Kohenim travelling south.
The Queen of Sheba in Ethiopian and Lemb troadition

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Abstract

Similar to oral traditions, written histories may exist in more than one version. The biblical story of the Queen of Sheba’s visit to King Solomon has undergone an extensive elaboration in different literary traditions. Compared to the Jewish and Muslim legends, a fundamental change of atmosphere can be discerned in the Ethiopian version (*Kebra Nagast*). The story as recorded in the *Kebra Nagast* might have had an influence on the traditions of other African peoples. The Lemb in Southern Africa are a very specific group with unique traditions regarding Israelite origins. Their oral traditions provide more information than any written sources. The reciprocity between orality and inscripturation of traditions yields valuable information regarding the possible development of traditions in ancient Israel. This study attempts to make a contribution to our understanding of transculturation, indigenisation, and identity formation. It shows how the Lemb and Ethiopians have constructed their own iconography and set of beliefs around Biblical myths in the context of marginalisation among other African communities.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is axiomatic that historians should use all available sources. African historiography has been on the cutting edge of methodological innovation for the last three decades, utilising written sources, oral traditions, archaeology, genetics, linguistics, ethnography, musicology, art, botany and other techniques to bring respect and maturity to the field (Lord 1968; 1976; 1991; Vansina 1985). But to use such a diverse methodology has brought controversy as well, particularly regarding oral traditions (not to speak of genetic results).

Substantial criticism has been voiced concerning the problems of chronology, variations in different versions of the same events, and the problem of feedback between oral and written sources (Henige 1974:223-235). The French anthropologist Levi-Strauss’ (1968) study of mythology has provided a useful corrective to an overly-literal acceptance of oral traditions, but often went too far in throwing out the historical baby with the mythological bathwater, leading some historians to reject totally the use of oral data (Beidelman 1970; Leach 1967). McNeil (1986:243) uses the term *mythistory* to acknowledge the close kinship between myth and history and the manner in which the two interact to comprise “shared truths” that for example underpin the Ethiopian worldview. Packard (1984:167-174) is convinced that a tradition may represent true historical processes, even if the specific events or individuals depicted cannot be otherwise
verified. Lord's (1968) findings regarding oral traditions have even been employed by biblical scholars in matters of composition, but his studies have further relevance, leading one to view the building blocks of traditional narrative as dynamic, the tales themselves as manifestations of a quintessentially human activity, story telling.

Oral traditions were the "vehicle" by means of which I came to know the Lembas in Southern Africa. Their mode of communication has always been by means of oral traditions, and the reception of these traditions always took place in this way. Unfortunately, this "living source" is slowly but surely disappearing. The transmission of traditions is kept alive artificially by the annual LCA (Lemba Cultural Association) Conferences in the Limpopo Province (South Africa). Nevertheless, these traditions are retained and affirmed by these conferences. The transmission of traditions also takes place during festivities and other "formal" events of the Lemba (of which many are traditional African feasts and rituals), when the Lemba's own cultural traditions are recalled. In this way these traditions are transmitted from one generation to another. The occasions for public performances as expressions of traditions are limited and can generally be observed only in the field (Le Roux 2003). A tale is acted out with bodily gestures, and the actors dramatise it by raising or lowering their voices. In order for it to be a success, the story needs to be well known, which is usually the case. Every performance is new, but presupposes something old, the tradition itself.

To a certain extent, this is the same with our sermons today: the performance is new, but it presupposes something old. The "original" tradition can never be reconstructed again, because it is meant to be fluxable/flexible. An oral tradition contains many variants, but that seems to be the stuff oral traditions are made of.

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1 A more balanced view has shown that a modified structural approach can be a useful tool in historical analysis. In Ethiopian historiography some preliminary speculations were advanced along structuralist lines, although in another sense such an approach was always implicit since the analysis of Ethiopian written chronicles required an awareness of the mythological or folk elements they contain.

2 Oral and local written traditions from various peoples can provide a partial corrective to the centrist biases of royal written sources. Recent research on the Hadeyya, Agaw, Beta Israel and the Lemba suggests a significant new trend in African historiography. For a survey of the research see Crumley, D 1990. Society, state and nationality in the recent historiography of Ethiopia, JAH 31:103-119. Oral traditions, or other types of oral material such as personal recollections, have also been used. The fact that much of the material is based on oral performance rather than on manuscript tradition adds an important dynamic element to what has hitherto been treated in a static noncontextual manner.
Similar to oral traditions, histories may exist in more than one version. The biblical story of the Queen of Sheba’s visit to King Solomon, for example, has undergone an extensive elaboration in different literary traditions. The fixed (written) story as recorded in the Ethiopian literary work the *Kebranagast* might have had an influence on the traditions of other African peoples. Compared to the Jewish and Muslim legends, a fundamental change of atmosphere can be discerned in the Ethiopian version. In short, the *Kebranagast* tells of the descent of the Ethiopian monarchs from Solomon and Makeda (the Ethiopian name for the Queen of Sheba), and of how the *Ark of the Covenant* was brought from Jerusalem to Ethiopia by Menelik, allegedly the son of the Queen of Sheba and Solomon. According to this source, Solomon sent numerous *priests (kohenim) and teachers of the Law* to join Menelik in journeying to Ethiopia in order to establish a kind of Judaism in Africa.

Research has shown that many indigenous groups in Africa today have customs with a Semitic resonance (Colenso 1855; McFall 1970; Kaplan 1993; Chidester 1992; 1996). Subsequently, regarding the Lemba in Southern Africa among others, the question has been asked where this resonance comes from. The Lemba are a very specific group with unique traditions regarding Israelite origins. They were led from the North into the Arabian Peninsula (Saba/Sheba) by Buba, their *priestly family*. The ancestors of the Lemba came by boat to Africa as traders. They erected trading posts at different places, and each time some of their people were left behind to take charge. The “Chosen People” or “Children of Abraham” kept themselves separate from the native peoples, but after a war broke out in their country, they (*the šawi*³, “traders”) could not return and had to take wives from the local peoples (the *vhazendi*, “heathen”) because they did not bring their own wives along. They blazed the trail southwards into Africa as traders, with the *ngoma lungundu* (“the drum that thunders”, see below) playing a very similar role to that of the Ark of the Covenant. There are various traditions regarding the time when the Lemba came to Africa. Some say it was during the time of Solomon. Although the traditions are very vague, they provide more information than any written sources. Lemba traditions make them special and extremely interesting to study from the point of view of oral cultures.

