in African states and cultures south of the Sahara

2.1 Hausaland, Yoruba, Kenia and Ethiopia in sub-Saharan Africa

Hausaland lies in the Sudanese belt just south of the Sahara. Lange compares the 'cult-mythological system underpinning the Hausa states with that of various other states of the central Sudan and of the ancient Near East and proposes precise ways and periods for the spread of the Canaanite-Israelite cultural pattern to West and East Africa' (Lange 2004:3, 155-297). Methodologically, the attempt to relate mythical incidents to ritual performances comes close to the approach adopted by scholars of the well-known myth and ritual school in the field of ancient Near Eastern studies (Lange 2004:559). Looking at the question of origins 'without preconceptions', he (2004:171-213) finds 'that a rather coherent body of legend, myth, ritual and linguistic elements supports the idea that the earliest bearers of Hausa culture, insofar as they are presently identifiable, were Hebrews'. The core element of the Hausa story, the Bayajidda legend, is provided by the Israelite tradition of Canaan, or more precisely by the biblical tale of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar (Lange 2004:235).

On the basis of recent research (Lange 2004:176-183) it can now be advanced that the (pre-Islamic) Gani festival in Daura was originally a New Year's festival during which the people commemorated the 'killing of the snake'. The deeper meaning of the ritual became clear through the model of interpretation provided by the myths of Ugarit, which were discovered in Ras Shamra (from the thirteenth century BC). These discoveries shed new light on the Canaanite religion and culture, which otherwise were known only from the Bible and from information recorded by some Greek authors. In the light of these findings, Bayajidda has several traits of Baal, who vanquished the sea god, Yam. The axe (in the Hausa legend) was the principal symbol of Baal and

the weapon used by the heroic god to overcome Yam in the struggle for the cosmic kingship. The serpent of Daura was cut into seven pieces. This indication is paralleled by information provided by the Ugarit myth in which the sea god, Yam, is equated with the 'wriggling serpent, the tyrant with seven heads' (Lange 2004:170).

Other recorded versions of the Hausa legends could be compared with the Canaanite notion of a seven-headed dragon Leviathan and the splitting of the body of Tiamat, which, according to the Babylonian creation myth, gave rise to the universe (Lange 2004:172-176).

Certain Oriental survivals among the Hausa cannot be traced back to Canaan; we have to suppose that the forebears of the Hausa had, like the Jews in their Babylonian exile, added to their Israelite and Canaanite heritage concepts derived from Mesopotamian culture (2004:171-213).

A comparison between the Yoruba myth of Sango and the Baal Cycle of Ugarit and between the Yoruba myth of Yemoja and the Babylonia Creation Epic implies the existence of cultural influences from the Semitic world in West Africa (Lange 2004:3, 323). Turning to the Kebbi traditions, these equate the Kanta legend with the legend of Sargon of Akkad and suggest even more precise and historically retraceable connections to the outside world. Lange also examines precise parallels between the festival of a dying and rising god in Ife with the fate of a similar deity in the Baal Cycle of Ugarit. Weisser (2004:4) comes to similar conclusions concerning the Igogo festival of Owo and the myth of Ishtar. The myth of Ishtar's descent into the underworld 'describes how all reproduction on earth ceased while she was away' (Hill 1992:93; Wolkstein & Kramer 1984:51-90).² The Baal Cycle is the best-known example of a cult myth within the sphere of the Canaanite culture (Lange 2004:307-372; 183-194). The Yoruba Itapa festival and the related social and political institutions are thought to be related to the early state building processes set in motion by the Phoenicians in the region of Lake Chad (Lange 2004:4). Merker (in Parfitt & Semi 2002:16) found parallels between the beliefs and customs of the Masia's myths (an East-African pastoral people of Kenya and northern Tanzania) and many other East African peoples and the customs of the biblical Hebrews. These myths include similarities in the names of God, in circumcision, in the belief in the figure of Moses (whom Merker

² Some scholars trace the Great Mother cult to the Anatolian goddess of nature and fertility, Cybele. 'In turn, the religious ideas and practices associated with the Great Mother cult in Asia Minor can be traced to the cults of Athtart or Astarte in West Semitic religion, and Ishtar in Mesopotamia' (Hill 1992:93). Ashtoreth was the Phoenician goddess of love and fruitfulness, while the goddess Ishtar was the equivalent for the Assyrians and Babylonians and most important female deity of ancient Mesopotamia in all periods. Her Sumerian name Inana is probably derived from a presumed Nin-ana, 'Lady of Heaven'; it also occurs as Innin (Black & Green 1992, in Hill 1992). She also enjoyed high honour among the Hurrians and the Hittites of Asia Minor (Hill 1992:93).

identified with the Masai Marumi or Musana), and in a variety of legends which include the stories of the creation of the world, Adam and Eve and the fall, the story of the flood, the theft of the birthright, the bronze serpent and the ten commandments.

