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AFRICAN “JEWS” FOR JESUS
A preliminary investigation into the Semitic origins and missionary initiatives of some Lemba communities in southern Africa

ABSTRACT
The Lemba live among other ethnic groups in southern Africa, but consider themselves to be Israelites who, after the Babylonian exile, migrated to Africa. The possibility that the Lemba might have a Semitic ancestry (embedded in an African culture) is further suggested by their preoccupation with religious practices like animal sacrifice, ritual slaughter, food taboos, circumcision rites, and endogamy. This article is primarily based on field research (participant observation and interviewing) among the Lemba people living mainly in the northern and eastern provinces of South Africa and in southern Zimbabwe. Attention is drawn to the way in which the identity of the Lemba is manifested through the traditions of their origin, some key cultural-religious practices (with an Old Testament resonance), the initiatives they took in their mission, and their assimilation into Christianity.

INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY
The Lemba (also known as the Balemba, Basena, Basoni, Vamwenye, Varemba or Balepa1) live among other tribes in southern Africa, speak the language of the populations surrounding them, attend local schools and hold positions in those communities. But their uniqueness lies in the fact that they regard themselves as being an offshoot of the Yemenite Jews, from a city called Sena (cf. Neh 7:38 and Gayre of Gayre 1967:16), who centuries ago crossed the “Phusela” (although they do not know what Phusela was) and came to Africa. Here they rebuilt Sena, perhaps in more than one place, and helped to construct a great stone city which they identify as Great Zimbabwe (Mathivha2 1992), the ruins of which have intrigued archaeologists for the last

1 For the purpose of this article I shall make use of the name “Lemba.”

2 Prof. Mathivha is the president of the Lemba Cultural Association (LCA).
hundred years.

Different writers and ethnological accounts since the early sixteenth century (e.g. A. Caiado in 1560, see Theal 1898-1903), speak of “Moorish” descendants with healing, trading, warfare and building skills, renowned as masters of magical arts and medicine men, different from the normal run of people and originally light-skinned, who settled near the Mberengwa Mountain in Zimbabwe (and further southwards).

The possibility that the Lemba might have a Semitic ancestry (embedded in an African culture) is further suggested by their preoccupation with religious practices like animal sacrifice, ritual slaughter, food taboos, circumcision rites, endogamy and many more. Although it is very difficult to actually “prove” their “Jewish” claims, genetic tests by Professor Trevor Jenkins (1995; cf. Gayre of Gayre 1967) from the South African Institute for Medical Research at the University of the Witwatersrand, as well as other research projects (cf. Parfitt 1995), have shown interesting connections between the Lemba people and those from whom they claim to have originated.

During a field study, conducted during the period between October 1995 and April 1996, I made use of qualitative research methods which included participant observation and in-depth interviewing. The phenomenological perspective employed in the execution of this study is also central to the concept of qualitative methodology. The phenomenological principle does not focus on the Lemba as Jews per se (or even as an Israelite tribe), but allows for “Jewishness” as it may be experienced by a specific group or person. My specialisation in the Old Testament (more specifically the pre-monarchic tribes of Israel) prompted me to collect as much information about this interesting group as possible.

I interviewed many Lemba people and collected as many oral traditions as possible. I also spent many hours observing their customs and rituals, and the religious pluralism and interdependence in the northern and eastern parts of South Africa (Venda and Sekhukhuneland) and the southern parts of Zimbabwe. As far as their religio-cultural practices are concerned, the Lemba are active “missionaries” to the BaVenda and other surrounding groups, and many outsiders have already been proselytised.

3 Estimates of the size of the Lemba tribe vary greatly. Schapera (1946:65) wrote: “Some hundreds of adult males in the Union [and] in Southern Rhodesia ... 1500 males;” Blacking (1967:41) estimated: “There are probably no more than about 2 000 Lemba living scattered or in little pockets among the Venda. ... [A] few others may be found in different parts of the Transvaal”; the Rand Daily Mail of 15 September 1982 spoke rather extravagantly of “South Africa’s ‘black Jews’ the Lemba....” Today, in the vicinity of Sekhukhuneland (Mpumalanga) alone, there are about 10 000 Lemba, and in the area around Mberengwa (southern Zimbabwe) there are at least another 20 000 Lemba.
I was furthermore surprised to learn that the majority of the Lemba whom I interviewed had embraced Christianity. This suggests a number of questions: Would they also be as devoted to the Christian religion as they are to those "Semitic" practices which they adopted centuries ago? At what stage does a group begin to proselytise? Why, if so, should they be hesitant to reach out to potential converts? What role does identity consciousness play in this process? Given the purview of this article, not all these issues will be addressed, but they certainly require further investigation.