Traditions most certainly change to accommodate new circumstances, but once the traditions relating to community identity are written down, a new model of an unchanging body of traditions is created. To a certain extent this might have been the case with the narrative of the Queen of Sheba and Solomon in the Ethiopian *Kebranagast*.

³ A man of importance is shown great respect when he is addressed as *mušawi* (“buyer”; cf. Tonga: *šawa* “buy”; a connection has also been suggested with Saba, Sheba; Van Warmelo 1935:122).
Nagast (thirteenth century) and with Mathivha’s⁴ (former leader of the Lemba Cultural Association) book (1992) on the history of the Lemba, since this similarly might have been the case with the historiography of the Deuteronomist. The moment these were fixed, they became something else. Did this fixed text in the Kebra Nagast have any influence on the traditions of the Lemba in Southern Africa? Does the story of the Queen of Sheba and Solomon have any relevance to the story of the Lemba? And what about any concurring elements? Although a mere comparison between the culture and traditions of the Falasha (Beta Israeli, Ethiopia) with that of the Lemba could be interesting, this is not the primary objective in this study. My main objective is the possible influence the story of the Queen of Sheba and Solomon as recorded in the Kebra Nagast might have had on the Lemba and to investigate possible concurring elements. The Lemba are used as an example, because they make particular claims, and because they are accessible to me.

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 a “lost tribe” of ancient Israel, or that they simply made some sort of religious shift along the way. But, in an attempt to provide maximum understanding, one actually 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.

Their oral culture is constitutive of their world-view and self-understanding or identity. It incorporates the role of oral traditions, history and historiography and one could even draw parallels between orality in early Israelite and African (Ethiopian and Lemba) religions. The reciprocity between orality and inscripturation of traditions yields valuable information regarding what may have happened in the development of traditions in Israel. This study thus attempts to make a contribution to our understanding of transculturation, indigenisation and identity formation. It shows how the Lemba and Ethiopians have constructed their own iconography and belief around biblical myths in the context of marginalisation among other African communities. This study takes Lemba traditions seriously, but although it in the end does not verify or negate Lemba claims, the outcomes of the study may take this debate a step further.

⁴ Prof Mathivha has since passed away (2002).
2. **THE QUEEN OF SHEBA IN BIBLICAL AND AFRICAN TRADITION**

According to tradition, Ethiopia’s relationship with Israel, which had begun through commerce and then developed in the political sphere, reached its peak in the time of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba at the beginning of the first millennium BCE. The earliest biblical sources for the Queen of Sheba’s visit to King Solomon are 1 Kings 10:1-13 and 2 Chronicles 9:1-12. Some scholars might argue that it is by some odd caprice of God’s revelation or by a mistake of the final biblical composer that the story has been recorded twice in scripture. Should we not rather consider repetition as one of the characteristics of scripture (Steenbrink 2000:149)? However, these accounts in the Bible tell almost the identical story of a queen who heard about Solomon’s fame, his wisdom and his richness. She came to test him, was convinced about the truth of the story, and consequently provided the king with a substantial amount of spices, gold and precious stones. She received proper answers and reciprocal gifts from Solomon and then departed.

As mentioned above, the story of the Queen of Sheba has undergone an extensive elaboration in the South Arabian/Muslim (Arberry 1955:384-385), Jewish (Josephus, first century CE), and Babylonian Talmudic (third century CE) traditions, and has become the subject of one of the most ubiquitous and fertile cycles in the Middle East (Ullendorff 1974:106).

This story is also a traditional subject of Ethiopian art and is recorded in a particular way in the *Kebran G registros* (“Glory of the Kings”), a highly valued Ethiopian literary work, whose origin and date of composition (sixth to ninth centuries CE, revised in the fourteenth century) are matters of some scholarly dispute (cf. Ullendorff 1974:106).

In brief, the *Kebran G registros* records that the head of the queen’s trading caravans was a man called Tamrin who supplied King Solomon with building materials for the Temple. On his return from Jerusalem he told the queen about Solomon’s wisdom, power and riches. The *Kebran G registros* elaborately states that the Queen of Sheba decided to see for

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5 "There are small, but not insignificant, differences between these two OT accounts which are of little relevance to the development of Solomon-Sheba legend but of considerable interest to the method of text-transmission" (Ullendorff 1968:132).

6 The basic features of this story have been embodied in a traditional pictorial representation of this legend. It usually appears in forty-four squares arranged in four rows of eleven each (cf. Ullendorff 1974:104).
herself and departed for Jerusalem with caravans filled with rich presents. She found Tamrin’s reports fully confirmed and after she had learnt about Solomon’s God she decided to abandon the worship of the sun, stars, and trees and to worship instead the Creator, the God of Israel (Kebran Nagast, chapters 25-26; cf. Ullendorff 1974:110).