The best-known 'Semitic' group in Africa today are probably the 'Jews' or 'Black Israelites' in Ethiopia, who from approximately the 1920s were known as the 'Falasha' (Kessler 1982:xiv; cf. Parfitt 1985). The word Falasha is derived from an ancient Ethiopic or Ge'ez term, meaning 'exile' or 'stranger' (Kessler 1982:xiv). The Falasha had certain customs which provided at least circumstantial evidence of early ties with Judaic civilisation. These customs included circumcision, the following of food prescriptions very close to those outlined in the book of Leviticus, and the practice of celebrating the Sabbath on Saturdays rather than Sundays.³

According to Lange (2004:267) immigrants from South Arabia imported a Semitic language into Africa. He (2004:267-277) is convinced that at one stage, perhaps during the Achaemenid period or later, Semitic colonists brought with them the Israelite legend of the Queen of Sheba. These oral traditions became official only as a consequence of the Christianisation of Axum in the first half of the fourth century AD (Lange 2004:268; Le Roux 2004; Lachkar-Bruder 2006:272).

2.2 The Lemba in Southern Africa

The maritime activities of the Sabaean (Yemenite) Arabs provide a background to the 'Semitic' elements found in the traditions of the Lemba of Southern Africa (Le Roux 2003:18). According to Yemenite folklore, their forebears migrated from Palestine to Yemen 'exactly forty-two years before the destruction of the First Temple' (Aharoni 1986:25). In view of the maritime enterprises in the Red Sea by King Solomon and some Judean kings, it is not far-fetched to assume that some Judeans settled in Yemen and eventually in Africa during that early period (cf. 1 Ki. 10:11-15). The Sabaean Arabs had been very much involved in settlement and exploitation of the coast of East Africa at the beginning of the seventh century BC and early in our era. Their very early influence in Ethiopia on language and writing characteristics and also on the Lemba, whose oral tradition indicates that they came across the sea from Yemen to Africa, can clearly be surmised (Le Roux 2003; Gayre of Gayre 1972:129). Most Lemba traditions are transmitted by means of songs, sermons, prayers, praises, proverbs, recitations, symbols, rituals, stories, written documents and numerous other media.

A comparative study among the Lemba illustrates and indicates diversity and unity within the same group. A group sense and the same traditions could exist in spite of geographical distance and language difference,

³ Abyssinian Christians share many of these customs with their Falasha neighbours. According to Goitein (1969:228) their beliefs and practices have very little to do with Judaism.

almost as it could for the European Jews, who were universally dispersed, far away from present-day Israel. Widely scattered Lemba communities in Southern Africa and Yemenite Jews, who hardly had contact with each other and did not even know of one another's existence, reflect similarity in their concept of their ancestry. This could point to at least some 'authentic' Jewish influence in the past (before their Diaspora; perhaps before 600 AD), which has been preserved in their oral traditions. Similar research can, unfortunately, no longer be conducted among the various tribes of early Israel, but there are traces of a similar feeling of unity and similarity of traditions, in spite of distance and other differences, which are reflected in the pages of the Old Testament.

If the Lemba originated from the 'Jews' in Yemen and before that from ancient Israel, this Yemenite community of Jews in Africa is perhaps the only one that remained practically unaffected by intra-Jewish migration. When Islam emerged, the Jews of Yemen were cut off from the rest of the Jewish people. It is indeed the possibility of preserving that part of a very ancient religious group which makes the Lemba so valuable to the historian of religion, comparative religion or missiology. My comparison of the social and religious practices and rituals of early Israel (1250-1000 BC) with those of the Lemba has delivered noteworthy results (cf. Le Roux 2003).⁴ Similarities such as the circumcision and New Moon ceremonies (Le Roux 2005), kosher eating and marital laws offer an indispensable tool for interpretation.

Although various religions have had an influence on their viewpoints, and most Lemba belong to one or other Christian denomination, it appears that we can refer to their social and religious practices and viewpoints as having resemblances to a syncretising, pluralistic pre-Talmudic Judaism embedded in an African culture (Le Roux 2003:2).⁵ A coherent body of legend, myth, archaeology, ritual and linguistic elements supports the idea that the earliest bearers of Lemba culture, insofar as they are presently identifiable, were Hebrews.⁶

⁴ I found Smart's model useful as a basis for the comparison of most religious and social aspects of the Lemba and those of early Israel.

⁵ The Lemba's sacred hills, animal sacrifice, ritual slaughtering, food taboos, circumcision rites and endogamy suggest a Semitic influence or resemblances embedded in an African culture (Parfitt & Semi 2002; Le Roux 2003:2).