At this stage of my study I am not primarily concerned with the issue of "Mission as African Initiative" but more generally with the relationship between the Old Testament customs and the Christian faith of the Lemba. At a later stage, however, my study may be able to throw more light on how these findings relate to their missionary initiatives as Christians. The purpose of this article is mainly to reveal some of my field work findings. Where possible, I have referred to other sources, such as interviews conducted by Parfitt and other available publications.

In what follows, I shall first pay attention to the way in which the identity of the Lemba is manifested in the traditions of their origin and through their cultural-religious practices. In the process I shall try to indicate at least some of the initiatives they have taken in their mission. I shall then discuss the assimilation that took place into Christianity, and finally draw some conclusions.

SALIENT CHARACTERISTICS OF THE LEMBA

The transmission of traditions

Most Lemba traditions are transmitted by means of songs, sermons, prayers, conversations, recitations, symbols, written documents and numerous other mediums. Songs, recitations and certain prayers, for example, may be described as poems or set speech which form part of everyday language, but which are specifically memorised. Sung messages ensure reliable transmission, because the "melody acts as a mnemonic device" (Vansina 1985: 16, 46). Lemba songs, recitations and prayers are mainly divided into two groups: those which all (even uncircumcised non-Lemba) may hear and those which are kept secret (only known by those who are circumcised by the Lemba).

4 This is the title of the large research project of which this study is a part. See footnote 6.

5 Prof. Tudor Parfitt, who is attached to the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London, is a world-renowned expert on "Judaising" movements and has also done some research on the Lemba.
The latter are usually sung or prayed only at special occasions such as at the ritual slaughter of animals or during the circumcision rites (cf. Von Sicard 1943; Finnegan 1976:206).

Apart from the usual routine occasions during which the Lemba convey oral traditions to the younger generation, the Lemba Cultural Association (LCA) also takes the deliberate initiative at the time of the Jewish New Year to hold a special conference at Sweet Waters in the Northern Province. On these occasions all possible means of communication are used to confirm their identity and to transmit it to the younger generation of Lembas. At these conferences the participants are addressed as “children of Abraham,” and their Jewish customs, costumes and traditions are communicated and displayed very explicitly. The proceedings, moreover, are invariably opened with Scripture reading and prayer by a Lemba Christian minister. The togas of the leaders and the T-shirts worn by many others usually bear the Star of David with their totem, an elephant, inside it. On these occasions it would seem that there is a conscious transfer and reinforcement of cultural identity. The Lemba narratives that are told or acted out at such occasions mainly reflect their understanding of their origin and the belief that their cultural-religious practices were transmitted to them by their (“Jewish”) ancestors.

Traditions concerning their origin and identity

Nothing exact is known about the origin of the Lemba, but old Lemba informants still recall the story their grandparents told them (D:F:6; cf. Junod 1908:277):

We have come from a very remote place, on the other side of the Phusela [sea?]. We were on a big boat (some say on the back of a tree). A terrible storm nearly destroyed us all. The boat was broken into two pieces. One half of us reached the shores of this country; the others were taken away with the second half of the boat, and we do not know where they are now. We climbed the mountains and arrived among the Banyai. There we settled, and after a time we moved southwards to the Transvaal; but we are not Banyai.

Whether the Lemba originally came to Africa across the sea from the Yemen is not sure. It might be significant that Parfitt (1995:5,7) found a town called Sena in the Eastern Hadramaut (Yemen, in the South of the Arabian Peninsula) which has preserved traditions concerning ancient migrations to Africa. Also, many of the tribal names of the Lemba are commonplace in the Hadramaut. Parfitt (1992:58) also found that an area not far from the Zambezi (where the Lemba rebuilt Sena), perhaps in the vicinity of Cape Correntes, had indeed been named by Vasco da Gama as “The Land of the Good People” (Terra da Boa Gente). One of the names the Lemba call themselves
African “Jews” for Jesus is in fact “the Good Men” and they usually refer to their sacred mountain in the Mberengwa district as “The Mountain of the Good Men.”

The tradition is held that they were guided from Sena to what we today call Zimbabwe (and southwards to other places) by a star which had been sent by God. On top of a hill they built a fort and a place of worship to their God Mwari (the heavenly God/the God of the Bible; see below). Mathivha (D:1:B:24,25) states clearly on this point, that the Lemba people...

...believe in the God of Abraham, the God of heaven who controls all things. ... The Lembas don't worship ancestors as has been mistaken by the early missionaries. The ancestors are the mediums to God. They get the message to God ... Even the Jewish use Jacob, Isaac and Abraham ... They did not pray to their ancestors. People mistook things without understanding them ... We are different from other tribes ... The religion of the Lemba is centered around the God of heaven (my italics).

Sacred drums were seen by the Lemba on their journey southwards as playing a similar role to what the Ark of the Covenant did among the ancient tribes of Israel. The Lemba saying: “Once we had a drum because we were a holy people and once we had a book because we were a wise people” is a tradition referred to by a number of informants. Some believe that the original drum (ngoma lungundu) which brought them from Sena might still be in one of the caves on Dumghe Mountain in Zimbabwe (Von Sicard 1943:140; Van Heerden 1959). The priest in Mberengwa (D:A:6) assured us that he cannot tell us what he knows about the sacred drum “because we are not allowed to reveal to people who are not circumcised,” but he did inform us that...