True to his reputation, Solomon was so impressed by her beauty and intelligence that he determined to father a son by her. After inviting her to a special banquet consisting of ten highly seasoned courses, Solomon suggested to the queen that she sleep in his tent. She agreed on condition that he would not take her by force. Solomon complied with this request, provided that she promised on her part not to take anything in the king’s house. Sheba soon awoke, for the seasoned food had made her very thirsty. She rose and drank from a bowl of water in the chamber. Solomon seized her hand and accused her of having broken her oath. Solomon then “worked his will with her” (had sexual intercourse with her). That night Solomon had a dream in which the sun departed from Israel and shone brilliantly over Ethiopia for ever. Upon her return from Jerusalem, the queen bore Solomon a son whom she called Ibn al-Hakim, “son of the wise man”, i.e. Menelik, who was believed to be the founder of the Ethiopian dynasty.\(^7\)

According to the Kebran Nagast Menelik I, when he grew up, was believed to have visited his father Solomon in Jerusalem, where he was educated in the Jewish religion and system of government. Zadok the priest anointed Menelik King of Ethiopia. Solomon asked his counsellors to send their first-born sons with Menelik. On his return to his country (Ethiopia), Menelik I was accompanied by a number of priests (kohenim) and teachers of the Law who were believed to have introduced Judaism to the country. This is a very early indication of a number of Israelite priests travelling south. It is further stated that the high priest’s first-born son was reluctant to leave behind the Ark of the Covenant (and thereby lose his future position as high priest), so Solomon had a replica made for him. Menelik I and the high priest’s eldest son conspired to switch the replica with the real Ark. Therefore, the real Ark was secretly taken from the Temple in Jerusalem and placed in Aksum, the sacred city in Ethiopia, where it is believed to be still in existence (Kebran Nagast, chapters 38-48; Isaac 1993:61). The divine presence had now left Jerusalem and settled over Aksum, the capital of Ethiopia (as dreamt by Solomon). Solomon’s “troops” did not manage to return the Ark to Jerusalem – perhaps because his policy was to make love, not war. David’s guerrilla fighters would most

\(^7\) Translation from Sir E A W Budge 1932, The Queen of Sheba and her only son Menyelek. London: Medici Society (A complete translation of the Kebran Nagast).

\(^8\) It was firmly believed in Ethiopia that all the kings of Ethiopia down to the last king, the late Emperor Haile Sellassie I, were descendants of Menelik I (Revised Constitution of Ethiopia, Addis Ababa 1955, 3).
likely have been more successful in this regard.

It is noteworthy that, compared to the Jewish and Muslim legends, a fundamental change of atmosphere can be discerned in the Ethiopian version: the queen is always shown as good, while Solomon is pictured in profile (i.e. evil). No longer is the emphasis on Solomon and his wisdom, but on the Queen of Sheba and her purity and nobility. Solomon is no longer exposed to the wiles of the seductress, the earthy demon Lilith, but he himself assumes the role of seducer (Ullendorff 1974:111). The *Kebrà Nagast* also exhibits significant changes of detail. It says nothing about the queen's hairy limbs, the glass floor, Sheba's descent from demons or the tale of the hoopoe. More important embellishments in this version are: (i) the phrase "she came to prove him with hard questions" in 1 Kings 10:1 is rendered in the Ethiopic version as "with wisdom"(for the Greek "with riddles"), and (ii) the queen's decision to abandon her idols and worship instead the God of the Hebrews. In this reading the quality of wisdom is attributed not to King Solomon but to the queen. The *Kebrà Nagast* version does not deviate substantially from the biblical account but simply supplies many details on which the concise story of the Old Testament is silent (Ullendorff 1974:111).

2.1 Maritime undertakings between the Semitic world and East Africa

In both versions of the story of the Queen of Sheba in the Old Testament, the narrative appears to be interrupted by two verses relating to the Ophir fleet that fetched gold, precious stones, and wood. According to the Old Testament, it was the Phoenicians (or Tyrians) who traded with the Land of Ophir (1 Kgs 10:11-15; Gen 10:29), from where King Solomon (ca.1000 BCE) drew rich merchandise after he had formed an alliance with Hiram, King of Tyre (Deut 9:26-28; 10:11-12, 16-22; 1 Kgs 5:7-12; 7:13-14; 9:10-14; cf. Na'aman 1997:74). The location of Ophir remains a mystery, but since it was the goal of a three-year return voyage, it was obviously a distant place. It could have been in Western or Southern Arabia, India or even East Africa (Sofala). But that the Phoenicians (and other Semitic peoples) circumnavigated Africa from west to east and traded with East Africa at least by 110 CE, seems certain (*Periplus* of the Erythraean Sea, first century CE; cited in Landström 1964:52; cf. Millard 1997:41; Kitchen 1997:122). Because of the distance, it was impossible to voyage to and from Ophir (if it was India) without making a principal landfall at Sofala. There was also an overland route to the south along the Nile, and consequently Ethiopia could have had an interest in the merchandise from Sofala and other gold-rich countries in the south (Gayre of Gayre 1972; Anderson 1887).

The Old Testament, similarly, refers to the "kingdom" of Saba from which the Queen of Sheba came to visit King Solomon. It is clear that Saba was a rich merchant in the gold trade, since Arabia itself is deficient in gold. The *Assyrian Inscriptions* (Pritchard 1969;
Müller 1888:739, 741) record that Teima, Saba and Haipá paid Tiglath Pileser (733 BCE) tribute in gold, silver and incense; similarly Sargon (715 BCE), Eratothenes (276-194 BCE), Agatharchides (120 BCE) and Artemidorus (100 BCE) speak of the wealth and greatness of the Sabaean colonies. According to the Periplus, the Sabaean colonies were established in Ethiopia very early (at the beginning of the seventh century BCE), as is proved by the characteristics of the Ethiopian language and writing, as well as by the oral traditions of the Lémba (Gayre of Gayre 1972:89).