⁶ An Oxford population geneticist, David Goldstein, tested DNA samples collected from the Lemba in Southern Africa. The results stunned the geneticists. 9 per cent of Lemba living in SA were found to carry the 'Cohen genetic signature' (a DNA pattern prevalent among the Jewish priestly caste), but among those males belonging to the priestly Lemba clan, Buba, named after the leader who led their ancestors from Judea, it was as high as and higher than the known Jewish priestly caste: 53 per cent. The Buba are recognised as the oldest and most senior of the twelve Lemba clans. 45 per cent of Ashkenasi priests and 56 per cent of Sephardic priests have this Cohen signature, compared to between 3 and 5 per cent of the general Jewish population (Thomas et al 2000).

3. Ostensible reasons for ancient Near Eastern activities in Southeast Africa

3.1 The obsession with gold

It is often supposed that gold was the most attractive object of the Phoenician African trade. By the time of the early civilisations (3000–2000 BC) gold had not only retained its sacred quality but had also become the symbol of wealth and social rank. It was believed that humans were given civilisations by their gods and gold was established as the ‘property of the gods’, a divine metal – as documented by the Conquistadores in Mesoamerican (in Telling⁷ 2005:115). In the Iliad and Odyssey, the epic poems of ancient Greece, Homer (circa 1000 BC) describes gold repeatedly both as a sign of wealth among mortals and as a symbol of splendour among the immortals (in Telling 2005:115; cf. Markoe 2002:173, 184; Moscati 1999:181). The obsession with gold is a central feature in most, if not all, ancient mythology, and yet, as strange as it may seem, after studying 600 African mythological stories, some scholars could not find one clear reference to gold (Telling 2005:121).⁸ They suggest that a possible theory could be that because many of the Africans were slaves working in the gold mines, they would have had no real feeling for or understanding of what they were doing.

Later the obsession with gold became a ‘human’ obsession, inherited from the gods. It continued to play a pivotal role throughout human evolution – our entire human history is inextricably linked to the production of gold. References to gold and gold mining are numerous in the Old Testament. Six sources are mentioned: Havilah, Ophir (1 Kings 10:22), Sheba, Midian, Uphas (Jer. 10:9; Dan. 10:5) and Parvaim (II Chronicles 3:6). The exact locations of all six have given rise to much speculation. Space constraints mean that all these locations will not be discussed here. I will refer only briefly to one of these locations, namely Ophir.

According to the Old Testament, it was the Phoenicians (or Tyrians) who traded with the Land of Ophir (1 Kings 10:11-15; Gn. 10:29), from where King Solomon (approx. 1000 BC) drew rich merchandise after he had formed an alliance with Hiram, King of Tyre. Ophir could have been in Southern Arabia, India or even East Africa (Sofala⁹), with their merchants and markets. Africa is the greatest gold-producing region of the three.

⁷ To my mind not a very reliable source.

⁸ I doubt whether this information is correct. The Lemba oral tradition indicates that they were metal and gold miners and workers in the vicinity of Mapungubwe in Limpopo province, the centre of the largest kingdom in the subcontinent, where a highly sophisticated people traded gold and ivory (Le Roux 2003). Also, the West African oral traditions verify migrations of certain clans across the Sahara to exchange goods for gold mined in West Africa.

⁹ The name ‘Sofala’ has no connection with Ophir, but is derived from the Arabic ‘safala’ = ‘to be low’ and denotes ‘lowland’, in Hebrew ‘shafelah’.

There is no indication in 1 Kings 10:11 of distance between Ezion-Geber (Elath in the Red Sea) and Ophir, and some scholars suggest not searching for Ophir beyond the Red Sea and its southern Arabian limit at Babel-Madeb (Kitchen 1997:144; Ryckmans 1960, Von Wissman 1970, Briquel-Chatonnet 1992, in Van Dijk 2006). The geographical options for the location of Ophir would then be limited to Sudan, Eritrea or Ethiopia in East Africa or Western Arabia. The most probable view is that Ophir was situated in Arabia. An old tradition recorded by Eupolemus (c.150 BC) also assigns Ophir to this region, identifying it with the island of Uphre in the Red Sea (Hirsch & Benzinger [1916]). The problem is that gold had already been exploited in those regions at that stage (Van Dijk 2006:20). Kitchen (1997:144) comes to the conclusion that if Ophir was situated in the relevant area of East Africa, it could have been ‘an 11th–10th century BC successor to Punt and ‘Amau, and therefore a source of gold for possible Tyrian–Hebrew expeditions’ (in Van Dijk 2006:20; cf. Markoe 2002:103). From the recent archaeological discovery at Tell Qasile of a storage jar inscribed in cursive Phoenician script ‘Gold of Ophir’, historical substance is given to a land hitherto thought to be legendary (Culican 1966:77-79; Lipiński 2004:223).

The Egyptian sources inform us also about the legendary country named Pwanit or Punt (cf. Lacroix 1998). Usually it is identified with the north coast of modern Somalia, but Lendering (2007) is convinced this is unlikely, since the Egyptians report that they obtained antimony in Punt. This was not produced in the Horn of Africa but in modern Mozambique. He comments that Pwanit is the Swahili word indicating ‘seaside’ and that a similar word may have existed 2,600 years ago (Lendering 2007; cf. Dart 1925:429).