...they know just a little of what happened to the ngoma lungundu or the Ark of the Covenant ... The Ark of the Covenant is with us, within our people. We always keep the law and we are still having it because we continue regarding our laws.

A satisfying answer to the question concerning the relationship between the ngoma lungundu and the Ark of the Covenant has not yet been discovered, but evidence indicates that the ngoma lungundu tradition originally came from the Lemba people (cf. Von Sicard 1943:140; Van Warmelo 1940). Regarding the special “book” alluded to in the Lemba saying quoted above, an informant told Parfitt (1992:231) that...

...they had a book once, long ago, but the Arabs were jealous and destroyed the book. ... Ours was the book of the Mwenye. Theirs was the book of Allah .... Allah is the name of God for the Muslims here, for the Blacks and the Indians. There were many Muslims and they call their God Allah. We do not call our God Allah. We came from Egypt and the name of our God is different .... Sometimes we call him Musa (my italics).

From this quotation it appears, furthermore, that they distinguish themselves (and their God) from the Muslims (and Allah). The envy and competition...
between the Muslims and the Lemba suggested by this quotation probably results from a trade agreement between the two groups, a trade agreement which most certainly dates back a number of centuries (cf. Van Rensburg 1974:107). This demarcation of their identity from that of the Muslim is an important identifying factor for the Lemba, and is found over a wide area (Sekhukhuneland, Venda and Zimbabwe; cf. Phophi via Parfitt on the Moors being Jews; see below).

According to Daneel 6 (1996, private communication) the word *mwenye* could be related to a Shona word which means "light" — which implies that "the book of the Mwenye" could be translated as "the book of the light." Daneel points out that in another context, where the Lemba call themselves *mwenye*, this may mean "people of the light" or "people who bring light."

Regarding the tradition of an ancient book, the Lemba author, M.M. Motenda-Mbelengwa, recalls:

> My father told me that he had it from his grandfather that the Lemba had a priest and a Bible made of skin. He said that it was lost somewhere. The priest spoke from high places while others listened. The Lemba therefore knew God. What strikes me is that most of the laws found in the Old Testament books are also found among the Lemba. This is striking to someone who reads the books and who knows Lemba laws (De Vaal 1958:54).

Another tradition amongst the Lemba is that they once spoke a language of their own (cf. Junod 1908:277; Jaques 1931:245; Van Warmelo 1940:7; Gayre of Gayre 1967:10,12). The priest in Mberengwa (and Napi, a traditional healer in Sekhukhuneland, V:1:SEK) informed us that they "have got secret words which must not be revealed to people .... It is a different language which is the language left to us which we inherited from our forefathers when doing circumcision" (D:A:10). Today there are still certain grammatical forms and words in the Lembas' language that are not found amongst other black peoples (cf. De Vaal 1958:53,55). Some scholars hold that the "secret words" are related to Karanga, which served as a kind of *lingua franca* for the groups of people associated with Great Zimbabwe at the time of Monomotapa 7 (cf. Gayre of Gayre 1967:12; Van Rensburg 1974:107). Given this context, the Lemba were probably traders who operated between the East Coast and the interior. It is even possible that the Lemba came from the Yemen to the East

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6 Prof. Daneel heads the research project "African Initiatives in Christian Mission," funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts. Until recently he was attached to the Department of Missiology at Unisa and is a world-renowned expert on African theology and African Initiated Churches, especially those among the Shona-speaking people in Zimbabwe.

7 The so-called "Emperor" who ruled a group of tribes from some stone-built centre such as Great Zimbabwe.
Coast of Africa with Arab traders, or that they are the descendants of local people who intermarried with Arab traders.

**Socio-religious beliefs and customs**

The Lemba have many customs, festivals and rituals with an Old Testament resonance, of which only a few will be mentioned here.

One Semitic rite which the Lemba practise with great conviction is circumcision (ngoma⁸; cf. Junod 1908:283). Most ethnographic accounts of Lemba life agree that they brought circumcision into the country, and passed it on to the Venda, the Sotho and even to the Tsonga (Schlömann 1894:64; Junod 1908:284; Jaques 1931:247; Stayt 1931:234; De Vaal 1958:57; Gayre of Gayre 1967:6). However, the presence of this rite in Zululand is not so easily explained. Regarding circumcision, the Lemba were (and still are) in fact “missionaries”⁹ to the Venda and surrounding peoples. They play a prominent part as surgeons and medicine men in the circumcision ceremonies practised by the Venda, the Tsonga and the Sotho of the Northern and Eastern Provinces, and the Shona in Zimbabwe. Phophi in Venda (in Parfitt 1992:50) reminds that:

> ... in the past the circumcision took place on the eighth day. And then, in remembrance of the eighth day, we circumcised in the eighth year. Then the influence of the other tribes’ initiation rites became very great and we started doing it whenever there were enough boys to make up a group big enough for an initiation school. ... the Lemba were once Moors .... But please do not think these Moors were Muslims. They were, of course, Jews. And in any case, long before the Portuguese came, we were doing circumcision at Great Zimbabwe. They found phallic stones there .... And guess what? They’re circumcised.”