It was a firm Arab tradition that Ophir (cf. 1 Kgs 10:11-15) was situated along the East African coast. Thomas Lopez in 1502 reported concerning Sofala “that the Moorish merchants were telling us that in Sofala there is a wonderfully rich mine to which, as they find in their books, King Solomon used to send every three years to draw an infinite quantity of gold” (Von Sicard 1955:67). This same tradition is repeated by the Portuguese missionary João dos Santos (1609), who lived and worked among the people of this region (Sofala, as mentioned above; cf. Map II, Le Roux 2003). He added that some old Moors narrated that the ruins on top of the mountains were in older times the trading depots of the Queen of Sheba (Saba), and that from this place a great quantity of gold was brought to her9 (cited in Theal [1898-1903]1964a:275-280; cf. Schapera [1937]1946:5, 6, 13; Von Sicard 1952:170; Marole 1969:1, 2; Parfitt 1995:3-5). The Arabs used the name Sofala not only for the town of that name, but also for the whole region between the Zambezi and the Limpopo. In addition, the region behind Sofala10 was known to the Arabs as Saba, which is the same as Sheba, the historical name of what is now Yemen (Junod 1938:14; Baines 1877:vi). Ferão (1609) observes that the “Moorish” people were mainly merchants and distinguished themselves from the other inhabitants by refraining from pork, and rejecting meat that was not killed by the hands of one of their sects (cited in Theal [1898-1903]1964b:371). In the light of the foregoing influences and immigration of Semitic groups to South-eastern Africa, it is in no way

9 A farmer from Zimbabwe told me that there are still treasures which were received from the Queen of Sheba hidden in a cave in that area. Another interesting piece of information was reported in the Sunday Express, 6 October 1935, under the heading “Sheba’s secrets. Guarded caravan takes them to safety”: “A guarded convoy of three camels loaded with the treasures and regalia of the Emperor of Abyssinia is crossing the flood of the Blue Nile to the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, where they will be kept in a Coptic church. Among them are the secrets of the Queen of Sheba – rolls of finely-written, illuminated manuscripts in a language that has been dead for thousands of years. One of them is said to be the plans of the gold mines which were worked forty centuries ago, and where, legend says, there is still a rich seam of gold.”

10 The hinterland of Sofala where the Lémba were living circa 1777 comprises the Zimbabwe and Belingwe (Mberengwa) regions (Junod 1938:14).
clear who the "Moorish merchants" are to whom reference is made here. Moreover, the question is who linked the mines of Sofala with the story of King Solomon, and whether this was merely transmitted to others from generation to generation. However, if it were not for the reports of the Arabian and Portuguese seafarers, these oral traditions would apparently have been lost.

Many references suggest the presence of people, mainly in the Zambezi region, possessing notably Semitic characteristics without being clearly Muslim. It seems reasonable to assume that although the "Moorish" or "Arab" people were not specifically referred to, their traditions and customs were reminiscent of those people that we know today as Varemba ("people who refuse"); Mushavi ("trader"); Vhasoni (great word, describing Lemba women); Mwenye ("foreigner", "Arab", "white people" or "people of the light"\(^{11}\)); Malepa; Vha-Sena ("people of Sena at the Zambezi"); Vhalingu ("Europeans", "non-Negroes" or "strangers") or simply the Lemba or Balemba in Southern Africa (cf. Connoway 1978:31; Hendrickx 1991:174; Ravele 1958:76-77).

However, the *Kebranagast* reports that the Queen of Sheba went to see Solomon, ostensibly to compliment him on his fame, piety and fortune. But just as today, rulers of antiquity did not undertake long journeys simply to exchange a few flattering pleasantries. Therefore, in the light of the overland trade between Southwest Arabia and the Near East to the Queen's far north it seems to be that the real reason for any such visit is more likely to have had an economic motive (Kitchen 1997:138). The Sabaean most probably saw the new sea-venture, between Solomon and Hiram, to Ophir (be it in Arabia or Africa), starting from the vicinity of Eloth and Ezion Geber (Gulf of Aqaba), and hence somewhere down the Red Sea, as a potential threat to their overland camel-borne trade north to that same quarter, and sought to sort matters out at first hand (Kitchen 1997:138,139). Kitchen avers that Solomon did not become wealthy simply by the generosity of a visiting female ruler, but that he had his own sources of wealth, be they in Africa or Arabia (Kitchen 1997:139). Jobling (1997:476-477) and others, however, show that in general these deals were not so favourable to Solomon. He highlights a few situations that rather suggest economic weaknesses and tension than wealth and prosperity in the Solomonic age. More recent archaeological inquiry furthermore questions, to some extent, the conventional dating of the Solomonic era. If the historicity of Solomon and his prosperity are under suspicion, how much more, then, that of the Queen of Sheba?

Regardless of whether this story of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba can be viewed as fact, fiction, mythistory or whatever, the narrative in the *Kebranagast* supplies

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\(^{11}\) This is only one possible translation. In the *Handbook of Nyasaland* (1936) the Amwenye are referred to as descendants of the Arabs found by the Portuguese at Sena.
information which is not found in the biblical versions and which is relevant to other African narratives. It not only gives another perspective on who seduced whom, and suggests that a son was born from that relationship, but also gives significant information on trading routes between the “North” and the “South”, i.e. between Israel and Saba (Sheba) and between Saba and Africa; the leading role that the priestly families (kohenim) played on the journey to the “South”; the important function of the Ark of the Covenant; and the establishment of a kind of Judaism at this very early stage in Africa.