The earliest reference to Punt is a note from the Fourth Dynasty of Pharaoh Khufu (2551–2528 BC; Daffue 2006:4). The famous expedition to Punt is the naval expedition sent there in 1482 by Queen Hatshepsut. It is vividly recorded on the walls of Hatshepsut’s celebrated mortuary temple at Deir-el-Bahri, near Thebes (Daffue 2006:5; cf. Breasted 1962 and Soper 1996, in Daffue 2006). Herodotus records that Ramses I (Sesostris, 1290–1224 BC) dispatched an expedition in about 1250 BC, which perhaps reached Madagascar (Ingrams 1931:48). It seems that in the New Kingdom contact was frequent, and there is textual evidence of a shrine or temple in Punt dedicated to the Egyptian goddess Hathor (Daffue 2004:4).

Daffue argues that the ancient traders who knew how to reach the riches of Southern Africa tried to keep the whereabouts a secret, and they often used the same names for quite different places; for example, both Africa and Indonesia were referred to as the ‘Land of the Wāqwāk’, and the word ‘Meluhla’ was used for both the East Coast and the Indus Valley. Daffue (2004:2) writes:

These winds blow from the northeast from May to November and then conveniently switch to the southwest from November to May. The result is that

with the northeast monsoon traders could sail down the east coast of Africa, but when returning with the southwest monsoon they made a direct crossing of the India Ocean to India. Consequently the world has always thought that India was the source of the raw materials which actually came from Africa.”

India has always been the *entrepôt* through which products from Africa, the Mediterranean world and the Far East exchanged hands (Daffue 2004:2). There are many assumptions concerning the location of Ophir. The role played by the Phoenicians has been interpreted diversely, and the historical value of the biblical accounts has been evaluated differently (Lipiński 2004:191-194). Despite much research and speculation, the real location of Ophir remains a mystery. If it was the destination of a three-year return voyage (1 Kings 10:22), Ophir must have been a far distant place (Le Roux 2003:29). Because of the distance it was, nevertheless, impossible to voyage to and from Ophir (if it was in India) without making a principal landfall at Sofala. But sailing to Ophir could apparently not be accomplished without the expert help of Tyrian sailors.

It seems the search for gold stretched much further down into Africa. Of the great number of Phoenicians voyages, only one report is known to us. It is a description by Herodotus of a voyage around Africa. Herodotus records that Phoenician sailors in the service of the Egyptian Pharaoh Necho (Wehimbre Nekao, 672–664 BC¹⁰, who ruled over the entire Syro-Palestinian region between 609 and 605 [Herodotus, *History* iv, 42, 43, in Moscati 1999:23]) circumnavigated Africa in the year 600 BC from east to west, from the Red Sea to the south-eastern coast of Africa. It is described that they had the sun at noontide upon their starboard; that is, they rounded the Cape of Good Hope and sailed back northward by the Atlantic and the Mediterranean till they reached Egypt again. It took them three years, and each year they landed somewhere long enough to sow a crop of wheat and harvest it (Ingrams 1931:51; Lipiński 2004:220; Markoe 2002:12; Moscati 1999:87; 2001:640). This is a possible indication that the land of Ophir was actually in this part of the world.

This story told by Herodotus was generally questioned after the famous geographer Ptolemy (c.85–c.165) had said that it was impossible to circumnavigate Africa. When Bartolomias Diaz reached the Cape of Good Hope in 1488, he proved that Ptolemy’s statement that one could not circumnavigate Africa was simply wrong (Lendering 2007; cf. Lloyd 1988.)

¹⁰ 605: Necho II inherited a war against Babylonia, in which Egypt supported Assyria. 609: intervention in Palestine, meeting with Josiah in Megiddo (2 Kings 23:29); or battle against Josiah would follow (2 Chron. 35:20-24). Judah and the Phoenician towns became Egyptian tributaries (Lendering 2007). He started to build a canal between the Nile and the Red Sea (which Herodotus calls ‘Arabian Gulf’; finished by Darius II, the Great). It is obvious that the pharaoh was in big trouble for some time, and he seems to have considered the possibility of attacking southern Babylonia by sea (Lendering 2007). The circumnavigation of Africa must somehow have been related to Necho’s defense projects.

The Phoenicians were notoriously and understandably reticent about the trade routes upon which their commercial and physical survival depended, so there is no known supporting evidence from that source (Woodhouse 1971:127; Van Dijk 2006:57). It is assumed that the Phoenicians kept secret their sailing directions and such a well-guarded trade route, which is the reason why we do not know much of their voyages (Lendering 2007).