Thomas Huffman (1984:593-612), Professor of African Archaeology at the University of the Witwatersrand, has explained a great deal concerning the organisation of structures at Great Zimbabwe in terms of circumcision and initiation schools. His argument is that, since such schools now exist among the Venda – a tribe more likely than any other in his view to have had something to do with the Great Zimbabwe culture – such schools must have

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8 Generally *ngoma* in African languages means drum or dance. Kritzinger (private communication) suggests that it seems as though the associations between the central elements of the Lemba identity is so strong that this word is also being used for circumcision.

9 The series “African Initiatives in Christian Mission” is an endeavour to show that the spread of Christianity in Africa, its shape and character, have been products of African Christians, in both the “mission churches” and the “African-Initiated Churches” (AICs). This project holds to the widest possible understanding of the notion of “mission.”
existed at Great Zimbabwe. By analogy, Parfitt (1992:50) suggests that one could conclude that, as the Lemba were a circumcising caste among the Venda, they may well have played a similar role in Great Zimbabwe.

Zvinowanda Zvinowanda, the High Priest of the family of priests in Mberengwa (Zimbabwe), emphasises the connection between circumcision in Old Testament times and their own. The circumcision ceremony is the occasion when newcomers become part of the covenant of God/Mwari. In this connection Zvinowanda emphasises that Genesis 17 is the most important piece of Scripture. He adds that they sometimes combine the circumcision ceremony with the pesah (Passover) festival. During the ceremony, they sacrifice a lamb or whatever animal is available "to appease God." He further emphasises that they do not follow the Christian (or Jewish) calendar in determining the dates of these festivals, but rather their own (D:A:4). Although they do have initiation schools for girls, and although there is no operation corresponding to circumcision for girls in Zimbabwe or the Northern Province, it does surprisingly occur (according to the traditional healer, V:1:SEK) in a region with one of the biggest concentrations of Lemba in South Africa, namely Sekhukhuneland (in the province of Mpumalanga). This matter therefore needs further investigation. Female circumcision does not feature in any Old Testament rituals or teachings, but it is an Arab (Muslim) practice.

The religious practices of the Lemba also include the slaughter of animals (shindja) for meat by bleeding them to death. Only after a Lemba has been circumcised is he allowed to shindja, i.e. to slaughter animals in the approved fashion [cf. Junod 1908:278 for a dialect called shindjao in the Northern Gazaland, Musapa]. Van Warmelo (1940:66) collected an oral tradition indicates that a special knife was used for shindja; it is called tshishizho (an instrument for killing animals in a kosher manner). Without the special prescribed blessing, also called the shindja (in Zimbabwe), dead meat is unclean, and only the Lemba have the sacred words which make it clean. These sacred words are a Lemba secret known by no one else. The animal must be killed by a circumcised ("clean") Lemba.

Almost all the informants mentioned the fact that their dietary laws and eating habits are different and distinct from those of other peoples in the country. The most important laws they were taught are that they are not allowed to eat pork or the food of the "gentiles" (whom they call basetse in Sotho and vhasendzhi 10 in Venda), and that they should wash their hands

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10 The word sindji or sendzi is especially interesting, and might also cast some light on the origin of the Lemba. Ancient Arab geographers like Masoudi, who wrote in 943 A.D. of his travels in Africa under the title "Golden Meadows," speaks of the aborigines of Central Africa as being the zindji. It is remarkable to see that word preserved by the Lemba for 1000 years with the same
before eating. They stress the fact that, “like the Jews,” they keep themselves apart from the “gentiles.” Ethnographic literature (De Vaal 1958:59,60; Junod 1908:285) similarly mentions that the Lemba refer to other Africans as vhâ-
sendzhi. Sometimes they use the fuller term, vhasesendzhi - vali va nama ya
vatu (vhasesendzhi - the eaters of dead meat). The Lemba are also taught not to cook with pans used by the vhasesendzhi and not to eat with them.

Mathivha (1992:61) also emphasises their cleanliness and the fact that they were instructed by their ancestors to follow a stricter dietary code (they were prohibited, for example, from mixing meat and milk when eating). Milk is to be drunk or eaten separately from meat dishes, and vice versa. However, as a result of “cultural diffusion” (as some Lemba intellectuals call it), I could not find any Lemba families who still refrain from mixing meat and milk when eating.