2.2 Priestly families (kohenim) and the Ark of the Covenant travelling South

The Old Testament records how important the Ark of the Covenant was to the Israelites. It stemmed from their “wilderness sojourn” (from Africa, Egypt) and was directly linked to the Covenant with Yahweh. The Ark was considered holy and was not to be touched improperly or placed on the bare ground. It was only to be carried by priests. By means of the pillar of cloud by day, and the pillar of fire by night, a further symbol of God’s presence was presented to the Israelites (Exod 25:10; Lev 16:2; Num 4:15,19,20). It is very difficult to determine how old the stories surrounding the description and the existence of the Ark actually are, or how old the traditions are on which these are based. There are, nevertheless, various traditions concerning the remembrance of a cultic object that was apparently of great significance to the Israelites on their journey through the desert and also during the period of the Judges (Josh 6:12-21; 18:1; 1 Sam 3:3; Kraus 1966:125; Deist 1985:40). Old Testament sources (cf. Deut 10:1-8; 31:9 etc.) are too incomplete to provide clarity about this matter, and, to complicate matters even further, the various traditions concerning the Tabernacle, the Ark, and the Temple became intertwined and are therefore difficult to distinguish (Schmidt 1983:113; cf. Josh 8:30; Jdg 20:27ff). Albertz (1994:57) surmises that the Ark probably did not have cultic significance in the beginning, but that it was only a symbol that guaranteed the presence of Yahweh. He further maintains that the Deuteronomist accorded it the function of the “bearer of the document of the Covenant” (or the Ten Commandments; cf. Noth [1958]1983, Fensham 1969:v, and Gottwald 1985:281). Finally, the Ark came to rest in a special permanent place in the Holy of Holies inside the Temple built by Solomon (1 Kgs 8:6). Thereafter there is no further mention of the Ark being carried to war or at festivals.

Some scholars are convinced that it was no longer in Solomon’s Temple at the time of the Temple’s destruction by the Babylonians in 586 BCE. They base their views on Jeremiah 3:16, and on the fact that the Ark is not mentioned among the vessels carried into exile or brought back from Babylon. The Second Temple does not seem to have possessed the Ark either (Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 5:2, cited in Isaac 1993:60). The Talmud further records that it was hidden by Josiah “in its place” or “beneath the woodshed” (Shekalim 6:1-2; Yoma 53b-54a). On the other hand, 2 Maccabees 2:1-7 says
that Jeremiah hid it on Mount Nebo. The many modern attempts to explain the disappearance of the Ark have been to no avail.

The fact remains that the Ark played an important, mysterious and sometimes fearsome role in the military actions of the Israeliite clans: that is, it symbolised the presence of Yahweh, without which there would have been no victory (cf. Jdg 3:28).

The *Kebran Nagast* and other sources record that Solomon sent numerous priests (*kohenim*), who obviously had to carry the Ark of the Covenant (although that was not Solomon’s intention), and teachers of the Law to join Menelik in Ethiopia. It should be clarified that the priests, *kohenim*, are not the same as rabbis or Levites. Rabbis are appointed functionaries, while members of the priestly class inherited their position through the male line. The *levim* or Levites are non-*cohen* members of the paternally defined priestly tribe of Levi. In biblical tradition Aaron, the brother of Moses, was the first priest (cf. Num 25). God awarded the priesthood to him and his sons; in other words, the priesthood is passed on through the Y-chromosome and there is no legitimate way in which a non-priest can become a priest.

Other pieces of information about much later “priestly immigrations” to Africa from the Semitic world come from the reports of the historian, Josephus (*Jewish Antiquities*).12 13 It seems that there was more movement between Israel and Saba and even between Israel and Africa than might generally be known. This correlates with numerous oral traditions and ancient reports of merchants, missionaries and travellers to the south-east coast of Africa, describing not only the Semitic features of certain peoples, but also their Semitically related customs and clothing. These features and customs have intrigued numerous scholars.

In order to prove his theory as to how the Old Testament traditions entered the former Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), Von Sicard (1952:170-175) examines the parallels between the

12 Josephus *ANT.* 12.8.7§§387-388; 13.3.1§§69-73; 13.10.4§285; 14.8.1§131; 20.10.3§236.

13 According to Josephus, the Jewish high priest Onias IV, for example, was persecuted by Herod Antipas in Palestine and fled to Ptolemaus Philometor in Egypt c. 172/168 BCE. He settled in Heliopolis and obtained permission from the Egyptian ruler to build a temple in Leontopolis, like the one in Jerusalem, not far from Heliopolis. There he appointed priests and Levites who followed him to Egypt. Later in c. 107-102 BCE, Cleopatra, the wife of Ptolemaus Philometor, employed Chelkias and Ananias, the sons of the high priest Onias, as generals in the army. Josephus further reports that there were many Jews living in the district at that stage. At Memphis Onias protested against Herod Antipas and convinced them of his evil ways (*ANT.* 12.8.7§§387-388; 13.3.1§§69-73; 13.10.4§285; 14.8.1§131; 20.10.3§236).
Old Testament story and that of the *ngoma lungundu* ("a drum that thunders"; the name refers to the specific sound of the drum), and those between *ngoma lungundu* and the thirteenth century Ethiopian *Kebra Nagast*. He arrives at the solution that it was the Lemba, the people of the *ngoma lungundu*, who literally carried the concept of the Ark of the Covenant and concomitant Semitically related customs and practices southwards into Africa. He describes their "drum that thunders" as "Eine afrikanische Bundeslage" (an African Ark of the Covenant). He is convinced that this group of people were strongly influenced by the numerous transmitted stories (and the *Kebra Nagast*) concerning the possible presence of the Ark of the Covenant in Ethiopia and that they carried, as an elite, priestly group (for the Vhazendji; most properly the Venda) those concepts southwards by means of their *ngoma lungundu* (cf. Hendrickx 1991:182; Möller-Malan 1953). If the story of the *ngoma lungundu* can be linked to the thirteenth century *Kebra Nagast* as suggested by Von Sicard, it indicates that the tradition may be at least 700 years old.

Both the oral and written traditions suggest that the *ngoma lungundu* was considered holy and was not to be touched improperly or placed on the bare ground. Inside the drum were sacred objects which belonged to the Vhazendji. Therefore, because of those magical skills especially during warfare, the Lemba (their priestly family) had to carry the drum; it contained their sacred objects and it was guarded at night by a mythical pillar of flame (Bloomhill 1960:165). If this magic drum was lost, calamity would befall them. The Lemba experienced the sound of the drum with awe and fear, since it was perceived as the voice of the great god, *Mambo wə δeDenga*, "king of heaven", speaking to them (Mathivha 1999b). When the enemy heard the sound of this magical drum, it had a special effect on them – they were not able to move, since it rendered them utterly powerless.