Scanty archaeological evidence of such explorations to Southern Africa is found in the existence of a number of rock paintings and Phoenician¹¹ and other beads (Woodhouse 1971:127; Fage 1978:278). Over the years various ancient Egyptian artefacts surfaced in various finds in sub-Saharan Africa to confirm that there must have been trade with the far south of the continent. Daffue (2004:5) mentions that archaeologists have found ancient Phoenician and Egyptian pottery and glass at numerous sub-Saharan sites. Glass beads of Egyptian and Phoenician origin have been discovered at Great Zimbabwe, Mapungubwe and related sites in Southern Africa (Saitowitz 1996, in Daffue 2004:5).

Professor Dart discovered twenty-eight coins at a depth of about six feet on the site of a Native hut, near the beach at Ford Governor in Eastern Pondoland (Dart 1925:427). The British Museum dated the oldest coins to the period of Ptolemy I (304-284 BC) and the others were Roman coins issued between the dates AD 296 and 313, five of them being struck at Alexandria.

In May 1901 Dr Charl Peters reported the find of an ancient Egyptian Ushabti figurine in the vicinity of Tete (Peters 1902:393), and in 1905 Sir Charles Eliot reported the discovery of an Egyptian idol at Mogadishu (Ingrams 1931:49). Its present whereabouts is unknown (Daffue 2004:5).

An engraving in Southern Africa with a remarkable similarity to simple 'Phoenician' ships (Fage 1978:278; private communication M du Toit, Stellenbosch 2005) was found on Driekopseiland, near Kimberley. Archaeology confirms that not everything that happened or exactly how it happened was written down.

There is an indication on an old South African map of the Cape Peninsula showing the wreck of a 'Phoenician galley' located in the middle of the Cape Flats about ten kilometres from Cape Town (Van Dijk 2006:109). Referring to what seemed to be the timbers of a vessel deeply embedded in the sea, Thompson in 1827 (in his *Travels and adventures in South Africa*, in Sampson 1948:34) reported:

“Whatever may be in this, Captain Owen seems to have obtained strong evidence of the commerce of the Phoenicians having extended from the Red Sea, much farther down the eastern coasts of Africa than is generally imagined: and to have pretty clearly ascertained that the celebrated gold

¹¹ Tyre and Sidon were known for their glass work.

mines of ancient Ophir were situated in the vicinity of Inhamban – where it is remarkable that a place of the name Ophir, still rich in gold and ivory, exists to the present day. It seems, therefore, not altogether incredible, that the Phoenician mariners may have actually doubled the Cape of Good Hope from the Indian Ocean.”

The remains of an ancient ship found in the 1890s during the laying out of the Maitland Cemetery on the Woltemade flats near Cape Town were similarly identified as belonging to one of the Phoenician ships which probably stranded there (Dart 1925:429; Ingrams 1931:51).

A number of ancient logs were found on the wreck of an ancient ship (1000 BC) which sank near Ulu Burun (on the coast of modern Turkey). The Center for Wood Anatomy Research of the U.S. Forest Products Laboratory in Madison, Wisconsin tested the logs in 1985 and they were found to be *Dalbergia melanoxylon* or African blackwood, which grows as far south as Mozambique (Bass 1987:729). Riesterer (1963:29) indicates that this is the same wood used in furniture in Tutankhamun’s tomb and most probably that mentioned in the Punt inscriptions. The people and animals represented in the relief of Hatshepsut are unmistakably from southern Africa.

However, there is plenty of evidence of ancient gold mining in the area stretching from the former Northern Transvaal (Limpopo) to the Zambezi. Summers (1963:54-58; 1969) has gone on record with the figure of between four and five thousand pre-European gold workings in Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), and Mason has mentioned several in the former Transvaal including one as far as the district of Middelburg, east of Pretoria (SA). According to Woodhouse (1971:128), none of these have yet been ascribed to the Later Stone Age but very little archaeological work has been done on them. According to archaeologists (Woodhouse 1971:128; cf. Huffman 1974:238-242) it is not certain whether people were already mining gold for export prior to the arrival of stronger groups who enslaved them or whether the mining commenced only after contact with Iron Age people about 2000 years ago (cf. Gayre of Gayre 1972:182; Huffman 1974:238-242). According to Summers (1966:466) the mining and treatment methods used in Zimbabwe were almost exactly the same as those recorded from Ptolemaic Egypt. Unfortunately many of the traces of early mining on the Zimbabwean Plateau have been destroyed by modern mining activity (Daffue 2004:5).¹²

¹² The ancient Arabian kingdoms of the Minaeans, Katabians and Sabaeans were strung along the monsoon’s path and from an early date these pre-Muslim Arabs were trading, alongside the Indians and Phoenicians, with the east coast of Africa. Agatharchides of Knidos, writing about 120 BC, remarks on the Sabaeans’ wealth, pointing out that much of it came from the trade with Africa (Bent 1896:227). After the decline of the Sabaeans’ power, Ingrams (1931:57) believes that it was the Himyarites or Homerites (as the Greek writers called them) who opened the gold workings of Zimbabwe (until the sixth century AD).