Other informants added that they are not allowed to eat rabbit, hare, carrion, or meat with the blood in it; neither do they eat barbel – a fish without scales, a kind of a catfish – nor duck, which they regard as a dirty bird (cf. Gayre of Gayre 1967:6,7). Phophi who (in Parfitt 1992:56) similarly puts great emphasis on the chapters in the “old, old book” (which describe the old religion of the Jews), maintains that the Lemba follow the rules (for example those in Leviticus 11) to the letter. It is not difficult to see that the Lemba adhere to the dietary laws of the Mosaic or Levitical code (11:3-10 and 39). Gayre of Gayre (1967:7) suggests that the rejection of pork, or killing in the kosher manner by bleeding, would be a remarkable coincidence on its own, but when the prohibition of eating hares, rabbits, scaleless fish and carrion is added to the list,

... the probability against coincidence is so great that we have to accept the fact that the Lembas observe the Mosaic code, and we then have to explain its occurrence among this small tribe of traders who have Caucasoid genes and live in the northern Transvaal and some adjacent parts of Rhodesia. Moreover, only the Lembas bleed animals to death as enjoined by the Mosaic code, and this act is restricted by them to the circumcised.

Another distinctive practice of the Lemba is endogamy. They are not supposed to marry outside their tribe except when a circumcised outsider has become a Lemba as a result of proselytisation. Some informants indicated that, in earlier days, one could only be a Lemba by birth, but that this is no longer the case. In the past few years, even a few groups of Germans have been initiated into the Lemba community in Zimbabwe through circumcision. The high priest in Mberengwa who conducts the circumcision (and most of the informants in Zimbabwe; D:A:5) stressed the fact that the circumcision connotation of disdain.
ceremony is, amongst other things, an occasion for incorporating newcomers into the Covenant of God (as mentioned above).

Some contend that a non-Lemba man who wishes to marry a Lemba woman has to undergo circumcision as well as a purification process (De Vaal 1958:60). He is wrapped in dried grass near a pool and set alight. Only once the grass is burning properly, is he tossed into the water. This custom symbolises a double purification process, namely through fire and through water.

When a woman from another tribe marries a Lemba man, she has to undergo some peculiar rites. For her to be accepted into the Lemba tribe, she is also subjected to a "baptism by fire" (Parfitt 1992:123):

... she had to crawl through a hole in an ant-hill. The idea was that the ants sting and suck off all the pig blood that this non-Lemba woman has eaten in her life. A fire would be lit on top of her which could burn the contamination, and then, just before she was roasted, they pushed off the branches and threw her into the river to get purified.

Another custom is that the woman is given an emetic which is supposed to make her vomit all her past impure food. Then they make a hole in the back wall of a hut and ask the woman to kneel on the outside, placing only her head through the opening. When her head has been shaven she is accepted as a member of the tribe and has to observe all the Lemba customs.

As far as burial customs are concerned, informants only referred to the fact that they were told to bury their dead with their heads in a northerly direction — to indicate the place where they came from (D:4:1). It is worth mentioning that most of the early ethnographic accounts are in agreement on the Lemba's burial procedures (cf. Thompson 1942:79; Bullock 1927:21; Hall 1905:94): The body is wrapped in an ox skin and laid on its side or on its back on a shelf, excavated from the side of the grave, which is six feet deep. According to these ethnographers, all other tribes in southern Africa (used to) bury their dead in a sitting position. During a "group interview" at Mogabane in Sekhukhuneland, one of the informants stated that

... in the olden days the Lemba had special burial customs. First they dug a room-like hole so that the whole soil must not be deep. And then they put the person on a shelf. And they make a door there like a tomb. There are still such graves somewhere at Pench (near Burgersfort) in the Eastern Transvaal (D:4:4).

Unfortunately, I have not yet had the opportunity to observe these graves, but the burials seem to be reminiscent of burial customs in Old Testament times (Le Roux 1995:108-111). The relatives of the deceased use to shave their heads and mourn for seven days, during which time they were not permitted to work (cf. Thompson 1942:79; Bullock 1927:21; Hall 1905:94). The seventh day is the day on which it is believed that the soul returns to the body. On that
day a feast is held during which an ox, a sheep or a spotless goat is sac-
rificed. The blood of the animal is sprinkled over the heads of the assembled
men or else it is drunk. Then they all kneel down and the man who is
officiating says: "xo ndziye" (pronounced hundji). According to a Lemba
informant (Jaques 1931:249), "Hundji" is the Lemba's country or place of
origin. It is not clear why they would refer to their place of origin at the grave
of a deceased person, but if we take into account that they bury their dead
with their heads in a northerly direction, to indicate the place where they came
from, it might make more sense. Daneel (1996, private communication) on
the other hand is convinced that this word rather comes from the Shona word
Hunda! which means "Yes!"