Von Sicard (1952:10-36) argues that the *ngoma lungundu* traditions could not have derived from the Islamic Lemba group, seeing that: (a) the Ark of the Covenant did not play such a role in the *Qur'an* or in the Muslim faith, (b) Abyssinia (Ethiopia) is literally called the "Trommelzentrum" (Drum Centre) and lastly (c) the Ark of the Covenant played a dominant role in the religious life of the Abyssinians (Ethiopians) and in the *Kebra Nagast*, their holy book. He concludes (1952:175) that "there is good reason to suppose that the Hamitoid people of Rhodesia brought with them the Jewish Lemba who were black-smiths and builders and it was through this that Old Testament traditions

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14 According to Ravele (1958:76-77) the name Lemba is derived from *lembe*, which means "a secret iron affixed to the beads worn by Vendas when doing their ceremonies". Oral traditions complement these written data. Lemba informants explain that those beads were "blueish beads which came from heaven" (Le Roux 2003:124). The Lemba were also obliged to carry a wooden basket full of *Malembe (lembe)* for the Venda.
entered Rhodesia."

Today, the tradition of the *ngoma lungundu* is still in existence among the Lemba. Some believe that the original drum which helped them on the journey from Sena might still be in one of the caves on Dumbghe Mountain in Zimbabwe (Von Sicard 1943:140; Parfitt 1992:142) or perhaps somewhere in the Soutpansberg area (Le Roux 2003). The Lemba are very secretive about its whereabouts. The fact that the – for some fearsome – drum may still be in the mountains, but guarded by the priests, not only keeps the tradition alive, but also contributes to the experiences of the mysterious or of the supernatural powers or influences which are linked to the drum (Le Roux 2003:123-126). Bloomhill is convinced that "no other legend is so imbued with the mystic enthralment of African folklore as that of Ngoma Lungundu" (1960:165).

It is furthermore interesting that the traveller Indrisi, already in circa 1150 CE, records that the Senzi – possessors of the *ngoma lungundu* – were in fact forced from their territory and down into the Sena area at the Zambezi. These people of the magic drum, calling themselves the BaSenzi (probably the Venda), at that stage became closely associated with the Lemba in the same area (Le Roux 2003:40). In this case the implication is that the tradition of the *ngoma lungundu* could even be two centuries older (900 years old) than the (revised) text in the Ethiopian *Kebrä Nagast*. To my mind this indicates that the narrative in the *Kebrä Nagast* might not have had such an influence on the role which the *ngoma lungundu* played in the lives of the BaSenzi and the Lemba as Von Sicard suggests. However, and this is even more exciting, the possibility exists that the *ngoma lungundu* story was not inspired by the fixed text (thirteenth century) in the *Kebrä Nagast*, but rather in one way or another by the much earlier version or oral tradition.

3. TRADITIONS OF ORIGIN OF THE LEMBA

Today the greatest concentration of Lemba are to be found in the southern parts of Zimbabwe (amongst the Shona), and, in South Africa, in the Limpopo Province (amongst the Venda), in Mpumalanga and Limpopo Province in Sekhukhuneland (amongst the Sotho), and in the Mara and Elim districts (also amongst the Sotho). They speak the language of the peoples surrounding them, and mountains usually played a central role in the areas where they lived or to which they moved and settled. The Lemba regard themselves as "children of Abraham", "the Chosen People" who at one or other stage came to Africa.

As mentioned above, the oldest tradition of the origin of the Lemba records that the ancestors of the Lemba came to Africa as traders by boat, from a remote place called Sena on the other side of the Phusela. They do not know where or what Phusela was.
They erected trading posts at different places, and each time some of their people were left behind to take charge. They kept themselves separate from the native peoples, but after a war broke out in their country, they (the šavi, "traders") could not return and had to take wives from the local peoples (the vhazendi, "heathen") because they did not bring their own wives along. Although the traditions are very vague, they provide more information than any written sources. It is clear that certain details would not be known without the evidence of oral traditions.

As far as I am aware this tradition was recorded for the first time by Junod, the Swiss missionary and scholar in 1908.¹⁵ Mathivha, one of the informed leaders of the Leamba (1992:1-7), collected numerous oral traditions amongst his people in south-east Africa and combined them with other available written information. He suggests that the "Jewish" ancestors of the Leamba migrated from "the North" (Israel) to Yemen (Saba/Sheba) as traders in the seventh century BCE. According to the Leamba the Buba is the oldest and was originally the priestly clan of the Leamba. Experts among the Falasha in Ethiopia aver, according to Mathivha (1992; 1998), that "Buba" is an aberration of the name "Juda". Mathivha (1992) continues that the Leamba were led by Buba, the priestly family, and established a large community in Saba, at a place called Sena. This is not only an indication of traders going in the direction of Saba, but also of a priestly family guiding a group of people from the north to the south. Mathivha further adds that the Jewish community of Sena, termed "Basena", was expanded by Jews who escaped the Babylonian exile in 586 BCE. They came into contact with Phoenician merchants who introduced them to trading with the Orient and Africa. Trouble broke out between the Basena and the Arabs, which caused some to return to Jerusalem while others left Phusela I and Sena I, and crossed the sea into Africa. In Africa they rebuilt Sena several times and were involved in the building of Great Zimbabwe (Mathivha 1992:1-7).

Oral traditions complement the written data. There is often a closer connection between oral and written documents than historians, who exclusively use the latter, would like to admit. A salient characteristic of an investigation into the Leamba communities is the existence of many similar traditions of origin and deep-rooted practices with an Old Testament resonance, found among widely scattered Leamba groups in Southern Africa. These correspondences of similar traditions and a sense of belonging in spite of remoteness of location and language are remarkable.