Van Dijk refers to the bird decorations (usually a hawk) on the prow and stern of early Phoenician ships¹³ (Van Dijk 2006:57). Bent (1896:xviii-xx) notices striking similarities and makes interesting comparisons between the Zimbabwean bird stele¹⁴ and the role of similar birds in especially Egypt (Gayre of Gayre 1972:105, 106; Culican 1966:92; cf. Frothingham 1893:251-325). Near the temple at Great Zimbabwe is a furnace for refining gold, built with a very hard cement of pulverized granite, with a chimney of the same material. Boscawen (in Bent [1896]1969:xviii-xx) notices that the hawk (Horus, the wife of Hathor) and emblems of the goddess Hathor nearly always occur as guardian emblems in the mines and quarries of the ancient Egyptians in Africa and in Sinai (cf. Proto-Sinaitic texts). Hathor was the miners' patron goddess, and her temples, statues or inscriptions were found in many rediscovered mining locations. A small Egyptian temple (erected by Seti II), dedicated to Hathor, was excavated in the centre of the Timna valley known as 'King Solomon's Pillars'. It served the members of the Egyptian mining expeditions and also their local co-workers.¹⁵

Boscawen (in Bent [1896] 1969:xviii-xx) argues that the association of mines especially with Hathor explains the birds, as, according to Sinaitic inscriptions, she was particularly worshipped in this region. Bent argues that this association with Sinai (she was also associated with the sparrow-hawk of Supt, the 'lord of the East'), Egypt and also with Arabia and Punt¹⁶ seems to be most important in connection with the emblem of the hawk found in the mines at Great Zimbabwe. According to Egyptian tradition she was also called the 'Queen and Ruler of Punt'. Hawks/falcons are seen as godly/royal symbols elsewhere in Africa – Lucas (1947/2001, in Bourne 2003) and Meyerowitz (1963, in Bourne 2003) trace this in Nigeria and Ghana respectively. Seligman (1934, in Bourne 2003) sees this worship in Africa as Phoenician-spread.

¹³ Thor Heyerdahl constructed a reed vessel, *Tigris*, similar to those of ancient Phoenicians, and proved that long sea voyages to India and even Africa in such vessels were possible (Heyerdahl 1978:806-827).

¹⁴ According to Bent (in Frothingham 1893) the outer wall of a semi-circular temple built on a hill overlooking the explored site at Great Zimbabwe is decorated with a row of sculptured birds standing on high stone pedestals. They all appear to belong to the same species, probably vultures.

¹⁵ Rotenberg [n.d.].

¹⁶ According to the oldest oral traditions of the Egyptians there was a close association between Hathor, the goddess, of Ta-Netu, 'the Holy Land', and Punt. From a very early date the ancient Egyptians make reference to a place of lucrative trade with African commodities called Pwnt or Punt, which seems to have included an area stretching from Yemen down the African east coast as far south as the mouth of the Zambezi and including Madagascar. Daffue (2004:3) is convinced that although many sources identify it as being in modern Somaliland, the frequent references to it in ancient Egyptian history and the kinds of products brought from there to Egypt undoubtedly place it much further to the south of the African continent (cf. Dart 1925:429; Fattovich 1999:636-637). In the ancient Egyptian sources (Hatshepsut 1473–1458 BC) it is depicted as a tropical region with palms, myrrh trees and people living in round houses elevated above the ground on piles. It was accessible from both the coast and the interior (Fattovich 1999:636-637).

The oldest signs of ore gold mining are to be found at the so-called Cradle of Humankind, just north of Johannesburg (SA). While archaeologists were uncovering amazing discoveries concerning the origins of humanity, they also stumbled upon layers upon layers of prehistoric mining activity, which was dated back to 7690 BC by scholars from Yale and Groningen universities (cf. Adrian Boshier and Peter Beaumont, in Tellingier 2005; Montgomery 2004).¹⁷ Many mining pits on the northern side of the Cradle of Humankind, scattered throughout the area, attest to the mineral potential that early explorers recognised there. Boshier and Beaumont have chosen sub-Saharan Africa as the cradle of both humanity and culture. It was possibly the hope of gold which brought ancient traders to the south-eastern coast of Africa.

3.2 Slave-trading

Lange (2004 and others) indicates that in the Central Sudan, for example, gold (and copper) was rare (though there are rich supplies further south, particularly in Katanga; Fage 1978:18; cf. Kitchen 1997:144) and is convinced that it could not possibly have provided the basis for an ongoing flow of goods through the Sahara (cf. Lange 2004:6, 7). On the Mediterranean the Phoenicians traded in precious and ordinary metals, timber, luxury and other refined goods, textiles and weapons. But it is less well known that the Phoenicians also traded extensively in human beings.