Jaques (1931:249) explains that (after the ritual) the priest then "prayed
to the ancestors," calling on them by name. All prayers ended with the word
"Amune." Other phrases used in these prayers were: "... a Sasa sa e se a
bona, Mose a a vuye popa, munhu umbi mutsa mbona kwava ku fa, wa
enda." A free translation would be (Jaques 1931:249): "... let Mose [Moses?] come back here, man is bad, you will not see him again, to die is to go on a
journey."

As mentioned above, the Lemba had, and still have, a priest who provides
guidance in many ways. Today this family of priests can be found in
Mberengwa (Zimbabwe). A priest "inherits" or learns all his skills from his
father and in turn prepares his son to become the next priest. The priest said
to me (D:A:4):

The succession is just from our forefathers right up to this generation and it will just continue like that. You see there is just a house of priesthood like in the Old Testament and this priesthood is not something of imposition or something that you do to yourself. It was something bestowed to a particular house by God (D:A:4; my italics).

He explained that he is not actually paid by his people, but he said: "... every
time my people pay some token of appreciation (tokens like mealies and
sugar-cane) but during circumcision, yes, they pay a certain fee for me" (D:A:4). After the interview – and to our great surprise – the priest insisted that we should take some of his "sugar-cane" as a "token of appreciation." This gesture once again stressed the remarkable hospitality which we encountered among the Lemba people.

ASSIMILATION INTO CHRISTIANITY

One would almost have expected that this group, with their Old Testament-
related customs and their traditions of origin, would be readily reconcilable to
the Christian faith. Mandivenga (1983) refers to a group of Lemba in the Gutu
district (Zimbabwe) who have converted to Islam, but most of the informants in the southern parts of Zimbabwe and the Northern Province of South Africa deny any connection with the Muslim faith (see Phophi, in Parfitt 1992:50). Parfitt (1995:4), however, is convinced that most of the Semitic, or apparently Semitic, features in the tribe's traditional observances may be explained by the influence of Islam. At the beginning of this century, Junod (1908:286) already mentioned that "... the retention of their Semitic habits for two centuries at least shows what a wonderful grasp Mohammedanism has on the native mind ...." He added, though, that "religiously speaking, the Balemba do not seem to have kept the slightest trace of faith in Allah and they adore the spirits of the forefathers just as the other natives do."

Whatever the influence of Islam may have been in the past, most of the informants indicated that they belonged to some kind of Christian church. These churches have a major influence on the concept which the informants have of God and the way of salvation. The Lemba way of life might evidence vestigial traces of Jewish or Israelite belief, practice or custom but, on the whole, their way of life and beliefs cannot be described as Jewish. As a matter of fact, I found an interesting sense of religious pluralism and interdependence. It seems as though the concept about God among the Lemba has three facets.

Firstly, there is the concept of Mwari or Modimo (the Supreme Being), which they knew long before they heard about Jesus or the Holy Spirit. The ancestors are mediators through whom communication with Mwari or Modimo takes place. The inference could be drawn that most of these people believe that rain is primarily brought by the old Supreme Being (through the agency of the ancestors).

Secondly, there is a Semitic Deity, also known as Mwari, Modimo or Jehovah – the God of the Bible who also contributes to their concept of God. In 1867, the German missionaries, Merensky and Wangemann were amazed to find that the Lemba in the vicinity of Potgietersrus, "... professed the existence of the Jewish God ....," and that the creation and flood narratives were known to them. They described the beliefs that they encountered as follows:

In the beginning God first made the man from the same material as the stones, and then his wife. Then he told them to multiple themselves. All people were killed once by water, the sun was dark and there was a great flood; the sea flowed over the land.

Thirdly, there is the New Testament notion about Jesus, the Son of God, and the influence of the Holy Spirit. Christ and the Spirit are seen as subordinate to the Father because in Lemba social structure relationships are always either super- or subordinate. And so, because relationships with other persons are usually ranked, it seems that, in their way of understanding, Christ
African "Jews" for Jesus

is ranked as being lower than the Father.

Mr Chekure, one of the informants in Gutu, Zimbabwe stated clearly that:

God is Jehovah who made the earth and what is in it and who came within his Son to preach about Him so that the traditional customs which we were practising should vanish. Which means God disliked the traditional customs which we were practising and he is confirming that. That's why he sent His Son to come and stop all those customs (D:D:5; my italics).

Those informants, who belonged to the Zion Apostolic, the Lutheran Evangelical and the Reformed Churches, had mostly made a "clean break" (as some call it) with their ancestors, but others seem to have incorporated Jesus into their spiritual world along with the ancestors.