However, very few interviewees indicated a link with Solomon, the Queen of Sheba, or even the Ethiopians. The Ethiopians as the "descendants" of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba do play quite an important role in Mathivha’s book (1992) and some other sources, but there are very few traces of this connection extant in oral traditions. The

¹⁵ This indicates that the tradition may at least be 90 years old.
Ethiopians do, however, recognise the Lembas as an authentic “tribe of Israel” and invited Prof. Mathivha as leader of the LCA to come and observe the “real” Ark of the Covenant in Ethiopia (private communication, 1999). It is further unfortunate that the Lembas do not link their story of the ngoma lungundu with that of the Ark of the Covenant as such. This connection is clearly an invention from outside.

Of course it would be nice to have the specific traditions about origin confirmed in a written document from the period, but the oral traditions still provide information that is not available in other sources and they do afford researchers valuable clues as to where to search. Foreign written sources relating to this period are also scarce, but the group continued to exist and this important period in their history would be almost unknown without oral traditions. One advantage of dealing with (or doing research on) a “living source” is that the researcher can sometimes verify some of the information regarding the traditions provided. Remarkable confirmation of some names and places referred to in the traditions of the Lembas is, for example, found by different researchers (most have already been referred to):

The Lembas aver that they came from a city on the other side of the Phusela, called Sena. Parfitt (1997:336) claims to have found an ancient city named Sena, at the end of the wadi Hadramaut, just before the valley turns away towards the sea. It was situated on the trade route, from the sea to Terim (see Map I, Le Roux 2003). The valley that leads from Sena in the eastern Hadramaut (in Yemen) to an old port on the Yemeni coast called Sayhut is the Wadi al-Masilah. Parfitt (1997:336) believes that Masilah may be the “Phusela” of Lembas oral tradition.

It is furthermore remarkable that some of the clan and sub-clan names of the Lembas correlate with commonplace names (Hadrami names) in the eastern Hadramaut (Parfitt 1997:336). Not one of them had the means of ascertaining in advance whether their clan names correlated with the commonplace names in the Hadramaut. One conclusion is that their oral traditions are very old. Obviously, it took more than just two or three generations to have migrated from Yemen to Southern Africa. All this implies that an oral tradition can survive many generations within a group.

The Lembas tradition is furthermore perpetuated, namely that they rebuilt the city of Sena in Africa on the Zambezi, which has also been located by many scholars, who traced their trail from Southern Africa northwards to their “vanished city” (as Parfitt calls it, 1997:336).

One of the praises of the Lembas refers to the Hadzi-Mberengwa clan as the “Good Men” and to Mberengwa Mountain as the “mountain of the Good Men”. Parfitt (1997) was amazed to find an area (on an old map) that had indeed been named by Vasco da Gama as “the Land of the Good People” : Terra da Boa Gente, not far from Sena on the

According to the folklore of the Yemenite Jews, their ancient forebears migrated from Palestine to Yemen, exactly forty-two years before the destruction of the First Temple. This is again in concurrence with the above-mentioned tradition of the origin of the Leba. Islamic and Christian inscriptions, as well as inscriptions written in the Himyarite language, also bear witness to a Jewish presence in Yemen during the centuries immediately preceding Islam (Goitein 1969:226). Another tradition in Yemen propagates the belief that centuries ago a group of Jews left Yemen for Africa and did not return (Beeston 1952:16-22).

Interestingly, Nehemiah 7 refers to all the different groups of Israelites who returned to Israel after the exile. Verse 38 specifically mentions the return of the ‘children of Sénàâ’. Where was this place and who were these people?

One should consider the possibility that some of the children of Sénàâ escaped the exile by fleeing into the Arabian Peninsula, as is indicated on inscriptions found in Israel (Niditch 1996:47-48).

I recall that a Leba in Soweto once told Parfitt that his grandparents had told him that they had originally come from a city called Sena, “somewhere south of Jericho”. I was amazed, not to find a place called “Sena” on an ancient map, but a city called “Lemba” (in Moab; Aharoni & Avi-Yonah 1974: Map 213). According to historical sources (*Josephus Ant.* 13:319; *Josephus War* 1:76), Judaism was imposed on the cities in ancient Moab by Alexander Janneus (103-76 BCE).

Recent genetic tests have shown interesting connections between the Buba, the priestly family of the Leba, and those from whom they claim to have originated. It appears that even a single gene tells a story. Thomas et al (2000:685) emphasises that the genetic

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16 DNA results, specifically involving the Buba clan, only became known in 1998 and 1999. The Leba already possessed these traditions about the Buba as the priestly clan long before the genetic tests had been done. The tests show their links with the Jewish priests elsewhere. The distinctive pattern predominantly found among members of the Jewish priesthood, the kohenim, is called the Cohen Modal Haplotype (CMH). This pattern of paternal inheritance has preserved the CMH as a potential watermark for Judaism. Specifically, the samples taken from the Buba (the priestly clan of the Leba) indeed showed a high frequency of this same pattern (CMH). It was found that 45 percent of Ashkenazi priests and 56 percent of Sephardic priests have the CMH, while in the Jewish population in general the frequency is 3 to 5 percent. Among the Buba, though, it is as high as 53.8 percent.
evidence revealed in this study is consistent with a Lemba history involving: “an origin in a Jewish population outside Africa, male mediated gene flow from other Semitic immigrants, and an admixture of Bantu neighbours.”

Furthermore, Thomas et al (2000:685) emphasises that the presence of the CMH in the Buba could, however, “have an exclusively Judaic origin” (my italics); it could date from 3 000 years ago. This information is once again consistent with the oral traditions of the Lemba and specifically those of the Buba tribe. In the meantime, research concerning the genetics of the Lemba is still continuing in South Africa and the results are not yet final, but until new results come to the fore, the current results are significant.