Homer and Herodotus (Od. 14.297; 15.452; Hdt. 1.1; 2.54, in Lange 2004:277) considered the Phoenicians dangerous pirates and kidnappers. And the Old Testament describes them as slave traders eager to acquire war captives in order to sell them to distant lands (cf. Ez. 27:13; Jl. 4:6; Am. 1:9). As traders and middlemen they take a cut on a much greater cornucopia of precious goods – as the prophet Ezekiel grudgingly admits. They were ‘despised as cheaters and hucksters, who could not be trusted, as insatiable mongers and unscrupulous profiteers, who kidnapped the helpless and traded in human lives; and as a licentious and morally corrupt race of people, who prostituted their daughters and butchered their infant children in honour of their gods’ (Markoe 2002:10).

Bovill (1968:22-23; Fage 1978:46-48) mentions gold and slaves on equal terms. According to him the Phoenicians were particularly well acquainted with different methods of enslavement. Black slaves, rather than gold, are therefore more likely to have constituted the bulk of trans-Saharan trade since earliest times (Fage 1978:18).

Aside from their general Semitic roots, their origin and ethnic identity remain a mystery. Unlike their Syrian or Palestinian neighbours, Markoe

¹⁷ This was followed up by the uncovering of a five-ton hematite stone in the vicinity which was covering a large cavern. Some of the mining access sites date back to 41 000 BC (cf. Adrian Boshier and Peter Beaumont, in Tellingier 2005) while the first signs of ore mining in Mesoamerica date back to around 12 000 BC.

suggests that the Phoenicians were a ‘confederation of traders rather than a country defined by territorial boundaries’ (2002:11). What did the Phoenicians call themselves? Markoe suggests that the ancient term ‘Canaanite’ represents the most likely possibility. Even the term ‘Canaanite-Israelite’ has been suggested (Stern 2000:85-147).

Nevertheless, it is suggested that the Israelites most probably participated in the Phoenician colonisation of North and East Africa and the Assyrians and Canaanites (as we know them from the biblical narratives) may have established themselves in the north and east African trading towns of the Phoenicians. The Phoenician mother towns on the Levantine coast and further south paid tribute to Assyria from the middle of the ninth century BC, and from the first half of the eighth century BC they were subjected to direct Assyrian administration lasting until the end of the seventh century. During the latter period, the Phoenicians – as also the Israelites – were certainly subjected to considerable cultural influence exerted on them by their Assyrian overlords (Briggs 1960:90; Markoe 2002:91).¹⁸

The oldest oral traditions and written sources available (e.g. the Assyrian inscriptions, 700 BC and the *Periplous*) refer to the pre-Islamic-Arabian (Sabaeen or Yemenite), Phoenician and Hebrew activities in Southeast Africa (in Le Roux 2003:73). At a very early stage, continuing influences between the Semitic world and that of the south-eastern parts of Africa had a reciprocal impact on one another.

As mentioned above, the Phoenician mariners were well known for their long seafaring journeys.¹⁹ Different biblical texts make mention of these voyages (Ez. 27; cf. also Josephus, *Against Apion* 1.17.18). The knowledge of the monsoon winds was harnessed by the ancient mariners to reach East Africa and trade in those African destinations²⁰ (Lendering 2007; Van Dijk 2006:111, 54-56; Daffue 2006:1, 2; Rawlinson 2005:74; Raban 1988:261; Gayre of Gayre 1972). There was of course also an overland route to the South along the Nile, and consequently Ethiopia could have had an interest in the merchandise from ‘Rhodesia’ and other gold-rich countries in the South. According to the *Periplous* the Sabaeen colonies were established very early (at the beginning of the seventh century BC in Ethiopia, as is proved by the characteristics of the Ethiopian language and writing, as well as by the oral traditions of the Lemba in Southern Africa (cited in Landström 1964:52).

¹⁸ But ‘the first wave of Jewish immigrants to North Africa seems to have arrived late in the sixth century before Christ, in Cyrenaica’, where ‘it was probably soon thoroughly submerged racially in a sea of local Berber converts to Judaism’ (Briggs 1960:90).

¹⁹ The extensive trade of Phoenicia requires much book-keeping and correspondence. It is in the field of writing that the Phoenicians make their most lasting contribution to world history.

²⁰ Research has shown that these relevant ships were constructed to move not only by means of sails, but also by oars manned by rowers (Van Dijk 2006:110, 54-56; Rawlinson 2005:74; Raban 1988:261).

3.3 Semitic migrations to Africa

Various pieces of information indicating very early ‘immigrants’ to Africa from the Semitic world, do exist. During the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah, Sennacherib, king of Assyria, came up against all the fenced cities of Judah, and took them. According to Jewish authors some Hebrews or Israelites tried to escape their wrath by fleeing into Africa. Speaking of the Jews, Lichtblau (2007/2008; cf. Ben-Sasson 1976; Dubnov 1967) says, ‘Pressed under sweeping regional conflicts, Jews settled as traders and warriors in Yemen, the Horn of Africa, Egypt, the Kingdom of Kush and Nubia, North African Punic settlements, and areas now covered by Mauritania. More emigrants followed these early Jewish settlers to Africa following the Assyrian conquest of the Israelites in the 8th century BCE...’ Rabbi Dahton Nasi (2007/2008; cf. Ben-Sasson 1976) has placed the Hebrew/Israelites all over the African continent.