One would also have expected to see their emphatic insistence on Semitic beliefs to be reflected in their concept of God. Evidence of this belief system is found in the case of the traditionalists who place a great emphasis on laws and rules, thus exemplifying a legalistic orientation. Since independent churches such as the ZCC (Zion Christian Church) and the ZAC (Zion Apostolic Church) rely so heavily on Old Testament rituals and symbols, one would expect the Lemba to be wholly committed to such churches (cf. van Zyl 1995). Most of the informants from Sekhukhuneland are in fact members of the ZCC, but there is a strong possibility that the Lemba simply joined the nearest Christian church in their vicinity because other churches were unrepresented in their areas. This matter needs further investigation.

Unlike other independent church groups, it seems (after this first round of field work) as though faith healing and exorcism do not at all feature prominently in the independent churches to which the Lemba belong, or even in their traditional culture. According to most informants, illness and healing are largely attributed to natural causes, and illness is treated by natural means. This matter also needs further investigation.

Quite distinctive is the fact that the Lemba Christians practise both circumcision and baptism. In India (Sekhukhuneland), both ceremonies take place in the same "holy" river. On the question as to whether they (in Venda and elsewhere) also baptise their children, Mathivha's answer summarises the situation (D:1:B:33; cf. D:G:2):

Yes, but circumcision ranks higher. Then you [will] tell the people [that] I accepted Christianity ... In the long, long past some of the things have been lost but the culture kept reminding us who we all are. The customs we practise tell us who we are. You see we are not claiming anything, we are just stating what we are (my italics).

The priest in Mberengwa added that they even combine the circumcision ceremony with the pesah festival. A lamb or other available animal is sacrificed to God and this also then becomes an occasion for proselytes to be
initiated into the Covenant of God as it is meant to be in the Old Testament.

Another interesting phenomenon, is that some Lemba rituals and symbolism were actually Christianised in Zimbabwe. The Reverend George Murray and his wife, both retired DRC missionaries of Morgenster, and formerly from Buhera (Zimbabwe), told us that the church (DRC) had taken over the idea of the Makapola festival from the Lemba. During this festival, the first fruits of the harvest were offered to the ancestral spirits and prayers of thanksgiving were offered for having food to eat. When the church adopted this usage, the custom was established of having Makapola festivals throughout the congregation at a particular time when the harvests had been reaped. In every district people came together on a given Sunday and brought pumpkins, maize, wheat or money which had been earned from selling the harvests as donations to the church. The produce would then be sold and the proceeds used as church funds (D:F:5). This festival also resembles a Semitic one.\textsuperscript{11}

Another Lemba custom that has been Christianised is the “receiving of new names.” The Lemba receive new names during the initiation rituals. Something of this had probably been established in the Gutu area (and elsewhere). An informant told us that he had been given the name “Israel” when he adopted the Christian faith:

\begin{quote}
It is a name when we are speaking of Christianity. It was a name derived from Christianity which I joined. I don’t want to change that name because I was given that name by the time I switched from my traditional customs to Christianity (D:C:6; my italics).
\end{quote}

In the light of the Lemba cultural practice of changing names after initiation, a change of name at conversion to the Christian faith will most probably appeal to most Lemba.

Let me conclude this section of my article by saying that, despite many indigenous features, all the above-mentioned practices and perceptions do resemble\textsuperscript{12} the religious culture of the ancient people of Israel.

\section*{CONCLUSION}

The way in which the Lemba affirmed their identity repeatedly became


\textsuperscript{12} There might even be more differences than similarities between the Lemba and the culture of the ancient people of Israel, but discussing those differences are outside the purview of this article.
apparent from the oral traditions and the cultural-religious perceptions and practices which were investigated. During the interviews remarks such as "... we are different from other tribes; we are a holy people; our God is different; [these things] remind us who we are; [they are] stating what we are ...." etc., were frequently made.

It also became apparent that the Lemba frequently proselytise whomever they contact to adopt their own religious practices. Thus, for example, they recommend and institute the practice of circumcision in surrounding tribes and peoples, and have even influenced Europeans (such as the Germans mentioned above). They have not only introduced circumcision and its significance to others; they also play a prominent role as surgeons and medicine-men in the circumcision ceremonies of other non-Lemba people. In this respect, African Jews have taken more initiatives than did European Jews, who kept circumcision to themselves. And, although the Lemba are endogamous, they have extensive rituals to proselytise 13 outsiders. The LCA also takes the deliberate initiative of holding an annual conference during which the Lemba oral traditions are conveyed to the younger generations. The question posed to the young is whether the Lemba are or will be diligent in spreading the Christian gospel. Will they also take initiatives as African "Jews" for Jesus? By the same token, one may ask: When does a group take the initiative in gaining proselytes? And, if there is reluctance to reach out, what is the reason? Is it perhaps a matter of self-consciousness? What role is played by a consciousness of identity in this process?