It is evident that the Lemba are accepted by some authorities in Israel as Jewish. Rabbi David Marciano Ben Yishai (in a letter distributed by Mathivha, president of the Lebba Cultural Association [LCA] in April 1997) officially declared that the Lemba of Southern Africa were Jews, and insisted that they should be treated as such by all the Jewish institutions world-wide. He said they should now begin the process of returning the Lemba Jews to the mainstream of world Jewry. He further decreed that they should help the Lemba Jews in every way to realise their identity as an authentic “tribe of Jews”. In 1999, after the remarkable genetic results were made known in the New York Times and the Jerusalem Report, Jewish rabbis and other interested Jews from the world-wide Kulano organisation, announced that they would in the very near future send representatives to the different Lemba communities in Southern Africa (e-mail communication, 1999), which they did in 2002 (cf. Le Roux 2003:241-242).

If the Lemba were the descendants of the Falasha, the question is, where did the Falasha come from or where did they gain their Semitic customs? In fact, if the Lemba stemmed from pre-Islamic Arab groups or were of Falasha-Abyssinic origin, this explains their affinity towards “Jewishness” rather than towards Islam. However, according to the genetic reports the Falasha have nothing in common with the Lemba or with Jews in Israel (cf. Spurde & Jenkins 1996).

The oral traditions of the Lemba and the historical, archaeological and genetic data constitute the possibility that the immigration of the Lemba to Africa could have taken place even before the Christian era, but more probably before the sixth century CE. Later migrations could also have occurred but this is just as difficult to determine.

4. CONCLUSIONS

To a certain extent, the reinforcement and confirmation of the identity of the Lemba were consolidated when their traditions were written down by some of their leaders and other
observers. After my field research was undertaken (1995-1997), I read Mathivha's book (for the first time) and some of the other authors' articles, and soon realised that the stories of the people at grassroots level sometimes differ from those written down. One often finds an author's own elaboration and editing of the beliefs of the people. This may not have been done deliberately, but happened when authors wrote down one side of a story, whereas there may be more than one way to interpret certain aspects of their beliefs. The traditions that are written down are not necessarily the oldest or the closest to the "original" practice, even if that could have been established. An opinion is often only one person's opinion or one clan's interpretation or perception of a specific event or practice. The same bias or limitation obviously applies to the present writer as well.

Furthermore, it became clear that traditions, once written down, were exposed to the world-view and editing of the redactor or writer, which then became "fossilised". Niditch (1996:44) aptly reminds us of the truism that "a person leaves traces of himself in his writing". Indubitably, oral traditions were never intended to be written down or to be deposited in writing. In themselves, oral traditions have the function or the nature of being adaptable and have the potential for repeated innovation. Although this might be true, it might also happen that a written work may be "re-oralised", or made the core of a new orally created work, especially when the conveyor has received new information or has something he or she wants to add. Mathivha (1998), for example, simply added the information about the current genetic research being done, which correlates remarkably with the story on the Buba clan he had already written down years ago (1992:9). It is wrong to think that once reading and writing are available, oral culture dies. The oral culture of the Lemba (and that of the Falasha) continues even though literacy has become more common.

Another inference that can be drawn is that the written text has had little influence on the people at grassroots level so far (as already mentioned above). Most interviews were conducted with people who had not yet read the book or articles by fellow Lemba, or with people who had not yet attended any LCA Conferences. I have also found that many of the respondents did not necessarily concur with the stories or interpretations of their leaders at the conferences. In fact, many of them stubbornly cling to that which was transmitted by their direct forebears.

One possible reason, as far as I can judge, for the Lemba writing down their oral traditions is that they became aware of the uniqueness of their customs and they felt

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17 Except for the short notes and articles of Lemba authors such as Mphelo (1936), Muda (1940), Mamadi (1940), Motenda-Mbelengwa (1958), Marole (1969), Moeti (1989) and others, Mathivha (1992) was the first to put in writing all the possible oral traditions of their culture.
threatened by complete assimilation by other peoples. It is also possible that in certain communities written documents were perceived as possessing some kind of status, lending authority to the stories they contain.

The examples from the stories of the Queen of Sheba and of the Lemba illustrate two major strengths of oral traditions as historical sources: they provide information otherwise entirely lost from the historical record, and they provide a view from inside a particular society. The latter function is particularly important when the group being considered is a minority, or has been conquered and to some degree oppressed by a larger group or expanding state, as was the case with the Beta Israel. Furthermore, the examples given above illustrate that this internal perspective may be as faithful to “what actually happened” as written records may be.

Nevertheless, weaknesses and limitations in the oral traditions are also clear. The main problems concern questions about chronology, nagging doubts about their historicity, and a focus mainly on their own elites. How do we know for sure that events described really happened, or have relevance, when they are difficult to verify in written documents? There are two types of answers to these questions. On the one hand, it is important in understanding Lemba history to know what their own view of their past is. Secondly, these Lemba cases show that through a careful collection and comparison of various versions of the oral traditions, and corroboration with written sources, we can arrive at a high degree of probable historicity (not that historical accuracy is of crucial importance if one attempts to understand the processes of transculturation, indigenisation, and identity formation).

Answers to many questions are not self-evident in any sources, written or oral, but both types must be used. The written records are not magically clear as to basic facts either. In Ethiopia, some chronicles and some hagiographies are better than others as historical sources. And this is also true of the historical sources of the Lemba. There is often a closer connection between oral and written documents than historians who use the latter exclusively would like to admit. Some histories, such as that of Mathivha, were not actually written down until 1992. The only other sources are those written by the Arab, Portuguese and other traders and travellers. Written histories may exist in more than one version, as oral traditions may do. They have been used creatively and effectively as sources for Lemba history, but like any other source they cannot simply be accepted as literally “true” regarding the historical “facts” they purport to portray. But they are certainly “true” regarding the sense of the image of the Lemba that the writers wished to present, and they have been used creatively as historical sources.

All historical sources have limitations as well as strengths. In the case of the Lemba, oral traditions – when used carefully in conjunction with written data – provide the essential
framework for a reinterpretation of history that is faithful to their noble efforts to survive with dignity and integrity within the broader Lembá (and world) context, and the resulting constraints.

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