The Assyrians were not the only kings to have come up against Israel. Two hundred years later, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, conquered Jerusalem and destroyed the First Temple. Again the Israelites tried to escape persecution and ran into the continent of Africa even after they were instructed by Jeremiah not to (Jer. 42-44).²¹ The rebels even appealed to the Queen of Heaven (Ishtar) by burning incense to call upon her favours in the struggle against Babylon. The compatriots of Jeremiah were carried away to Egypt. He joined them under protest (Jer. 44:20-23; Jer. 43:4-7; cf. 52:1-2). The prophet warned them that he was going to push king Nebuchadnezzar into Egypt and capture both Egypt and them. This warning could have caused many Israelites to migrate even deeper into Africa (Nasi 2007/2008; cf. Johnson 1988; Seltzer 1980:174). According to Grayzel (1948:33, 34; cf. Ben-Sasson 1976; Dubnov 1967) some Jewish mercenaries were employed by the Babylonians to guard the southern Egyptian borders around 600 BC. They needed soldiers to protect the southern frontier of Egypt against the attacks of the Ethiopians. He added that they gave them land in the district called ‘Assuan’ and granted them permission to build a temple and offer sacrifices to their God.

Around 176 BC King Antiochus ruled the Greek Kingdom and came up against Israel (Ben Yisrael [n.d.]; cf. Seltzer 1980; Josephus *ANT.* 13.15.4). Approximately two years later, the king attacked Jerusalem and destroyed the city and burned it down. He also ordered them to give up their practices or they would be put to death. Again, many Hebrews fled into the Arabian Peninsula and into Africa. After the Greeks, the Romans destroyed Jerusalem around 70 CE. The restrictions facing the Hebrews forced them to emigrate in even greater numbers than before (Grayzel 1948; cf. Seltzer 1980). Rome’s

²¹The prophet Jeremiah remained in Jerusalem after the third deportation by King Nebuchadnezzar since he had beaten the revolting King Zedekiah of Judah. Jeremiah had begged his countrymen to respect the powers of Nebuchadnezzar, but saw that the Jews continued to plot and rebel – with the hope of getting help from Egypt and the Moabites – against Babylon.

vengeance forced the Hebrews who lived in Cyrenaica, approximately a hundred thousand, and a million in Egypt, to flee into the west and south of Africa.

Lichtblau (2007/2008; cf. Johnson 1988) agrees that the Jewish presence in Africa began to expand significantly in the second and third centuries of the Christian era, extending not only into the Sahara desert, but also reaching down along the West African coast, and possibly also to some Bantu tribes of Southern Africa where, according to him, some 40 000 members of the Lemba clan still claim Jewish roots. Grayzel (1948:34) says, '... such is the explanation how the Sahara desert (and further south) first acquired Jewish tribes ...' and why we find so many remnants of the ancient Near East in Africa south of the Sahara.

4. Conclusion

Remnants of ancient Near Eastern influence can be detected all over Africa. Oral traditions as well as written sources indicate that there was constant contact between the ancient Near East and Africa. Archaeology and oral traditions are providing raw material for the prehistorian – the reconstruction of life prior to written sources or when written records were few or not understood (Woodhouse 1971:9). The prestige of written records has until now distracted the attention of researchers from a thorough investigation of the genuine oral traditions and other available sources (Lange 2004:173).

For Africanists used to considering African cultures in isolation, any consideration involving the ancient Near East (Mesopotamian, Canaanite-Israelite, Phoenician, Sabaeen) must appear far-fetched. During the colonial period it was generally supposed that in Africa tangible progress was achieved only by foreigners. Reacting against these colonialist assumptions, the historians of independent Africa denied that there was any foreign impact on Africa prior to Islam and European expansion. This reaction has not only channelled the energies of research towards a vigorously African perspective of the African past, but has also erected a formidable barrier between Africa and the outside world (Lange 2004:172).

Lange and other scholars disregard the present trend of research and adopt a comparative perspective which leads to the conclusion that the oral traditions which trace the origin of, for example, the Hausa states to the ancient Near East are basically correct. The multidisciplinary research among the Lemba also shows that there is at least a very strong indication of an earlier correlation between the culture of the Lemba and that of early Israel. In the period preceding the textual evidence of the Middle Ages, societies in sub-Saharan Africa were not isolated or self-contained but instead took part on various levels in global exchange.

They were in intense economic and cultural contact with the Semitic societies of the ancient Near East. It is perhaps inevitable that the elaboration of alternatives to the exclusive Africa-centred approach of Africanist research begins in the mode of trial and error. Moreover, the well-disposed reader can find in them a number of important directions for further research.

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