Obviously, the matter of proselytising is related to a consciousness of identity of the Lemba. In this regard one has to refer to the developments of identity consciousness which took place in pre-monarchical Israel. The unique identity 14 of ancient Israel as a distinct ethnic group, for example, is attracting much attention in the current discussion of the history of Israel. It is now widely accepted that the Deuteronomistic history, which describes the pre-monarchic and monarchic periods in the history of Israel from its establishment (in approximately 1200 BC) up to and including the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC, was formulated as a response to Israel's identity crisis after the exile, when their ethnic identity was diluted and even threatened by complete

13 The Lemba probably do not in their own experience distinguish between their role as experts in circumcision and being witnesses of Christ. The majority of Lemba in Sekhukhuneland view circumcision mainly as a cultural practice, whilst the priest responsible for circumcision in Mberengwa clearly spells out the implications (for those being incorporated) for their relationship with the God of the Covenant. Circumcision is seen as a kind of incorporation into the covenant with God.

14 Cf. Schreiter 1985:43 and 105 on the forces and resources that shape identity in a culture.
assimilation (cultural diffusion) and eradication.

The function of this historiography by the Deuteronomist may have been precisely to give identity to an oral community in danger of losing its specific character (cf. Mullen 1993:5; Whitelam 1989:19-42). This resulted in the Israelites' becoming more exclusivist (xenophobic) after the exile. Earlier the community had probably been more open towards foreigners. Modern theories of ethnicity indicate that such a process of world and group creation is often more related to the needs of the group than to an empirical historic reality (cf. Mullen 1993:15, note 37). This article has not dealt with such theories, and neither has it denied or confirmed their validity. It has instead endeavoured to use empirical data to indicate that a nation or a tribe are exposed to many different influences while they are in the process of becoming established (a very important phase in the history of the people or tribe), and that these influences help to form an "identity." One of the purposes of the Israelite narrative is to demonstrate that identity is difficult to define because history is such a dynamic, highly fluid process. The course of events is, however, difficult to capture, and the complexity of a historical situation often forces one to reduce historiography to what is available in the sources. It is therefore virtually impossible to define the identity of the tribes of Israel before the monarchy, or to give a clear account of the social processes which gave rise to the quest for and creation of their identity (Le Roux 1994).

Obviously, it is no simple matter to compare the history of the Lemba with that of Israel, and it might indeed be deemed an impossible exercise. Nevertheless, studying the Lemba as a pre-industrial group of unique character might shed light on what we know about the oral culture and sociocultural structures of the Israelite clans. But that is a study on its own.

As far as the Lemba are concerned, their constant affirmation and avowal of their separate identity suggests that they use their historical consciousness to legitimise themselves with reference to a supposed past – possibly because they run the risk of losing their unique character through cultural diffusion. Although most scholars agree that oral traditions are documents of the present because they are told in the present, traditions should always be understood as reflecting both past and present in a single sweep – people reach back into the past in order to create both the present (but also a future) for themselves (Vansina 1985).

The vast majority of the informants' stories about their past concur. These transmitted narratives give them a feeling of "belonging": they believe that they are unique and have special qualities and skills that their neighbours envy. The conception that they themselves, as well as their customs and practices, are different is probably the most significant factor to which the maintenance of their separate identity may be attributed.
The Lemba know where they come from. They were guided by *Mwari* to specific places and they therefore want to stay together and preserve their culture. They want to live separately from other people. They often emphasise that it is precisely because of cultural diffusion that most of them no longer observe their distinctive Lemba customs. This may be one of the main reasons why their leaders (e.g. Chief Mpaketsane and Professor Mathivha) are seriously advocating a homeland of their own.

Lemba cultural leaders (such as Mathivha) might to some extent perceive the Christian churches as a threat, given the fact that some missionary groups used to regard Lemba traditional practices as "evil" (as was seen in the above). This may be the reason why so much emphasis is placed on their culture (cf. e.g. Mathivha). Mathivha states that it is not a matter of ancestor worship or religious practices, and so there is no threat to their ties with Christianity. It is merely a matter of culture! Perhaps Mathivha's remark that "circumcision ranks higher than baptism" should also be seen in this light (D:1:B:33).

Culture and religion cannot be separated. Both deal with the deepest values of a society or a group. Religion is always embedded in culture – as is also the case in the Old and New Testaments. Mathivha himself occasionally emphasises that the Lemba are (or are not) allowed to do certain things, "... because God commanded it. ... It is our religion: ... It is part of the covenant of God" (D:1:B:25,26). The Lemba perception of Christianity – and how it accommodates their "culture" – will probably determine their future involvement in the outreach of their churches. Further research into "African initiatives in Christian mission" should therefore focus on the extent of the Lembas' involvement in the outreach of their churches. If such research identifies hesitancy on the part of the Lemba to be involved, it might be revealing to investigate the underlying causes of this hesitancy. Are Lemba Christians more intent on preserving their cultural customs than on spreading the Christian gospel? Or can the two causes be served simultaneously? The relationship between the "proselytising" actions of the Lemba as a cultural community (discussed above), and the outreach of the Christian churches to which they belong, should also be investigated.

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